

**Literature and Politics in the Age of Nationalism:
The Progressive Writers' Movement in South Asia, 1932-1956.**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an account of the development of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in South Asia. This body set itself the ambitious goal of mobilising South Asian writers and advancing the movement for independence by infusing it with social content. As such it was inspired by movements in Europe but was also inextricably linked to social and literary traditions that had already been developing in India. In this sense the PWA was embarking on a project for cultural hegemony that was as much a political and social movement as a literary one. Consequently, the movement was not solely concerned with questions of literature in a narrow sense but also with the public and political role of writers in society, with which language the nationalist movement should foster and the popularisation of its cultural and political aims through theatre and film.

Previous studies of the movement have treated it far too narrowly as a simple front for communist aims. This was an important dimension of the movement that I account for but I see it as an attempt by some of the foremost intellectuals in the India of my period to shape the freedom movement and to project its vision for a wider society post-independence. This thesis argues that the PWA embarked upon a project for cultural and political hegemony whose aim was to transform the literary and wider cultural landscape of South Asia. It aims to demonstrate that the trajectory of this literary project can only be understood as part of a wider process of the global politics that were impacting on the intelligentsia. This thesis is an effort to understand the specific motivations and factors that influenced writers in one of the most turbulent periods of South Asian history. In investigating the interplay between literature and politics there is an assessment of the success and limitations of a cultural movement that aspired to hegemony.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AICC	All-India Congress Committee
AIML	All-India Muslim League
AIPWA	All-India Progressive Writers' Association
APPWA	All-Pakistan Progressive Writers' Association
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPP	Communist Party of Pakistan
CSP	Congress Socialist Party
CWC	Congress Working Committee
INC	Indian National Congress
PWA	Progressive Writers' Association

INTRODUCTION

The late Edward Said epitomised the anguished academic who continuously struggled with the vexed issue of creative activity and political commitment. As a dedicated intellectual thinker he never shied away from being a passionate spokesperson for the Palestinian cause that was so close to his heart. In 1993, Said delivered the Reith Lecture on the topic of intellectuals and society. He argued that,

Real intellectuals are never more themselves than when, moved by metaphysical passion and disinterested principles of justice and truth; they denounce corruption, defend the weak, defy imperfect or oppressive authority.¹

For Said truth and justice were not abstract principles, they were rooted in concrete reality and as such were shaped by the type of society intellectuals were part of. In a wide ranging discussion on the definition and role of intellectuals Said made a compelling case for the public and political role of the intelligentsia that went beyond the scope of art and literature. He stated quite unambiguously that the place of intellectuals was to be on the side of the underdog, to question political masters and confront existing orthodoxies and that their very *raison d'être* was to 'represent all those people and issues who are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug'² and insisted that the purpose of the intellectual's activity 'is to advance human freedom and knowledge.'³ This interpretation places him in the tradition of a radical left milieu that seeks to expose and undermine traditional authority based on powerful interest groups.⁴ Said's writings were concerned with the role of intellectuals at the beginning of the twenty-first century and many of his contemporaries have taken a political stance on the great issues of the day. So writers of as diverse political

¹ E. Said, "Representations of the Intellectual", *The Independent*, 24th June 1993, p. 24.

² Said, "Representations of the Intellectual", p. 24.

³ Said, "Representations of the Intellectual", p. 24.

⁴ Said, "Speaking truth to Power", *The Independent*, 22nd July, 1993, p. 12.

persuasions as Naom Chomsky and Christopher Hitchens, have not been averse to ‘throwing their hat in the ring’ as it were, in terms of espousing a particular political ideology. According to Said’s definition those who proclaim their allegiance to traditional authority forfeit this right to be included in the intellectual community. So Hitchens would be excluded. However, throughout history there have been intellectuals espousing right wing causes which have provided legitimacy to existing power structures. Edmund Burke unleashed an intellectual onslaught on the French revolution of 1789, Joseph de Maistre challenged the principles of the enlightenment, and in the early 1930s Martin Heidegger used his academic influence to support Hitler’s National Socialists in Germany.⁵ More recently, American academics and writers like Francis Fukuyama and William Kristol have been associated with the neo-conservative political project and the magazine the *Weekly Standard*.⁶ In spite of this the power of Said’s analysis lies precisely in his assertion that intellectual activity should correspond to oppositional politics. Its partisan nature should champion the exploited and oppressed. There are of course many risks attached to this type of thinking but also tremendous satisfaction. The huge popular acclaim with which the British playwright Harold Pinter received this year’s Nobel Prize for Literature is indicative of how within the public domain the synthesis of culture and literature with radical politics has a receptive and appreciative audience. In announcing the award, the chair of the Swedish Academy stated that Pinter was an artist ‘who in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces

⁵ In 1790 Burke published *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, London: OUP, 1999, which castigated the revolution as anarchic, violent and unconstitutional; de Maistre argued for the restoration of a hereditary monarchy, which he regarded as a divinely sanctioned institution, and for the supreme authority of the Pope in both religious and political matters; Heidegger was rector at the University of Freiburg until 1934 but under his leadership three book burnings took place on the campus.

⁶ The *Weekly Standard* is owned by Rupert Murdoch News Corporation and one of the editors is William Kristol, Chair of the Project for the New American Century.

entry into oppression's closed doors.'⁷ For the Academy, Pinter's artistic creativity lay in his partisan stance against oppressive regimes. The chief concerns of these intellectuals revolve around the question of war, the rights of minorities, national liberation struggles, the perceived neo-colonial projects of western countries in Asia and Africa and human rights.

Over 70 years ago similar questions exercised the passions of writers and artists right across the globe. It was a very different age but the threat of war, fascism, colonial oppression and the right to self-determination were on the agenda for a previous generation and not only in Europe or North America. In South Asia tentative stirrings for home rule had given way to open revolt against the colonial presence. Some of the most gifted and sensitive minds of young writers were receptive to the huge convulsions taking place at home and abroad. The Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) comprised writers and other artists who did not accept artificial boundaries in social and professional life. They believed the intelligentsia had a wider role to perform in society and that cultural activity and production should not merely reflect social life but should, of necessity, provide space for the questioning of orthodoxies and existing power relations, and reveal something problematic about life.

The history of the Progressive Writers' Association spanned the most exciting, yet turbulent and fraught years of India's struggle for independence. The momentous events of this period covered the end of Gandhi's *satyagraha* campaign, the rise and fall of the Civil Disobedience movement, the Bengal famine and the rise of fascism, the second world war and Quit India movement, communal riots accompanying the partition of India and independence and the early stages of national development in

⁷ H.Engdahl, quoted in the *Guardian*, 13th October 2005.

India and Pakistan. The central point to acknowledge is that the PWA project was based on the premise of fundamental change of society. It insisted on the root and branch transformation of Indian social life that did not rest upon mere reforms introduced gradually. Writers were not interested in superficial change that would mask the reality of the privilege, status and power that underpinned the social order. The progressive project entailed a challenge to all orthodoxies, all the shibboleths of indigenous cultural and social practice, as well as to colonial rule. This was a movement of writers but it was a deeply ideological one, and as such the PWA was as much a political and social movement as a literary one. It was a project that was linked to an emerging left wing in India and was an attempt to unite writers into a single body for the express purpose of operating in the political as well as literary arena.

What is progressive?

‘Progressive’ was defined within the orbit of the PWA as a movement forward. Implicit in this definition was a sense of things getting better--that there would be improvements in social and economic life. For progressive writers literature would be an integral component of this process. In the conclusion to an address at its first conference the writer Ahmed Ali issued this call,

And as progressive writers it is our duty to produce literature which will not be bloodless and anaemic, but pulsating with fresh blood, throbbing with new life – a literature which will envisage the future, herald its advent, and directly work for that healthier and better life after which all of us are aspiring today. We should not write for just a section or class, but join hands with the struggling humanity, and address those millions

of human beings who are living in hunger, poverty, and squalor, for they are our public today, and they are our audience of tomorrow.⁸

This statement made explicit what writers should oppose and in whose interests they should work. To appreciate further the concept of progressive it is necessary to pose the question: progressive in relation to what and for whom? In response to this the PWA defined progressivism by the position one took in relation to the key questions of the day. As a body of radical writers, they stood in opposition to the colonial project and therefore identified with a rising nationalist movement. They argued against the threat of fascism and associated with political formations that opposed this. The essence of progressivism also defined what type of society would emerge post-independence and in this respect their vision was for some form of socialist society. Each and every idea was measured against these issues. Any activity had to be considered in terms of whether it advanced the causes of anti-colonialism, anti-fascism and socialism but also whether it was designed to harness a collective consciousness based on the masses or foster divisions that fortified old prejudices. Such principles guided these writers' definition of progressive.

Key figures involved in founding the PWA like Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zaheer were directly influenced by the writers' movement in Europe associated with the anti-fascist popular fronts of the mid 1930s and the international congresses of these movements. Typical of the stance of these movements was an article in the British magazine *Left Review* by the young Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-1972)⁹ in 1936. He argued:

⁸ Paper to AIPWA conference on 10th April, 1936, "Progressive View of Art" in *50 Years of PWA*, Golden Jubilee Celebrations, Lucknow, 1986, p. 46.

⁹ Cecil Day-Lewis was a member of the British Communist Party from 1935-38. He served in the Republican army in the Spanish civil war and was appointed Poet Laureate in 1968.

As literature draws its nourishment from the life of the people and as its ideology is deeply affected by the social conditions of its age, so it is in the interest of the writer to establish connection with this life and to fight for conditions more favourable to his art. As a member of the People's Front, he will not only be playing the most effective possible part in the struggle to defend culture; he will also be brought into contact with a diversity of men and women, a variety of opinion, aspiration and experience which cannot fail to enrich his own work. ...He will give his special powers and outlook to the movement; and he will receive from it the sense of community which alone can enable him to re-establish the social function of his art.¹⁰

The founders of the PWA were inspired to try to implement such a programme in the Indian context. In the same way that European writers aimed and succeeded in attracting the support of established writers, the PWA project set out with the same objective and enjoyed considerable success in doing so.

Ralph Russell argues that the fact that the PWA project aimed to harness literature to social and political aims was not unusual in South Asia and that by the 1920s 'themes of revolt against imperialism, of nationalism, and of radical social reform were already common in literature'.¹¹ This leads him to conclude that the PWA represented a continuation of such developments. It is undoubtedly the case that a tradition of social reform existed in the writings of Iqbal and Premchand which predates the PWA. It is also true that within Urdu literature there had been a long tradition of modernity that can be traced to the Aligarh movement of the late nineteenth century. However, the PWA also represented a break with these past movements. In colonial India it was possible for many groups to oppose the British presence, demand independence and call for the just treatment of the poor and downtrodden. This after all was an essential component of Gandhi's philosophy with its emphasis on a constructive programme of social cohesion and a return to village

¹⁰ Quoted in *Left Review*, London, vol. 2, no. 13, October 1936, p. 674.

¹¹ R. Russell, "Leadership in the All-India Progressive Writers' Movement" in B.N. Pandey, ed., *Leadership in South Asia*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT Ltd, 1977, p. 113.

type communities with rights and obligations applicable to all. The key element that marks the progressive project from previous movements was its revolutionary component. The movement was conceived of as a venture to turn existing society on its head and to organise society anew. It did not only demand an end to the colonial presence in India but it called for fundamental social change of that society. This vision emanated from the belief that the Soviet Union had achieved such a transformation and was building a new more egalitarian society, which was modern, industrial and without the trappings of religion, class and caste.

Middle class intellectuals playing at politics?

The social milieu that leading progressives came from was not dissimilar to that of the leaders of Congress and the Congress Socialist Party. Progressive writers in London were found amongst students studying Law, Medicine or English. Writing came to them naturally; they were part of study circles, reading groups and literary meetings. As Sajjad Zaheer stated in 1940,

We were gradually drifting towards socialism. Our minds searched for a philosophy which would help us to understand and solve the difficult social problems. We were not satisfied with the idea that humanity had always been miserable and would always remain so. We read Marx and other socialist writers with great enthusiasm. As we proceeded with our studies, solved the historical, social and philosophical problems through mutual discussions, our minds became clear and our hearts contented. After the end of our university education, this was the beginning of a new and unlimited field of education.¹²

The PWA agenda was part of the project for modernity. In this respect they went beyond Gandhian politics to embrace a more radical nationalism of Nehru and left wing currents inside the socialist and communist movements. This nationalism was defined on the basis of a modern nation state that incorporates all, irrespective of

¹² S. Zaheer, "Reminiscences" in *Indian Literature*, vol. 2, Bombay: PPH, 1952, p. 49.

caste, class, region, linguistic or religious differences. Modern nationalism would apparently see the ebbing away of these older differences as a new national identity evolved. However, the complex reality of colonial India was that it was a rapidly changing society with major technological innovations to its infrastructure but also to its polity and economy. Conversely, this modernity was running parallel to pre-modern structures and organisation. This produced a complex web of social relations and economic and political bonds that may at first appear to be contradictory but paradoxically seemed to coalesce. The existence of modern and pre-modern formations has been appropriately characterised as a process of “combined and uneven development” by Leon Trotsky. Trotsky was writing about the situation of Russia as it entered the twentieth century, where an economically backward country with traditional modes and patterns of social interaction was rapidly undergoing enormous economic developments in machinery and land cultivation. This produced transformations in social and political life but also tensions as the super-modern interacted with various pre-modern systems.¹³ In colonial India nationalism did not develop as a uniform, homogenous ideology. Nehru’s vision for a united nation based on modern principles of citizenship, civil society and secularism was contested by the emergence of social formations that championed specific types of nationalism based upon religion, region or language. Organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Jama’at-i-Islam utilised pre-modern notions of community identity, albeit using very modern methods of mass mobilisation to challenge the dominance of Congress ideology. These notions emphasised a cultural specificity that was exclusive and based on traditional ideas. The notion of progressivism entailed a break with the past in so far as that past rested on

¹³ For a detailed and stimulating discussion on the theory of combined and uneven development see Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, New York: Pathfinder, 1987, first paperback edition.

obscurantism and religious orthodoxy that legitimised conservative practice and custom. So the PWA saw the fight against colonialism as also a fight for modernity but one that would mobilise the mass of ordinary people as opposed to the educated elite. The volatile period of the 1930s was fraught with many ambiguities and paradoxes on the question of nationalism, which the progressive project had to contend with.

It seems quite paradoxical that writers who in the main hailed from upper middle class backgrounds could espouse the cause of the less fortunate and disadvantaged. At one level, writers were part of the educated, middle classes, in some cases; they were western educated and quite patrician in their background. The fact that these writers had little or no experience of manual work or peasant life and yet these young fire brands were setting an agenda for the radical transformation of society, in which they championed the interests of the poor and exploited, can appear to be either typical behaviour of the well-to-do philanthropist, condescending and patronising, hypocritical or contradictory. They were writers producing literature on themes relating to the poor and disadvantaged, advocating revolt and opposition to existing societal norms in a largely illiterate society. Consequently, it can be argued that in spite of their contention that literature and politics were interconnected there was very little connection between themselves and the people they championed. On the other hand, the fact that the overwhelming majority of writers were producing works in the vernacular is proof of their desire to write for Indians as opposed to the English educated elite. But the reality of colonial India and post independence was that the majority were illiterate. This incongruity was acknowledged by Sajjad Zaheer, a founding member of the PWA. In 1940, he wrote,

Most of the members of our small group wanted to become writers. What else could they do? We were incapable of manual labour. We had not learnt any craft and our minds revolted against serving the imperialist government. What other field was left?¹⁴

Implicit in this statement is the reality of what choices were open to this privileged layer of people. If they were not going to enter the Indian Civil Service, practice law or medicine then writing was their only option. So it could be argued that rather than writing for the masses their audience was a like minded social milieu. However, the great Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz countered this line of thinking by insisting that,

If the message of the progressive writers does not reach the uneducated workers at least it reaches the middle classes. The war between the capitalist and the proletariat is not the exclusive war of the proletariat; it is a battle challenging all of us. Are we not part of our society?¹⁵

In addition Faiz questioned whether or not an individual had to be from the poor and exploited classes in order to be a radical writer. He pointed out that Marx, Engels and Lenin had not been manual workers--not one of them had ever worked in any factory, on any field, even for a day. So Faiz concluded that 'much would depend on how well [the progressive writers] understand the problems of the workers, act wisely and sincerely'.¹⁶ Further, his comment to those who challenged the ability of writers to depict the lives of low caste groups or villagers and workers was to maintain that a 'thinker can guide the people more effectively than a stupid person wasting his energies in a desert under the heat of the sun.'¹⁷ There was not anything unusual in middle class individuals espousing radical causes and acting as the spokespeople of disadvantaged groups. In Western Europe the literati had championed the interests of

¹⁴ S. Zaheer, "Reminiscences" in *Indian Literature*, vol. 2, Bombay: PPH, 1952, p. 49.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hafeez Malik, "The Marxist Literary Movement" in India and Pakistan", *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 4, August 1967, p. 653.

¹⁶ Faiz quoted in Hafeez Malik, "The Marxist Literary Movement in India and Pakistan", p. 653.

¹⁷ Quoted in Imdad Husain, *An Introduction to the Poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz*, Lahore: Vanguard Books PVT, p. 106.

industrial workers, refugees, women's suffrage and the rights of gay people throughout the twentieth century. The key point about Faiz's comments was that he and other writers understood that they had to have some understanding of the concerns of ordinary people which transcended mere empathy. Radical writers could not become members of the "proletariat" or "peasant" classes. *That* would be patronising and demeaning to themselves as well as those they claimed to champion. Rather it implied an appreciation of the fact that the labouring classes and poor were the equals of intellectuals in a united struggle for human emancipation. To this end progressive writers were predisposed to defy their social origins as they attempted to reach out to their fellow countrymen of humbler origins. They saw the need to take popular culture seriously and not to leave it as the preserve of apparently non-political or traditional, conservative or reactionary writers.

Literature vs visual arts

By its very definition the PWA project privileged literature over other arts, particularly the visual arts, and this can appear to be problematic for a supposedly populist radical tradition. In some respects it can be argued that the visual arts, particularly painting, song, dance and theatre were artistic forms based on traditional notions of art and culture. Painting in particular was riddled with religious iconography and much of the content of dance and songs depicted a quiet conservatism which would not sit comfortably with a staunchly secular, modernist, left tradition. In his Presidential Address to the first All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) Conference the great Hindi-Urdu prose writer Premchand noted how religion had 'used fear and cajolery, reward and retribution as its chief

instruments.’¹⁸ Any art created on this basis was moribund as it was produced for social and political elites to legitimate an existing order. For Premchand this applied as much to literature as it did to visual arts and it was for this reason that he dismissed the notion of literature as mere entertainment for a parasitic class. He argued that a writer’s duty was to help *and* side with the ‘downtrodden, oppressed and exploited’ and to produce literature that was realistic and based on observation. Only then would literature become ‘a torch-bearer to all progressive movements in society.’¹⁹

Nevertheless the visual arts did present a problem for the PWA. Traditional painting and sculpture depicted a plethora of deities and the imagery and themes placed more emphasis on the spiritual element as opposed to the material world. As such the traditional visual medium was characterised by mysticism and superstition which was held as irrational and backward looking by young writers of the 1930s. However, this is not something peculiar to Indian arts. Progressive writers viewed the Christian iconography of the Madonna, Christ and saints as equally irrational, mythologizing and backward.

However, a focus on literature did not prevent progressive writers from seeing the necessity of utilising other artistic forms. So from their inception, the *mushaira* (poetry gathering) was part of the PWA repertoire. The public recitals of poetry and songs were a feature of progressive gatherings throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. In addition, with the establishment of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1943, this visual medium was used to great effect during the Bengal

¹⁸ Presidential Address of Munshi Premchand delivered to the 1st AIPWA, “The Nature and Purpose of Literature” in *50 Years of PWA: Golden Jubilee Celebrations*, Lucknow, 1986, p. 35.

¹⁹ Premchand’s Address, in *50 years of PWA*, pp. 35-36.

famine crisis and the communal riots that accompanied partition and independence. In public performance, whether plays or poetry gatherings, one key component was the use of amateur actors. Many of the IPTA troupes were composed of ordinary individuals drawn from villages, small towns and in the case of cities, from urban sprawls surrounding factories where industrial workers and their families lived. This did not preclude the use of professional or semi-professional artists but the emphasis was on the “masses” speaking for themselves. In this way people were able to utilise their own experience of evictions, famine, unscrupulous landlords, employers and supervisors, lack of money for weddings, food or whatever to explain why there needed to be change. In some cases progressive theatre artists would perform productions based on short stories by progressive writers. So Premchand’s story *Kafan* (The Shroud) was performed to wide audiences in villages and towns across north India. Dissecting the horrors of rural poverty and social mores which place a greater value on a piece of cloth than human life, this short tale touched a raw nerve. Its subject matter unmasked the cruel injustices of religious rites, duties and observations which did little to provided comfort in life but expected custom and rituals to be obeyed in death.²⁰ So although the movement had a literary focus in its initial stages, it was pre-disposed to using the visual format when necessary.

Historicising the PWA

The writing of history has always generated controversy and debate. Some historians maintain that what they are engaged in is recording events that happened and describing the role of various actors in any given situation. As such they insist that history is neutral and objective. However, questions arise as to what events are given

²⁰ See Premchand, “The Shroud” in *Deliverance and other Short Stories*, trans by David Rubin, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988, pp. 233-240.

primacy? Which individual voices are recorded and presented as factual? What types of sources are being used? Who were the authors of these and what kind of audience were they writing for? And above all, are there certain voices in a narrative that are marginalised, ignored or silenced? And if so, by who, and why? The positivist notion at the heart of a traditional historian's craft rests on the collection of data from archival sources. However, archival material can be selective, incomplete and inconclusive. Conclusions arrived at by the above method may not provide a coherent picture of events. Sudipta Kaviraj argues that history can be understood at two levels: a record of events that occur over a period of time, but also the stories in which what has happened is recovered and explained.²¹ In this sense history is also ideological. In describing the characteristics of a totalitarian state, George Orwell's protagonist Winston stated he 'who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past'.²² The old adage that history is written by the victors is pertinent to this study. The PWA project is largely held to have failed as it did not achieve any of its stated aims, either in terms of developing a popular literary culture or in terms of its vision for an independent India. Its political ambitions and connection to a communist tradition are partly seen as one reason for its ineffectiveness. But an examination and documentation of the PWA needs to go beyond established and accepted facts. The movement has to be understood in its own terms and against the backdrop of national and international events unfurling during its rise. Individual writers had motivations, hopes and desires that propelled them to break with the orthodoxy of the creative genius, immune to and above the 'grubby' business of politics. At its core the progressive venture was a project that was revolutionary in its outlook. They did not write to produce mere

²¹ S. Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, New Delhi: OUP, 1995, p. 107.

²² G. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954, p. 199.

fiction. Their imaginative literature provided social commentary on events that were shaping the subcontinent during the turbulent years leading to independence and partition in August 1947. They did not just reflect events as they unfolded, choosing instead to raise social concerns and questioning established ideas. The PWA set out to use literature and the arts to reshape society as well as give expression to people's lives. Its aspiration was, to use the terminology of Antonio Gramsci, a 'hegemonic' and not merely a literary one, and its history has to be assessed in these terms.

Previous studies of the PWA have only dealt with these issues tangentially. Scholars who have worked on the PWA have focussed on Urdu writers. So Carlo Coppola's work deals with Urdu poetry and is presented within a literary framework.²³ He does take account of the political impact of the Communist movement on the PWA but Coppola suggests the progressive movement was largely controlled by Communists. He also maintains that writers only joined the association for nationalistic reasons. Consequently, once independence was obtained there was no need for an organisation and this, he believes, helps explain the decline of the PWA.²⁴ Though the PWA was an independent body with its own constitution, manifesto and policies, it was nevertheless seen as a cultural front for the Communist Party of India. The history of the Indian Communist movement has been covered extensively by many scholars.²⁵ However, these works are structured within a theoretical framework whereby their analysis tends to focus on the extent to which Communism within India strictly adhered to policies emanating from Moscow and, more fundamentally for this research, how all organisations that had Communist

²³ C. Coppola, *Urdu Poetry, 1935-1970: The Progressive Episode*, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Chicago, 1975.

²⁴ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 633.

²⁵ See G. D. Overstreet and M. Windmiller, *Communism in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959 and D.N. Druhe, *Soviet Russia and Indian Communism*, New York: Bookman Associates, 1959.

affiliations were more or less manipulated and controlled centrally by the Party for its own ends. So according to Overstreet and Miller the PWA was the most important professional front organisation the CPI ever had²⁶ and Hafeez Malik believes the PWA acted as a 'transmission belt of the CPI'.²⁷ So this interpretation is not confined to literary scholarship. These works are by American scholars writing in the late 1950s to early 1970s and perhaps tend to conform to the prevailing ideas of communism that were dominant in US academia. The principal problem and weakness with this approach is that it fails to take account of other factors that shaped the PWA movement, particularly the nature of the independence movement, the international dimension of writers organising politically and debates within the movement itself. These works fail to take account of the motivations of the writers involved, the degree to which they were able to mobilise writers and artists way beyond the ranks of the 'left' and the degree to which it was a movement that survived 1947 and moved into the arena of theatre and film. A history of the PWA cannot fail to take account of the influence of the communist tradition but it cannot also be one that simply reduces this history to this one aspect.

More recently, Priyamvada Gopal's work has presented a more sympathetic account of the impact of political ideas on progressive writers.²⁸ She goes some way to locating this literary phenomenon within the ambit of the freedom struggle. Her work also focuses on Urdu literature and she adopts psychological and gender perspectives to provide a literary analysis of the short fiction of four writers. Though insightful

²⁶ Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 432.

²⁷ H. Malik, "The Marxist Literary Movement in India and Pakistan" in *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 4, August 1967, p. 652.

²⁸ P. Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence*, London: Routledge, 2005.

interpretations of the literary genre are presented this approach limits the exploration of the political component of the movement.

More forthright in their understanding of the political dimension are the works of Khizar Humayun Ansari and Ralph Russell. Ansari's work is a very thorough account of the influence of left wing ideas on the Muslims of north India.²⁹ As such it demonstrates the impact of the Russian revolution on this constituency but the focus on Muslims leaves the discussion of the PWA again confined to some Urdu writers. In addition the scope of this work ends in 1947 and so no analysis of the post partition period is possible. Ralph Russell, although he focuses on Urdu writers, nevertheless approaches the PWA from a political and historical viewpoint as well as assessing their literary merits.³⁰ So his work takes account of the international dimension as well as the nationalist struggle. His treatment does not restrict itself to an interpretation of the PWA as a mere Communist front. This has the merit of opening a space for the consideration of much wider political influences on progressive writers. Yet the limitation with this work, as with much of the others, is that its focus is on the Urdu literary canon within the PWA. This is understandable given the fact that the early pioneers of progressive writing were from the Urdu tradition and that at the initial stages of the movement Urdu writers predominated. However, as the PWA became a national association it consciously set out to break from a purely Urdu framework. From 1936 onwards a vibrant movement for progressive writers spread throughout the provinces, with linguistic associations established in Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, Telegu, Malayalam and Hindi. Hindi

²⁹ K.H. Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought among North Indian Muslims (1917-1947)*, Lahore: Book Traders, 1990.

³⁰ See R. Russell, *Pursuit of Urdu Literature: a select history*, London: Zed, 1992 and "Leadership in the All-India Progressive Writers' Movement" in B.N. Pandey, ed, *Leadership in South Asia*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1977, pp. 104-127.

writers as a body were slow to involve themselves with the PWA but by the early 1940s writers such as Yashpal, Amrit Rai, Bhisham Sahni, Upendra Ashk Nath, Rambilas Sharma were drawn into the progressive fold and they became a major component of the movement in north India. The contribution of Hindi writers has been ignored or underplayed in previous accounts of scholarship. This research seeks to document the role of Hindi writers alongside their Urdu counterparts within the context of a national movement.

The rationale for considering both Hindi and Urdu writers stems from the stated aims of the PWA project, which sought to develop not only a popular literary tradition that was connected to social reality but to advance the development of a popular vernacular based on the demotic language of north India, Hindustani. This attempt was in direct opposition to the trend towards separatism between literary Hindi and Urdu. The question of a popular language would have a bearing on the nationalist movement as it ebbed towards independence and as such a focus of Hindi and Urdu writers has repercussions on a pan-Indian scale that goes beyond the northern 'cow' belt.

The aim of this research is to fully document an account of the progressive writers' project using literary and archival sources supplemented with contact and discussions with surviving members. In the process it is hoped that a more balanced and considered assessment emerges of a national project that aspired to hegemony and one that locates the movement within the totality of the society that gave rise to it.

Much of the previous scholarship is based on the history of the PWA until 1947 and there is an assumption that the PWA movement died on the embers of partition and

independence. So Coppola argues that there was ‘visible decline’³¹ of the AIPWA and that by 1949 it was a ‘mere shell of an organisation.’³² However, the project did survive the ravages of partition and emerged as a literary and political organisation in both India and Pakistan. To simply interpret the post 1947 period as one of inevitable decline does not provide an understanding of how the movement sought to reconstitute itself in terms of its original aims or how it attempted to confront the new challenges ahead. Although the association was a literary one, the post 1947 era witnessed progressive writers’ transferring their skills and energies into the developing film industry in Bombay. They had already established a vibrant theatre group and this medium provided space for writers and artists to propagate the progressive message in new popular forms. In the field of literature partition occupied a central place in the writings of progressive authors. Amongst Hindi and Urdu writers the themes of communal violence, plight of refugees and abduction formed a core of their prose and poetry writing. Partition literature has been documented and analysed following the publication of this literature on the 50th anniversary of 1947.³³ Though this continued to be a major concern in the following years progressive writers began to enter the fast expanding film industry where new political concerns and themes would make their impact. A consideration of the progressive role and impact in the early Bombay film industry or theatre has not been documented or analysed previously.

³¹ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 632.

³² Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 634.

³³ See Alok Bhalla, ed, *Stories about the Partition of India*, New Delhi; Harpercollins, 1999; Saros Cowasjee and K.S. Duggal, eds, *Orphans of the Storm: Stories of the Partition of India*, New Delhi: UBSPD, 1995.

A note on chapters

The thesis is comprised of six chapters. It begins with a consideration of intellectuals and society and the relationship between literature and politics. The role of intellectuals had been theorised by Leon Trotsky and Antonio Gramsci at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Trotsky's case this was as a result of the Russian revolution and the experimentation in art and culture that emanated from this. Gramsci's concern was two-fold: firstly, with attempting to come to terms with why Italy had not achieved a level of linguistic unity or of identification of the mass of people with the state, which existed for example in France; secondly, connected with this, was his attempt to see how the revolutionary movement in Italy could draw the mass of people behind it in what he called a 'hegemonic' project. The approach of the founders of the PWA to literature was based upon a similar understanding of the ideas of these two figures, even though they would have been unaware of Gramsci's writings and most would have been hostile to Trotsky by the time the PWA was launched in 1936. Gramsci's ideas in particular enable us to theorise what the PWA was trying to achieve and to assess its degree of success. The chapter focuses on the lives and writings of three key figures of the PWA who were pioneers of the movement in order to assess their notion of the interrelationship between political commitment and literature. This section moves on to examine the impact of the European movement of writers on Indian intellectuals. It documents the three key international writers' conferences in Moscow 1934, Paris 1935 and Spain 1937, which were instrumental in delineating the role of writers and artists during this period. It demonstrates how these proceedings had an influence on young Indians in London who then played an initiating role in the PWA.

The second chapter charts the birth of the PWA movement in India. Although the formal launch of the association was initiated in 1936, the antecedents of the movement were established at the end of 1932 with the publication and subsequent ban of *Angare* (Burning Embers), an anthology of Urdu short stories by four writers. It will consider the circumstances behind this censorship and the response of writers to this. It will document the discussions of writers in India and London from 1934-35 and consider the framing of their first manifesto, over which there is still much controversy. The chapter then moves on to chart the events leading up to the first All-India Progressive Writers' conference in April 1936. It traces the path of Sajjad Zaheer, a founding member and a major contributor to *Angare*, when he returned to India from Europe. It records the meetings he had with established literary individuals and associations and his efforts to secure support for this venture.

The proceedings of the first two national conferences are documented with specific attention given to the contributions of key note speakers and the policy statements that were issued. From this it is possible to draw conclusions on the political and literary priorities and direction of the movement. This will demonstrate how the PWA managed to achieve some of the goals it set itself in its first two years. It did this in terms of building a national organisation that commanded the widest support possible from a range of writers and artists. It succeeded in organising a literary association with the express purpose of attempting to produce a popular literary tradition. It also won a generation of intellectuals to the notion of the 'committed' writer and of participation in the political arena. The chapter ends with some examination of how the movement organised itself in terms of publications and its structures.

Chapter three traces the interaction of the PWA with various trends involved in the nationalist movement. This discusses how an early identification of many writers with Gandhi gave way to a close identification with Nehru and with the Congress Socialists, and with a willingness to follow the lead of the illegal Communist Party. Members of the PWA began to exercise influence, especially with Nehru's mass contact campaign of 1937. This period was characterised by a convergence of radical nationalist ideas and left wing politics. This chapter will document this convergence to illustrate the radicalisation of the period and how this provided fertile ground for progressive writers to operate in. But the PWA influence was subject to the vicissitudes of political developments over which it had little control. First, Nehru's abandonment of the mass contact work and then the divergence between the politics of Congress and Congress Socialists on the one side and the Communist Party on the other once the USSR entered the Second World War in 1941. This chapter will then trace the tensions that emanated from the Second World War which led to a severing of the unity that had been achieved earlier.

Chapter four focuses on the war years from the viewpoint of the PWA movement. It aims to assess the ways progressive writers sought to grapple with the problems and tensions that arose in this period. It will document the formal statements of the PWA body and then examine how this was reflected in literary output from these years. The chapter will then go to look at the new forms of activity particularly the people's theatre movement which took left wing ideas into towns and villages across the country. It will conclude by documenting some of the branch activities of Hindi and Urdu writers but will also consider other regions from 1943-47. This will illustrate how, in spite of the divergence between nationalism and communism at the political level, within the cultural arena the PWA project was able to flourish and extend its

nationwide character and membership through a progressive nationalism instilled with left wing ideology.

The next chapter looks at one of the most contentious issues that confronted progressive writers, that of language. For the PWA the question of language was central to their political project as they sought to win a mass audience to identify with their notion of popular nationalism. This presented a problem in India as a whole with its many languages, and a particular problem in north India where the most widespread spoken language, Hindustani, was written in two different scripts. The PWA was operating in a period where the unity of the popular vernacular had been challenged by sections of the intelligentsia who insisted that there were two distinct languages with separate vocabularies as well as scripts. Progressive writers identified the creation of an independent nation with the creation of a unified national language that was popular and demotic. This presented a specific problem for Hindi and Urdu writers but also one for the wider nationalist movement. The chapter traces the attempts of prominent members of the nationalist movement to maintain the unity of the language. It documents the discussions of the PWA on the script and their efforts to promote a neutral popular idiom before 1947. The chapter then examines the impact of partition and traces the debates within the Indian constituent assembly, which had enormous ramifications for the PWA post-independence. Through documenting the discussions amongst Hindi and Urdu writers it will show how the PWA attempted to resist linguistic chauvinism and maintain its allegiance to an eclectic Hindustani. The chapter ends by looking at the PWA in Pakistan and its record on this issue.

The final chapter traces the development of the progressive movement in India and Pakistan from 1947 to 1956. Partition represented the negation of the entire progressive project and the literary and political tradition it attempted to develop. Yet the movement survived this setback and writers found themselves having to confront new political realities. Partition was a deeply unsettling reality that many progressive writers viewed as the antithesis of true freedom. This chapter documents the short-lived but very colourful history of the PWA in Pakistan. Using PWA documents, government records and personal testimonies it will document the proceedings of the three national conferences, which show both the political and literary questions that writers tried to grapple with as well as the problems of state scrutiny. It will demonstrate how the PWA was willingly embroiled in a military escapade that was to damage them and the progressive movement in Pakistan for a generation. The chapter then considers the fate of the movement in independent India. It will show that there were similar factors at work determining the goals and methods of the progressive writers as in Pakistan but that the political dynamics were different. This helps explain why the movement in India was able to survive intact whereas the Pakistan one was effectively crushed.

The chapter ends with an examination of progressive activity in the most modern art form, film. This documents the role of progressive artists in the emerging Bombay film industry and assesses their impact on some early popular films in order to see whether the original progressive credo survived.

Sources

The Progressive Writers' Movement had a totality that encompassed the whole canvas of cultural forms from poetry, cartoon and sketching, theatre, film, song to

prose writing. This totality also had a pan-Indian character that covered all the key linguistic regions of South Asia. Within the confines of this thesis it is impossible to account for this wholeness. The PWA movement has had a very chequered history and to document this authoritatively requires the utilisation of diverse sources. This thesis does not claim to be a definitive account of the movement as its focus is on Hindi and Urdu writers alone. But through a range of different types of material, some of which have not been used before, it does attempt to present the history of the movement in as wide a framework as possible.

The primary sources used are drawn from the records and documents of the All-India and All-Pakistan Progressive Writers' Associations and the Indian People's Theatre movement. This includes the records of the proceedings, manifestos, policy statements and resolutions. Discussion documents and debates conducted through some of their publications have also been used to assess how progressive writers attempted to implement decisions. In addition, material has been drawn from government records, particularly the Government of India Home Political files and unpublished Criminal Investigation Department records to assess the level of surveillance on the PWA throughout the period of this study. From this it is also possible to assess the 'perceived' level of threat with which state authorities viewed PWA activities and to explore their responses to this. Records from the files of the All-India Congress Committee and documents from the Communist Party of India and the Congress Socialist Party have been used to explore the relationship of progressive writers to the nationalist movement. The proceedings of the constituent assembly sessions have also been drawn upon to shed light on some key questions that impacted on the writers' movement. In addition recently published documents of

the European writers' congresses from the 1930s have been utilised to analyse the international dimension of the PWA.

There has been a need for caution with documents relating to the PWA itself. For much of its history the PWA movement was subjected to a level of state scrutiny and its association with left politics rendered it a 'suspicious' organisation as far as both the colonial state and independent nation state were concerned. State censorship was combined with the confiscation of material and arrest and detention of its leading members. The sources for this project unfortunately are not documented neatly in archives and libraries. The documents that have survived have been chronicled by the adherents of the movement many years after it ceased to exist as a formal organisation.³⁴ This inevitably raises some questions about the reliability of these sources as what has been recorded does not reflect the totality of the documents. Another factor relates to the publications of Hindi and Urdu journals. Again, they were subject to police confiscation and what may exist today will be located with individuals, who may not even know what this material is. It has therefore been impossible to have a complete set of the various Hindi and Urdu journals that appeared during the period of this thesis. Those that have been used for this research were provided by individuals in India and Pakistan, who are attempting to collect and archive these. A related problem has been deciphering the dating, page numbering and publication places and publishers. Many journals do not specify these details. The only way to judge the data from these is to assess the period from the articles and discussion contained within.

³⁴ See S. Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movements in India: Chronicles and Documents*, 3 vols, Calcutta: Shanti Pradhan, 1979 or the Souvenir documents produced to commemorate the golden jubilee celebrations, 1986.

This research seeks to fill these gaps through the use of autobiographical writing and memoirs of some of the key players within the movement. Moreover, interviews were conducted with surviving members of the PWA in India and Pakistan as well as the relatives of some writers. Oral testimonies, however, can be problematic as they rely upon memory which could be selective, may lack chronology and may deliberately emphasise or underplay certain events.³⁵ Notwithstanding, what is quite remarkable about the interviews conducted for this research is the extent to which they do appear to substantiate some of the officially documented sources. Moreover, they provide information previously undocumented which does not necessarily contradict official material but does illuminate aspects of PWA history that have not been documented before.

This thesis will discuss the politics of the Communist Party of India and the Congress Socialist Party. Though there were and remain many political differences, which will be considered, for the purpose of ideological commitment the terms socialist and communist will be used interchangeably to denote the political philosophy that writers adhered to during the period under study.

Finally, it remains to explain the chronology of the period that this thesis covers. The dates 1932 and 1956 encompass the gestation, development and the fruitful, experimental and politically dynamic periods of PWA history. December 1932 saw the publication of *Angare* by four Urdu progressive writers which was to become the harbinger of many controversies that dogged the movement. 1956 represents the point after which the movement had already disappeared in Pakistan and lost momentum in India.

³⁵ See J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, London: James Currey, 1985, pp. 27-31.

CHAPTER 1 LITERATURE AND POLITICS

Introduction

The All-India Progressive Writer's Association was formally established in April 1936 in Lucknow. One of its founding members, Mulk Raj Anand wrote an article in the British journal, *Left Review*, later that year where he articulated the case for a new type of literature and writers' movement. In writing about the formation of the PWA he stated that its aims were 'to rescue the arts from the decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated, and to bring them into close touch with the peoples of India.'¹ These decadent classes were represented by the landed aristocracy, the priestly classes and the 'babus' (clerks) who formed the rising Indian intelligentsia but only read the English classics. By stating that the arts had to have a connection with the lives of ordinary people Anand was clearly expressing the view that writers had a responsibility to ensure this.

In addition to this article, *Left Review* also published the founding declaration of the PWA, co-authored by Anand, which made statements that implied an appreciation of the interconnectedness between literature and politics.² The manifesto stipulated that 'it is the duty of Indian writers to give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and to assist the spirit of progress.'³ What was clearly involved was the notion of the writer as an intellectual playing a wider role in society. Some thought this was not possible and writers had to remain independent of political activity, but this was challenged by many Indian writers who had been influenced by the experience of their western counterparts. This chapter will consider the Progressive Writers' Association as part of a project for the creation of a new Indian literature

¹ M. R. Anand, "Towards a New Indian Literature" in *Left Review*, vol. 2, No. 12, Sept 1936, p 623.

² See manifesto of the PWA, London, *Left Review*, vol. 2, no. 5, Feb 1936, p. 240.

³ See manifesto of the PWA, *Left Review*, vol. 2, no. 5, p. 240.

that was part of the struggle for independence. It will locate this project in the vision that progressive writers had for a new type of society that they hoped would emerge from independence.

Debates over the role of the intelligentsia in society have for many years dogged writers, journalists, and artists. Throughout the twentieth century writers had agonised over the question of whether there is, or should be, any connection between their art and political activity. On the one hand it has been a long-held belief that the realm of politics and the arts are separate, with different functions, validity and outcomes. Those who hold that art and literature have no connection with political content usually do so as a result of the belief that political art is crude, propagandist and lacking any aesthetic quality. For artists to remain true to their vocations they have to be imaginative and free from all forms of responsibility. They have to be above petty concerns of everyday existence and strive for creative excellence. In this light, art and literature are the product of an individual genius, who remains oblivious to and independent of any societal constraints. It is for this reason that the theory of ‘art for art’s sake’ is propagated, where it is held as an article of faith. In this view art is a form of mysticism, implying direct revelation and purity of the aesthetic realm. Accordingly, the “uniqueness” of art would be sullied if social questions were allowed to interfere and impose themselves.⁴ Defenders of this position usually view the Russian revolution of 1917 as signalling the death knell of artistic endeavour as it is held responsible for destroying individualism and creative work. This is because throughout the 1930s and 1940s many artists influenced by Soviet communism produced art that tended to glorify the Soviet Union and those artists and writers who

⁴ For a detailed review and discussion of this theory see A. Guérard, *Art For Art’s Sake*, Boston: Lothrop, Lee Shepherd Company, 1936.

attempted to produce different types of art were castigated as traitors, fascist sympathisers or bourgeois and decadent. The Russian revolution had produced many schools within the artistic community but by 1934 Stalin had imposed a particular brand of art school on Soviet writers and artists--socialist realism. This type of art was didactic, crude and simplified human relations and social life.

If there were artists who eschewed politics, they had their mirror image in political activists who held a very narrow view of politics. So Amadeo Bordiga, the Italian communist, held that the project for social revolution was only political and that historical crises had only economic causes.⁵ Consequently, these 'anti-culturists' believed that in the struggle for social revolution cultural questions were a diversion. Both the art for art's sake and the anti-culturists' viewpoints were purist and narrow in their outlook. The socialist realism that was imposed and became the orthodoxy from the mid 1930s reduced art and literature to crude propaganda and was neither socialist nor realist. Opposed to both these positions was, and is, a perspective that states art and literature are part of social life and as such cannot be divorced from each other in some arbitrary manner. Social life incorporates the political, economic, social and cultural domains. The proponents of this view hold that intellectuals cannot be cushioned in their ivory towers, disengaged from worldly matters and solely interested in abstruse, perhaps even occult, subjects.

The aim of this chapter is to consider the question of literature and politics as it was debated and theorised at the beginning of the twentieth century. The relationship between the two was not an abstract one confined to the intelligentsia. Its birth lies in the process of social and political transformations underway in the Soviet Union and

⁵ Quoted in A. Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed., by David Forgas and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. by William Boelhower, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985, p. 17.

as such was influenced by historical circumstances. In examining this relationship I hope to provide the historical context that underpinned the discussions of Indian writers on their role as intellectuals in the 1930s.

The Intellectual and Society

During the inter-war years a theoretical viewpoint emerged on the question of literature and politics that was more considered, nuanced and based on the actualities of life and struggle of ordinary people. One of the most influential books to appear in the late 1920s was Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*. Trotsky had been the leader of the victorious Russian army that had led to the transformation of Soviet Russia following the revolution in October 1917. As an active participant in the revolutionary battle to change society, Trotsky's ideas on literature and society were developed as a consequence of what he and many others had witnessed during the revolutionary years in Russia. The revolution saw illiterate workers and peasants listening to and appreciating the works of Mayakovsky, Gorky and Tolstoy.⁶ People who had been denied or never given access to such cultural works were suddenly able to understand, question, appreciate and enjoy "high" culture, which for too long had been the preserve of the elite classes.⁷ This is what led Trotsky to identify the core theme of the relationship between literature and politics, which is that only

a movement of scientific thought on a national scale and the development of a new art would signify that the historic seed has not only grown into a plant, but has even flowered.⁸

⁶ J. Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, London: Penguin, 1977, pp 38-40.

⁷ P. Kogan, "Socialist Theatre in the Years of the Revolution" in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, Part 2, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993, pp 145-150.

⁸ L. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. by Rose Strunsky, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1960, p 9.

His book was published in 1924 and provides a detailed theoretical understanding of the relationship between art and society. For Trotsky the development of art was the ‘highest test of the vitality and significance of each epoch’.⁹ This is because Trotsky did not believe that art could remain untainted or unaffected by the social convulsions that would inevitably accompany periods of crisis and change. He argued that in times of social upheaval ‘...the events are prepared by people. They are made by people; they fall upon people and change these people’.¹⁰ As individuals moved to take centre stage in collectively changing the set up of society, they were transformed in the process and this in turn broadened their horizons, enlarged their capacity for critical thinking and made possible the impossible. This applied no less to cultural questions than to simple narrow economic issues: ‘the creation of a new culture is not an independent task to be carried out separately from our economic work and our social and cultural construction as a whole.’¹¹ It was in establishing this connection that Trotsky was able to articulate the possibility of a new art fit for a new society, which would be ‘realistic, active, vitally collectivist, and filled with a limitless creative faith in the Future’.¹²

The strength of Trotsky’s analysis lay not only in tracing the interconnectedness between literature and politics but also in his understanding of two additionally vital components of this relationship: the role of past cultural traditions and the nature of politically committed socialist art. Some socialist interpretations of literature and society maintain that all links with past cultural traditions have to be severed, believing them to be corrupt, oppressive and moribund. So the progressive Indian

⁹ Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p 9.

¹⁰ Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p 12.

¹¹ Trotsky, L. *Culture and Socialism*, London: New Park Publications, 1963, p 25.

¹² Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p 15.

poet and writer, Akhtar Husain Raipuri castigated classical Urdu poets Ghalib and Mir as degenerates and supporters of feudal cultural values.¹³ Similarly Ahmed Ali, one of the founding members of the Progressive Writers' Movement condemned the Urdu poet Iqbal and the Bengali writer Tagore as reactionary and representatives of mysticism.¹⁴ For Trotsky, a committed communist and revolutionary could not be against the cultural heritage of the past.

The art of past centuries has made man more complex and flexible, has raised his mentality to a higher level, has enriched him in an all-round way. This enrichment is a precious achievement of culture. Mastery of the art of the past is, therefore, a necessary pre-condition not only for the creation of new art but also for the building of a new society...If we were groundlessly to repudiate the art of the past, we should at once become poorer spiritually.¹⁵

So for Trotsky past cultural traditions had to be mastered and understood in order for society to go forward. In the process of constructing a new society the past could not be dispensed with, ignored or destroyed. This did not mean that the past was accepted uncritically. Writers had to view past traditions with openness, scepticism and an ability to discern what was useful from that which was not. Again on the question of political art Trotsky made his views clear. In the manifesto entitled "Towards a free Revolutionary Art" published in 1938, Trotsky, along with the French surrealist André Breton and the Mexican artist Diego Rivera, argued, 'In the realm of artistic creation, the imagination must escape from all constraint and must under no pretext allow itself to be placed under bonds.'¹⁶ They went on to proclaim

¹³ See A.H. Raipuri, *Adab aur Inqilab*, 1934.

¹⁴ See Ahmed Ali speech, "Progressive View of Art" to 1st AIPWA conference, Lucknow 1936, published in *50 Years of PWA, Golden Jubilee Celebrations Souvenir*, Lucknow, 1986, p. 44.

¹⁵ L. Trotsky, *Culture and Socialism*, London: New Park Publications, 1963, pp 12-13.

¹⁶ Manifesto: "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art" published in *Partisan Review*, New York: 1938.

that they stood by the formula 'complete freedom for art'.¹⁷ On the question of a political organisation and party and its relationship to art Trotsky had this to say:

A revolutionary party is neither able nor willing to take upon itself the task of "leading" and even less of commanding art, either before or after the conquest of power. Such a pretension could only enter the head of a bureaucracy – ignorant and impudent, intoxicated with its totalitarian power – which has become the antithesis of the proletarian revolution. Art, like science, not only does not seek orders but by its very essence cannot tolerate them.¹⁸

This is very revealing in terms of how Trotsky saw the relationship between party, art and class. There is no mention here of the didactic, crude political manipulation of art that some assume is endemic to political art. Instead Trotsky argued for freedom of thought in artistic matters but he also understood that this was not the same as 'art for art's sake'. The same manifesto declared.

...we have no intention of justifying political indifference, and that it is far from our wish to revive a so-called 'pure' art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction... We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution. But the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art.¹⁹

From these declarations and writings it seems apparent that what Trotsky was engaged in was the idea that an artist and writer could be committed to a political cause and that this cause of social and human liberation would usher in a new type of society with a new culture that would truly reflect human life. His writings indicate that it was possible to be a committed writer without descending to the depths of propaganda.

¹⁷ Manifesto: "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art"

¹⁸ L. Trotsky, "Art and Politics in Our Epoch", *Fourth International*, March –April, 1950.

¹⁹ Manifesto; "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art"

Another activist writing on cultural questions during the twenties was the Italian revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci. He had also been influenced and inspired by events in Russia and had been General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party from 1924. He edited a paper, *Ordine Nuovo*, which took up cultural issues and discussed at length the role of writers and artists in the political arena. So he argued against the narrow focus of the anti-culturists and insisted that for fundamental change to occur those in the forefront of revolutionary struggle have to take up questions of winning intellectual power as well as economic and political power.²⁰ Like Trotsky, he also believed that it was possible and desirable for writers to be committed but without their art being reduced to propaganda. He argued that committed writers could not be dogmatic in their approach. In commenting on the relationship between literature and politics he argued,

The literary man must necessarily have a less precise and definite outlook than the politician...For the politician, every 'fixed' image is *a priori* reactionary: he considers the entire movement in its development. The artist, however, must have 'fixed' images that are cast into their definite form. The politician imagines man as he is and, at the same time, how he should be in order to reach a specific goal...The artist necessarily and realistically depicts 'that which is', at a given moment (the personal, the non-conformist, etc.). From the political point of view, therefore, the politician will never be satisfied with the artist and will never be able to be: he will find him always behind the times, always anachronistic and overtaken by the real flow of events.²¹

This was not because Gramsci believed writers and artists to be backward and any less committed than politicians. It was a recognition that even a committed writer needs to depict the full complexity and contradictory nature of social life.

Revolutionary writers cannot simply act as cheerleaders for their cause. Art has to encompass all aspects of cultural life and portray this as vividly as possible. This is

²⁰ A. Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, p 41.

²¹ Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, pp 100-101.

because any given socio-historical moment is never homogenous; it is full of conflict and contradictions, confusion and inconsistency.²² These contradictions require characters that represent progressive ideas of change, equality and justice as well as characters that represent conservative ideas that legitimise the prevailing social norms and attitudes. A writer needs to depict and give full expression to these nuanced and contradictory realities. A socialist paradise may be the desired outcome of any crisis or struggle but this cannot be the sole purpose that is portrayed in art.

Many critics of politically engaged writers and committed art maintain that such writers confuse the purposes of literature and politics. But Gramsci argued that if writers allowed their work to be directed by external practicalities, such as political groups dictating what they should write about and how they should write, then,

It shows that his enthusiasm was fictitious and externally willed, that in that specific case he was not really an artist, but a servant who wanted to please his masters.²³

And he continued, 'If the cultural world for which one is fighting is a living and necessary fact, its expansiveness will be irresistible and it will find its artists'.²⁴ In other words, the very process of social upheaval and change will lead writers and artists to question society and seek ways to understand the human condition in a more profound and informed manner. This will inevitably have an impact on their creative mind and will be reflected in their works and ideas. Committed art is not something that can be imposed and made to order. It is something that grows and develops from the basis of social life. Like Trotsky, Gramsci too held the view that

²² Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, pp 93-94.

²³ Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, p 109.

²⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, p 109.

the individual is not apart from society and that all individuals, including the artist, are to a great extent historically conditioned. So he concludes,

...the artist does not write or paint – that is, he does not externalize his phantasms – just for his own recollection, to be able to relive the moment of creation. He is an artist only insofar as he externalizes, objectifies and historicizes his phantasms. Every artist-individual, though, is such in a more or less broad and comprehensive way, he is ‘historical’ or ‘social’ to a greater or lesser degree.²⁵

The key point here is not the crude determinism that denies individual will and thought but rather that, as a social being, the writer will be influenced and moulded by society in his motives, desires and actions.

Gramsci’s contribution to our understanding of literature and society was further strengthened by his discussion of the role of intellectuals. He explicitly rejected the notion of the intellectual as a social category that was autonomous and independent of social and political interests. He argued that in one sense ‘all men are intellectuals...but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.’²⁶ By this he meant that all individuals have an intellect and use it but they are not all intellectuals by social function. In the functional sense Gramsci identified two types of intellectuals: firstly, traditional intellectuals, such as teachers, priests and administrators who perform the same tasks from generation to generation and secondly, organic intellectuals who Gramsci argued are directly connected to social classes or enterprises that use intellectuals to organise interests and gain power.²⁷ Organic intellectuals are people drawn directly from the social groups in whose interests they attempt to organise. So in modern capitalist society they can be worker

²⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, p 112.

²⁶ A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed, and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York: International Publishers, 1980, p 9.

²⁷ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 5-7.

intellectuals as well as academics and professionals. However, Gramsci refined his category of the organic intellectual further by stating that in the modern world it was no longer sufficient for the intellectual to be eloquent on behalf of the group interest they represented but that their mode of being lies in

active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator (but superior at the same time to the abstract mathematical spirit); from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains “specialised” and does not become “directive” (specialised and political).²⁸

Here Gramsci is making explicit the role of the intellectual as an organiser whose job it is to persuade and give direction within the political sphere.

In summary, Trotsky’s and Gramsci’s contribution was rooted in the assertion that there was a connection between literature and politics. As society faced social convulsions the cultural domain could not remain unscathed. In seeking to transform society onto a more equitable basis it was possible for writers to be partisan and committed in favour of social change for the oppressed and downtrodden. This partisanship did not mean subservience to a political machine or ruler but that writers’ creativity and commitment would develop as they were absorbed in political engagement and activity. The cultural heritage of the past could not be ignored but had to be viewed critically and learnt from. In addition, intellectuals had to play an active role in all social and political activities in order to achieve a synthesis between their artistic output and political commitment. The writings of Trotsky and Gramsci illustrate that politically committed art was possible without degenerating into crude propaganda.

²⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p 10.

Intellectuals within the PWA

Within the Progressive Writers' Association in India there were some organic intellectuals coming from the labouring classes in urban as well as rural areas but for the most part the majority of writers associated with the PWA were drawn from elite backgrounds. So Sajjad Zaheer was from an old aristocratic Lucknow family as was Rashid Jahan from Aligarh. Writers such as Premchand, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzaffar, Ismat Chughtai, Sadaat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, Ali Sardar Jafri, Mulk Raj Anand, and many others, were drawn from middle class and upper caste backgrounds. However, what defined this group of writers as organic intellectuals in the Gramscian mould was that they consciously took a decision to side with the oppressed, downtrodden, labouring classes of India and the world. Indian writers decided upon this path as part of a conscious project to affect social change in India. In Gramsci's words, they were a group entering history with a hegemonic attitude to affect change:

One must speak of a struggle for a new culture, that is, for a new moral life, that cannot but be intimately connected to a new intuition of life, until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeing reality and, therefore, a world intimately ingrained in 'possible artists' and 'possible works of art'.²⁹

This can be illustrated by looking at the lives and some writings of three leading players within the PWA: Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand and Rashid Jahan. Their literature and life experience demonstrates the relationship between literature and politics and expresses the utility of intellectuals in society. The birth of the PWA movement will be the subject of the next chapter but in order to appreciate the interplay of literature and politics in imaginative writing and how at both a theoretical and practical level this was interpreted by South Asian writers it is necessary to examine the contribution of the writers above. A consideration of these

²⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, p 98.

three writers is not to imply that other members of the PWA were any less important. Rather, it is recognition that Premchand, Anand and Jahan represented three quite unique yet complementary strands of the movement: internationalism; identification with and compassion for the poor, oppressed and exploited; and total opposition to colonial rule and communal division.

Premchand (1880-1936) was the doyen of Hindi and Urdu literature. Until his last breath he fought for unity between Hindus and Muslims and Hindi and Urdu writers.³⁰ Premchand's early schooling was in Persian and Urdu, as befitted a member of the *Kayastha* community. His father was a clerk in the post office and Premchand's childhood was spent in the vicinity of his village in Lamahi, about six miles from Banaras. He was an avid reader of fiction and devoured Persian tales produced for the Mughal courts, classic epics and English literature.³¹ According to Gupta his first literary work was a farce about a bachelor uncle who falls in love with a low-caste woman. This apparently is based on the true romance of an uncle of his and consequently no copy survives as his uncle was not too pleased!³² The choice of subject matter was to be the harbinger of themes that would pre-occupy Premchand for the rest of his life. His first novel, *Asrar -e-Ma'abid* (The Mystery of the Temple), was serialised in the Banaras Urdu weekly, *Awaz-e-Khalq*, from October 1903 to

³⁰ Premchand, aka Dhanpat Rai, was the leading exponent of Urdu and Hindi prose writing. He is seen as the father of the progressive movement before its inception as his fictional stories convey themes of revolt and opposition to the colonial order but also merciless exposure of caste inequities, the subordination of women, established Indian politicians and all dogma. There are numerous biographies including one by his youngest son, Amrit Rai, *Premchand: His Life and Times*, trans by Harish Trivedi, with an introduction by Alok Rai, New Delhi: OUP, 2002.

³¹ P.C. Gupta, *Premchand*, Makers of Indian Literature Series, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1968, p. 10.

³² Gupta, *Premchand*, p. 10.

February 1905. This exposes the goings on of a priest with local prostitutes and how he undermines the virtue of young women who come to worship at his temple.³³

As a veteran of the movement his attitude and enthusiasm were akin to that of a youth. Premchand delivered the opening speech at the inaugural conference of the PWA in 1936. This will be covered in the next chapter but what is not widely appreciated is how Premchand's political development and his writings were informed by the trajectory of the nationalist struggle. Very early on in his literary life Premchand experienced the world of colonial rule. In 1908 he brought out a small collection of Urdu short stories, *Soz-e-Watan* (Sorrows of the Nation).³⁴ This was written before he became an established writer but these writings were destroyed by the government as 'seditious'. When he was a Senior District Inspector of Schools in Hamirpur UP, the Collector authorised a raid on his house which resulted in the officially sanctioned public burning of 500 copies of his short stories that had just been published by Daya Narain Nigam in the journal *Zamana*. This first collection was burned in front of a British magistrate in India in 1908.³⁵ It is easy to see why. The five short stories contained themes of patriotism and freedom from alien rule. They were heroic epics of Indians resisting subjugation but the analogy with British rule was all too obvious.³⁶ The name Premchand was a pseudonym that he adopted but it was not the first one. He originally used the pseudonym *Nawab Rai* but was forced to drop this in 1910 as the Education Department issued an order stipulating

³³ Amrit Rai, *Premchand: His Life and Times*, pp. 41-43.

³⁴ See Premchand, *Soz-e Watan*, Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, 1961.

³⁵ M. Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Autobiography*, London: Asia Publishing House, 1964, p 68.

³⁶ See A. Rai, *Premchand: His Life and Times*, for Premchand's own description of his meeting with the District Magistrate, pp. 73-75.

that *Nawab Rai* could not publish anything in future without the express permission of the government.³⁷

Premchand had been married at the age of fifteen in accordance with his parents' wishes but he was deeply unhappy with his first wife and eventually she returned to her parents' house after ten years of married life. In 1906 he married, by choice, the widow Shiv Rani Devi, who was the daughter of an Arya Samaj social reformer. By marrying a widow he was making a bold social and political statement and openly flouting strict caste norms regulating marriage ties. The interwar years were a turning point in the nationalist movement. On 8th February 1921 Gandhi addressed a public meeting in Gorakhpur to launch the Non-Cooperation movement. Premchand attended this rally with his family and on 15th February he submitted his resignation as a school's inspector and joined the ranks of Gandhi supporters.³⁸ His wife was also involved in this movement. Shiv Rani was arrested for organising a picket of shops selling foreign cloth. She was imprisoned for six weeks for this activity.³⁹ He became more active in writing and publishing and rejected further possibility of government employment as a protest against foreign rule.

Some of Premchand's work is semi autobiographical and much is written from his own experiences of what he witnessed. So his second novel, *Prema* is a fictionalised account of the hero marrying a widow and challenging obscurantism within his community.⁴⁰ One of his finest and most creative literary endeavours was his novel *Godan (The Gift of a Cow)*. This was his penultimate novel written over three years in the early 1930s and was published in June 1936. This novel centres on the life of

³⁷ Gopal, *Munshi Premchand*, p 70.

³⁸ Gopal, *Munshi Premchand*, p

³⁹ Gopal, *Munshi Premchand*, pp 316-317.

⁴⁰ This was published in 1907 and the Urdu version is *Hamkhurma-o-Hamsawab*.

the peasant Hori and his family in north India. The story is one of endless hardship as Hori struggles to make ends meet on his farm and to own a cow: the peasant's measure of wealth. The protagonist Hori believes that he has to make the gift of a cow to a Brahmin in order to secure salvation for him and his family. In this struggle he is compelled to give a daughter in marriage to an elderly man and is continuously at the mercy of moneylenders, the village patwari and the landlord.⁴¹ The novel brilliantly captures the economic and social conflicts at the heart of rural India before independence. The reader is left in little doubt that the very hierarchic nature of village life with its petty rules and social obligations governing every aspect of social intercourse is at fault. Hori's struggle for survival and self-respect faces intolerable obstacles at every turn. The story is quite bleak and relentless in its portrayal of the degrading experiences that Hori has to undergo but it is also humane and compassionate without sentimentalising rural life.

Premchand's earlier works also depicted the rural life with the financial hardships faced by peasants but they always ended with some sort of compromise between peasants and the landed gentry. In *The Gift of a Cow* no such compromise is possible. When Premchand wrote this novel India was gripped with the Civil Disobedience campaign and the language of "Home Rule" and *Satyagraha* had been replaced with the demand for complete independence. Premchand had been drawn towards Gandhian philosophy as a result of Gandhi's ability to transform the Indian National Congress out of its mere petitioning and elite orientation into a mass mobilising movement. Originally he had been inspired by Gandhian notions of self-sacrifice, civil harmony and accommodation between the wealthy and poor. However, Premchand was also inspired by the experience of the Russian revolution and in the

⁴¹ See Premchand, *The Gift of a Cow*, trans. by Gordon C. Roadarmel, London: Lokamaya Press, 1987.

last few months of his life he wrote an essay and an unfinished novel which expressed his views on the nature of social and economic inequality. In his essay he stated,

In this capitalist society the one motivation for all action is money...from this point of view, it is the capitalists who rule the world today. Human society has been divided into two sections. The bigger section comprises the tillers and toilers, while the far smaller section comprises those who through their might and influence hold the larger section under their subjugation. They have no sympathy for this larger section and take no pity on it whatever. This section exists merely so that it may sweat for its masters and bleed for its masters and one day quietly depart the world.⁴²

And in his unfinished novel he wrote,

Some poor man goes and eats a few ears of corn from another's field, and he is punished by the law. Another, a rich man robs others in broad daylight, and he is honoured and titled. Some men come armed with all kinds of weapons and terrorize poor helpless workers and turn them into slaves. Under the pretext of rents and taxes and duties they begin to loot them. They draw fat salaries, go hunting, go dancing, indulge themselves in all kinds of pleasures. Is this God's own creation? Is this Justice?⁴³

This demonstrates how Premchand's thinking was clearly moving in a more radical direction. He was aware of the limitations of Gandhi's strategy precisely because for Premchand nothing short of complete independence would suffice. However this radical orientation did not result in Premchand depicting his peasant or urban characters as glorious revolutionary heroes. In *Gift of a Cow* Hori is defeated in his efforts and has lost much. He is not presented as a conquering peasant hero but one who has withstood many indignities and hardships. There is no happy ending but the novel points to a deep malaise in a social order based upon his social position. In his address to the first AIPWA conference he stated the duty of the writer had to be to

⁴² See "Mahajani Sabhyata" quoted in Rai, *Premchand: His Life and Times*, pp. 363-364. This essay was written in June 1936 and according to his son is evidence of some sort of final testament.

⁴³ Premchand, *Mangalashtra*, quoted in Rai, *Premchand: His Life and Times*, p. 363. This last novel, though unfinished was published in 1948.

represent and help the downtrodden, oppressed and exploited and to act as an advocate of their cause.⁴⁴ This is what is apparent in Premchand's literature.

As with Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) also felt the brutality of colonial power when, after hearing about the Jallianwala massacre in Amritsar, he joined the non-cooperation movement. In the early 1920s he was involved in student agitation and received eleven lashes on his back and was jailed briefly. The experience had a deep impact on the young Anand and he concluded that notions of empire and freedom were complete opposites:

I had grown up in the ferment of a great moral and political movement in which I had learnt...that alien authority constricted our lives in every way. I can't say there was no bitterness in my hatred of imperialism, because I remember how often waves of fury swept over me to see hundreds of human beings go to jail daily after being beaten up by the police for offering civil disobedience.⁴⁵

Anand came from a family of metal workers with an army background in Peshawar. It was partly to avoid further arrest and escape the petty bourgeois ambitions of his soldier father that Anand came to London in the autumn of 1925 to study English at University College London. Unlike most Indian students at the time he had to work in Indian restaurants and later for a publishing firm to earn his keep as his family were not in a position to fully finance his studies or maintenance. In London he became part of the literary crowd known as the 'Bloomsbury group'. Here he met the writers T.S. Eliot, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster and John Strachey amongst many others. This literary elite both impressed him and left him feeling quite perplexed and uncomfortable. London at that time was the centre of the English speaking intellectual world and Anand had hoped to meet with like-minded

⁴⁴ Premchand's Address to 1st AIPWA conference, in *50 Years*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ M.R. Anand, *Apology for Heroism: A Brief Autobiography of Ideas*, Delhi: Kutub-Popular, 1946, pp 53-54.

individuals who shared his anti-colonial, liberal views. To his surprise he discovered that, according to Eliot, Gandhi was an ‘anarchist’ and that Indians should concentrate on cultural aspects of their society and leave the politics of governance to the British!⁴⁶ Many of these writers had not visited India and so their impressions were formed by such writings as Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, which to Anand was typical of colonial fantasies of India.⁴⁷

Anand was disturbed by the levels of prejudice and ignorance amongst some writers; and it was partly in response to these perceptions that he wanted to write. When it came to the truth Anand believed that the ‘writer can help to educate humanity in this way far more enduringly than can the scientist or educationalist.’⁴⁸ As an Indian student in London, Anand found he was popular with the literary set and fortunately for him not all writers were as parochial as Eliot. He soon found himself drawn to the Woolfs but more importantly, E.M. Forster. Anand held *Passage to India* to be the best fictional writing on his homeland as this went beyond the orientalist conceptions of the ‘natives’ and attempted to depict the complex, often contradictory and mostly confrontational impact of colonial rule in India.

Anand had wanted to write about the ordinary, the mundane, everyday experiences of Indians who were not kings, priests or gods. James Joyce’s *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* impressed him greatly as it was a new type of literature infused with themes of Irish nationalism. In 1927 Anand went to Ireland and was impressed by the writings of Yeats because his work represented the lives of ordinary people in villages and towns. This was to be his model as he set about writing his first novel,

⁴⁶ A. Anand, *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, London: OUP, 1995, pp 44-47.

⁴⁷ Interview in Khandala, on 8th March 2004.

⁴⁸ Anand, *Apology*, p. 135.

Untouchable, published in 1935. As the title suggests it is a story based on the life of the most downtrodden, despised and oppressed section of Indian society. This story is based on a single day in the life of Bakha, a sweeper boy whom the reader follows on his daily chores of cleaning the latrines of the rich and powerful. The novel is merciless in its condemnation of caste hierarchy and strict rules governing ideas of purity and pollution. When Bakha walks down the streets he has to signal an alarm with his voice as he approaches so that the “pure” are forewarned to avoid even his shadow. On one occasion he does “pollute” a caste Hindu and is chased, abused and attacked all day long for this defilement.⁴⁹

Anand was born into the *kshatriya* caste but he had always befriended and played with the children of sweepers and as a child he had been shocked and disgusted by the suicide of a relative who had been disowned by his family for daring to share her food with a Muslim. It was this personal experience of caste inequality and religious bigotry that left the young Anand with a bitter taste and it was the lives of ordinary people that he sought to depict in his work. With the publication of *Untouchable*, Anand had firmly associated himself with that brand of writers that Trotsky and Gramsci had theorised a decade earlier. These were writers who saw ‘political, social and human causes as genuine impulses for the novel and poetry’.⁵⁰ For Anand literature should be an interpretation of the truth of people’s lives. It should be written from *felt experience* and not books.⁵¹ It was for this reason he returned to India briefly in 1929. As with Premchand, he had been influenced by Gandhi and he went to his ashram in Ahmedabad, where he showed Gandhi drafts of his novel.

⁴⁹ See M.R. Anand, *Untouchable*, London: Penguin, 1940.

⁵⁰ S. Cowasjee, *Author to Critic: The Letters of Mulk Raj Anand*, Delhi: Writers Workshop Publications, 1973, p 1.

⁵¹ Interview, 8th March 2004, Khandala.

Gandhi was extremely critical because he claimed there was too much of the “Bloomsbury” feel to it. Whilst in Ahmedabad, Anand lived like a disciple and did his share of cleaning latrines.⁵² It was in this period that Anand revised his book considerably and when E.M Forster read it, he retorted that in response to those who complained about the “dirt” ‘the book seems to me indescribably clean...it has gone straight to the heart of its subject and purified it’.⁵³ Though this is his most widely read novel it was quite difficult to get it published in the 1930s. Some nineteen publishers had rejected this story for its “dirt”. In despair, Anand was on the brink of giving up when the twentieth publisher accepted the novel as Forster had agreed to write the preface. Anand praised Forster for his support as it was not only unusual for an Indian writer to depict his protagonist as a latrine cleaner; many European writers did not themselves venture into a subject matter like this.⁵⁴

Like Premchand, Anand displays compassion for the plight of untouchables but never sentimentality. In many ways the novel represents his thinking beyond the limits of Gandhi’s idea of untouchables as *harijans*. For Anand this was far too patronising and it is for this reason that his fictionalised account depicts a debate between a Gandhi type figure espousing the oneness of humanity and the poet who poses a modern solution to the problems of untouchability – flushing toilets!⁵⁵

Whilst in London Anand was conscious not only of colonial stereotypes of Indians that were prevalent amongst some British intellectuals but also the contempt with which they held British workers. A year after he arrived in London the general strike took place. This episode was to have a profound effect upon him. His natural

⁵² Interview with Anand.

⁵³ See Preface to *Untouchable*, p v.

⁵⁴ Interview with Anand.

⁵⁵ Anand, *Untouchable*, pp 151-153.

sympathies were with the strikers and their supporters for he found himself comparing the position of the English worker with that of Indians under colonial rule and found “British democracy” seriously lacking. He believed there to be ‘something rotten in the state of Denmark’.⁵⁶ His outrage at the way the state treated the strikers was outstripped only by his astonishment at the attitudes of fellow students who were content to volunteer to run trams, tubes and buses. Anand saw this as treachery and he associated himself with a small group of students who refused to be bullied by the majority. For his pains he was attacked in Gower Street.⁵⁷ But he had no regrets, stating ‘in life there are some things worth getting beaten up for’.⁵⁸

The writer Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) is less well known than either Premchand or Anand but her role was nonetheless pivotal to the relationship of literature and politics and the role of writers in society. Born in 1905 into a well to do Muslim family of Aligarh, she was brought up in a liberal household. Her father was Sheikh Abdullah, a social reformer and educationalist. In 1907 he established the All-Women College in Aligarh, one of the first to be devoted to the education and empowerment of Muslim women. Jahan herself was educated at this college and at the age of 14, she heard Gandhi deliver a speech against the British in Aligarh. From that point onwards she took to wearing khadi.⁵⁹

Jahan was known for her no-nonsense attitude and speaking the blunt truth. She abhorred hypocrisy and had little time for social conventions governing religion, caste or class. Her sister-in-law, Hamida Saiduzzafar, recalls an incident when Jahan had a Chamar boy working in her kitchen, who was asked to wash and change into

⁵⁶ Anand, *Apology*, pp 32-35.

⁵⁷ Anand, *Apology*, pp 35.

⁵⁸ Interview, 8th March 2004, Khandala.

⁵⁹ “Dr. Rashid Jahan Seventieth Birth Anniversary”, Aligarh: 1975.

clean clothes every morning. Some of her Hindu friends discovered this and objected. Jahan retorted as quick as a flash, 'Well, he's cleaner than many high-caste Hindus. If you don't want to, you needn't eat in my house'.⁶⁰ She was affectionately known as Rashida to her friends and family and people marvelled at her wit, plain talking and straightforward manner.

This was reflected in her short stories. In *Dilli ki Sair* (Trip to Delhi) she depicts the cruelty visited on a married woman in purdah whose husband leaves her sitting on a station platform whilst he goes off to eat snacks and talk to other men.⁶¹ This was one of the stories included in the publication *Angare* in 1932. Her other contribution to this collection was *Parde ke Piche* (Behind the Veil), which concerns the fate of women engaged in excessive child bearing and the preference given to male babies. A western educated man demands a male heir from his poor wife who has borne girls every year of their marriage. A doctor advises her to use something to prevent regular pregnancy. The story was remarkable in its time for including the theme of birth control.⁶² With these stories she invited the wrath of every middle class Indian husband. What they and others objected to most was that here was a mere child of a girl who dared to question the right of a husband to behave as he thought was his natural right.

The cause of the downtrodden was close to her heart and she devoted all her energies to this effort. By profession Jahan was a doctor and her attitude towards her patients illustrates her compassion for the poor as well as her contempt for her wealthier

⁶⁰ H. Saiduzafar, "My Renegade Sister, Rashid Jahan 1905-1952" in *The Making of a Modern Muslim Woman: Begum Khurshid Mirza (1918-1989)*, by Lubna Kazim, Lahore: Brite Books, 2003, p 116.

⁶¹ See R. Jahan, "Trip to Delhi" in *Journal of South Asian Literature (JSAL)* vol. 22, no. 1, Spring 1987, pp. 131-132.

⁶² See R. Jahan, "Behind the Veil" in *Angare*, Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1995 pp. 166-180.

clients. She had more time and patience for patients with moderate means or very little. As Hamida recalls she would sit for hours talking to women in purdah as easily as she would with women not in purdah.⁶³ She refused to take payment from her poorer patients but always took fees from her wealthier clients, even though she disapproved of their attitudes, stating,

why should I bother with these people who are so fussy and don't follow my advice. They can afford to call in any doctor. I'd rather give my time and energy to those who need me and appreciate my services.⁶⁴

Jahan's one act drama *Aurat* (Woman) is a perfect example of her political, social and economic concerns.⁶⁵ It is a lengthy piece and allows for some character development. It depicts the life of a woman, Fatima, whose husband is a maulvi. He wants to take a second wife as Fatima is unable to produce a child for him. With the surgical precision of her medical training, Jahan knits a compelling yarn about duty, jealousy, cruelty and male domination. We see Atiq, the pious husband use selective religious texts to legitimise his claim to a second wife. It is a multi-layered account of a society that is underpinned by unfairness and oppression for women. As such its themes are universal and the play was widely acclaimed when it was performed, although it also caused 'a few eye brows to be raised'.⁶⁶

Coming from a well established upper class background, Jahan was well acquainted with the habits of the aristocracy whom she despised for their double standards and greed. As a doctor she witnessed first hand the treatment men subjected their women to as well as the often callous manner with which servants were treated.⁶⁷ In her

⁶³ Saiduzafar, "My Renegade Sister", *Making of a Modern Muslim Woman*, p 112.

⁶⁴ Quoted in "My Renegade Sister", *Making of a Modern Muslim Woman*, p 112.

⁶⁵ See "Woman" trans by Steven Poulos, in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 1, 1981, pp. 70-88.

⁶⁶ Interview with Munshi Shahid Hussain, 28th March 2004, Aligarh.

⁶⁷ See Zaheer *Roshnai*, pp 49-58 and "My Renegade Sister" pp113-115.

childhood servants were part of the family and her nephew, Salman Haidar, recalls how she never allowed her nephews and nieces to 'laud it over the servants. We had to make our own beds...She made sure we could all sew and knit. To this day I sew better than my wife'.⁶⁸ As a practical individual she was not only interested in diagnosis, she looked for treatment and a cure. It was for this reason Jahan joined the Communist Party of India.⁶⁹ Though she remained a loyal member throughout her life, she never allowed the Party to dictate what she wrote or how. Such was the force of her personality that 'no husband, father, brother, maulvi or Party could tell her what to do, or think'.⁷⁰

Unlike Premchand and Anand, Jahan is not held to be as great a writer as her works are claimed to be far too limited in scope and of variable quality and length. It is true that the focus of her writings are primarily one subject – women – but they are half of humanity, so perhaps this is not so limiting a scope. It is also the case that she writes with economy. Her stories are very short and some are undoubtedly better than others. But the power of Jahan's writing is that in a few words she is able to convey an enormity of ideas – the wilful neglect of wives by their husbands, the perils of endless child birth, and the injustices perpetrated by "respectable" society towards the poor and destitute. These were all issues that the established order wished to see swept under the carpet. Jahan brought these out into the open and as Premchand and Anand, exposed the hypocrisy, cowardice and brutality of existing society. But unlike either Premchand or Anand, Jahan continues to excite passions, fears and anger. More than 70 years after the publication of her stories and over 50 years since her death, a conference commemorating her life and writings cannot be

⁶⁸ Interview with Salman Haidar, New Delhi, 18th December 2003.

⁶⁹ "My Renegade Sisiter" in *Making of Modern Muslim Woman*, p. 113.

⁷⁰ Interview with her niece, Shahla Haidar, New Delhi, 19th December 2003.

held at the university of her native Aligarh. This is on the spurious grounds that such an event would provoke protests and violence from religious leaders, as she is associated with the *Angare* publication. A seminar was finally convened in Aligarh, privately, to celebrate her centenary last year but even then controversy dogged the event. In reporting on the planning of the seminar, *The Tribune*, of Chandigarh referred to Jahan as ‘a “Rebel writer” ahead of her times’.⁷¹ Yes, she was ahead of her times and, yes, she most certainly was a rebel. But her rebellion was not one for the sake of it. Jahan had no reason to rebel. She had been given all the freedom a girl could hope for in her family. In fact it could be argued she hailed from a family of rebels. As Gail Minault points out, her father, Sheikh Abdullah, was a Kashmiri Brahmin who converted to Islam in order to marry the woman he loved, Wahid Jahan Begum. He also championed women’s education at a time when such ideas were unthinkable and was prepared to stand up to conservative interests, from wherever they emanated.⁷² Her fiction conveys the constant theme of an enlightened doctor representing modernity but this was not a modernity based on simple imitation of all things western. Jahan came from a very liberal family where established orthodoxies had been challenged by a previous generation. Her parents questioned former taboos and championed rational thought and innovation that was as much to do with indigenous social realities as western ideas. In this respect Jahan was a true pioneer of the progressive tradition as much, if not more than, both Premchand and Anand. She challenged the sacred cows of Indian society and, as a woman in the 1930s, her achievement was more remarkable. In this respect she paved the way for younger women writers.

⁷¹ *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, 23rd October 2005.

⁷² See Gail Minault, “Shaikh Abdullah, Begum Abdullah, and *Sharif* Education for Girls in Aligarh” in Imtiaz Ahmad, ed *Modernization and Social Change among Muslims in India*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1983, pp. 206-236; Minault, G. *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, New Delhi: OUP, 1998.

Progressive writers had their own ideas about the role of the intellectual. They had disavowed the notion of 'art for art's sake' on the basis that it was unrealistic; unsustainable in the light of oppressive systems, undesirable and that the notion itself was suspect in the light of historical circumstances. In his paper given to the second AIPWA conference in Calcutta, Anand made a distinction between the individual and the individualist.

An individual is the correlative of the community and is not to be conceived without it, without the collective of which he is a part; the individualist is the very opposite of the community, the eccentric.⁷³

In connecting the individual with society, Anand made it explicitly clear that the writers are individuals and not some machine to be used as a political tool by having their individuality sacrificed at the altar of propaganda. But neither are they hermetically sealed from the collective community that they belong to.

Premchand, Anand and Jahan introduced themes into South Asian literature that had been ignored or not considered worthy of note. They were responsible for putting centre stage the lives of peasants, labourers and women. As writers their literature focused on ordinary, mundane life and on individuals with colourless lives.

Characters were represented, not as caricatures but as multi-faceted beings in shades of grey as opposed to black and white. In their work no attempt was made to venerate the poor and destitute as revolutionary heroes. But at the same time there is no question as to where the authors' sympathies are. All three are unashamedly on the side of the exploited and oppressed. Moreover, their writing poses profound questions about the nature of society, whether that be colonial repression, or caste, class and gender inequalities. They saw a function for their literature in contributing

⁷³ Quoted in *New Indian Literature*, No. 1, 1939.

to the nationalist discourse and giving some political direction on the necessity to change society. All three were influenced by the social experiment that was under way in the Soviet Union as a result of the revolution. Their writings and personal lives are evidence of the role intellectuals attempted to play at an important junction of Indian history. In this they were attempting to put into practice the ideas that Trotsky and Gramsci had theorised in the 1920s. They also demonstrate that it was possible for writers to engage in spheres beyond their profession without resorting to dogmatic, crude and sloganeering literature.

The European Influence

The political, social and economic background to the 1930's was instrumental in the formation of the Progressive Writers' Movement. The world economy was still reeling from the reverberations of the Wall Street crash. Economic depression had set in with unemployment spiralling to ever greater heights and levels of poverty rising in Western Europe. Fascist parties had come to power in Germany in 1933 and Italy in 1922. They were riding high on the fear such catastrophe induced and directing resentment towards convenient scapegoats in the form of minorities. The Russian revolution had survived the ravages of the First World War and for many the relative success of this young and new social experiment proved to be an inspiration in the face of Nazi barbarism. Various political formations to the left had developed in Western Europe around the socialist parties but also vibrant communist parties were proving to be a major pole of attraction for a new generation of youth disillusioned with the perceived shortcomings of established left socialist parties. This new generation consisted of industrial workers, the unemployed but also journalists, writers and other artists who were very receptive to the ideas and practice of what they saw as a new dynamic, egalitarian society in the making. So writers as varied as

Bertolt Brecht, George Bernard Shaw, André Gide and Rabindranath Tagore were drawn to the left in their art as well as in political outlook.

In the 1930s whether writers wished it or not, the world of politics did impinge upon the artistic arena. It not merely impinged—it intruded, infiltrated and imposed its will. Even the most apolitical and impartial writer could not avoid political questions or taking a stance on issues relating to the war, fascism and the colonial presence in Africa and Asia. Stephen Spender, a British writer and critic, stated:

...I felt hounded by external events. There was ever increasing unemployment in America, Great Britain and on the Continent. The old world seemed incapable of solving its problems, and out of the disorder Fascist regimes were rising.⁷⁴

The maxim of “He who is not for us is against us” had made it impossible for writers to remain neutral. For many writers it was not whether it was desirable or necessary for there to be a relationship between politics and literature but the fact of the matter was that there was a connection between the two and no amount of wishful thinking was going to alter that. In the 1930’s writers felt that the most sensitive minds could not remain immune or desensitised to the general political fate that millions found themselves involved in.

Another aspect of this question that exercised the minds of writers was that for the first time in human history it was not only a question of the intelligentsia consciously making a stand to side with the destitute, oppressed and exploited sections of humanity. An antidote to these problems now seemed to be available. To be a committed writer was necessary but more importantly a vision had arisen that gave

⁷⁴ S. Spender, *World Within World: The Autobiography of Stephen Spender*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951, p 137.

hope to those challenging tyranny and desirous for social change. This hope existed in the form of the Soviet Union for most. The revolution of 1917 had raised the prospect of a new type of society that had not been thought possible before. The early Soviet state with its apparent root and branch social transformation had excited millions around the world and its experiment at forging a more apparently just and equitable social order was ground for optimism. To paraphrase a sentiment from the period, for many “not to be a Communist seemed indecent” in the 1930s.⁷⁵

Many writers had been shocked and horrified at the way writers and artists were been treated in Germany. They had witnessed the confiscation of books and other material designated as “anti-national”, “undesirable” and “communistic”. On 10th May 1933, in the squares of Berlin University, Fascists burnt books by Maxim Gorky, Stalin and the German writer, Ludwig Renn. Across Germany Nazi students and officials staged massive book burnings where works by Helen Keller, Ernest Hemingway, Karl Marx, Bertolt Brecht, John Reed, Jack London and many others were publicly destroyed.⁷⁶ Book burnings became a frequent feature on the streets of Berlin and other cities and writers were subjected to harassment, arrest and many had to go into hiding and eventually to leave as political refugees. Against this background it is not too

⁷⁵ An example of this is to be found in the memoirs of Michael Carritt. He was in the Indian Civil Service and posted to Bengal from 1929-1939. As an Assistant-Magistrate he had been appalled at the treatment of Indians by his fellow officials. On leave in London in the summer of 1936, Carritt attended meetings of the League Against Imperialism, a left wing body run by Ben Bradley, a member of the British Communist Party. He also attended meetings against the rise of fascism and joined the Communist Party. On his return to India, Carritt acted as courier for Indian Communists. In this capacity he was responsible for receiving left wing books and Marxist pamphlets, which came to him legally as a British civil servant. He would pass these on to his Indian comrades. He also provided sanctuary for P.C. Joshi, the future General Secretary of the CPI, in his flat in Calcutta, whilst he was in hiding. On his return to Britain in 1939, Carritt resigned from the ICS and worked inside the Communist Party against fascism. His double life was discovered and eventually he was denied his pension in 1940. In the 1980s, he proclaimed that if he had his time again, ‘I would choose the same sort of road’. For a full and scintillating account see Michael Carritt, *A Mole in the Crown: Memories of a British official in India who worked with the Communist Underground in the 1930s*, Hove: privately published, 1985.

⁷⁶ G. Tischler, “Bonfire of the Sanities”, *The Washington Diplomat*, June 2003.

difficult to see how writers and other intellectuals felt the need to respond. A Revolutionary Association of Writers and Artists had been set up in Paris in 1932 by the writer Henri Barbusse. In 1933 Louis Aragon inaugurated *La Maison de la Culture*, which brought out a review entitled *Commune*, edited by Barbusse, Aragon and André Gide. This proclaimed itself as 'a review of struggle...In face of the confusion by which existing culture moves towards fascism, the Commune proclaims that the only revolution is the proletarian revolution'.⁷⁷ In Madrid a similar association was established in June 1933, which led to the founding of a review entitled *Cultura Nuova* in Valencia in 1935 and with the outbreak of civil war the Alliance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals for the Defence of Culture was established in July 1936. In the United States the magazines *New Masses* and *Partisan Review* were launched.⁷⁸

From 1934-37 three conferences took place that were a watershed in delineating the role for writers and intellectuals in a rapidly changing world. In 1934 the first Soviet Writers' Congress took place in Moscow from 17th August to 1st September.⁷⁹ This gathering was pivotal in setting up a model of how to organise and give political direction to the nascent activities of writers in the Soviet Union as well as in the west. Though this was an essentially Soviet writers' convention a number of international delegates attended. So the French writers Louis Aragon, André Malraux, Jean Richard Bloch, Paul Nizan and André Gide attended, as did the German writer Heinrich Mann.⁸⁰ This conference was dominated by discussions on artistic theories that were linked to Soviet Communism, so the speech by A.A. Zhdanov, who was

⁷⁷ L.M.Schneider, *II Congreso Internacional de Escritores Antifascistas (1937): vol.1: Inteligencia y Guerra civil Espanola*, Barcelona: LAIA, 1978, pp 30-31. trans. by Chris Harman.

⁷⁸ Schneider, *II Congreso Internacional de escritores antifascists*, p 31.

⁷⁹ See *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977.

⁸⁰ Schneider, *II Congreso Internacional*, p 25.

the secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, argued that writers had to be 'engineers of human souls'.⁸¹ By this he meant that writers had to have knowledge about social life in order to depict it accurately in their works but he added:

...to depict reality in its revolutionary development...the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism.⁸²

To argue that writers had to have experience of social life in order to write about it was one thing but to insist on a 'revolutionary development' and the 'remoulding' of people's ideas was quite another. Zhdanov was describing the theory of socialist realism which insisted on artists producing art that glorified the virtues of the Soviet Union, with contented workers and peasants building the communist utopia. It is quite clear that Zhdanov had a didactic understanding and belief of what was expected of writers and their literature and from this conference socialist realism came to be synonymous with the Soviet Union.

The key note speech at this conference was delivered by Maxim Gorki. As the most celebrated Soviet writer his presence at the congress was of paramount importance. In his speech he explained the purpose of the new writers' union that was launched from this congress. This body was not solely intended to organise writers into one unified organisation but so that

...professional unification may enable to them to comprehend their corporate strength, to define with all possible clarity their varied tendencies, creative activity, guiding principles, and harmoniously to

⁸¹ Speech by A.A. Zhdanov in *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934*, p 21.

⁸² *Soviet Writers' Congress* p 21.

merge all aims in that unity which is guiding all the creative working energies of the country.⁸³

He echoed Zhdanov's sentiments on socialist realism by asserting that the creative energies of writers be subordinated to the aims of society. He further added that the Writers' Union should be 'purged of all philistine influences'.⁸⁴ These ideas on culture and literature were quite removed from those espoused a decade earlier by Trotsky and Gramsci and implemented in practice in Gorki's own novels. In particular, Gorki's adherence to this policy was extremely influential in the propagation of socialist realism amongst a generation of writers during the 1930s and 1940s. However it was not the only interpretation of a writer's role that emerged from this congress. Karl Radek's speech on "Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art" surveyed a range of literature from across the world and the attitude writers had taken to the Russian revolution.⁸⁵ On the question of the approach writers should adopt in their work Radek stated that they should have a "whole approach" and not simply write from their own narrow experience. This whole approach necessitates an understanding that the job of a writer is to depict "warts and all".⁸⁶ On socialist realism he stated,

An artist who tried to represent the birth of socialism as an idyll, who tried to represent the socialist system, which is being born in hard-fought battles, as a paradise populated by ideal people – such an artist would not be a realist, would not be able to convince anyone by his works. The artist should show how socialism is built out of the bricks of the past, out of the material which we ourselves create in the sweat of our brow, in the blood of our toil and struggle, in the hard battles of classes and in the hard toil of man to remould himself.⁸⁷

⁸³ M. Gorky, speech in *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934*, pp 64-65.

⁸⁴ Gorky, in *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934*, p 64.

⁸⁵ K. Radek, speech in *Soviet Writers' Congress*, pp73-182.

⁸⁶ Radek, in *Soviet Writers' Congress*, p 146.

⁸⁷ Radek, in *Soviet Writers' Congress*, p 157.

Though Radek was a senior member of the CPSU, his approach is quite similar to that of Trotsky and Gramsci on literature. In the same way that Trotsky had identified the different purposes of literature and politics a decade earlier Radek understood that writers could not portray a happy artificial socialist paradise that bore little resemblance to reality. Writers could be committed to the cause of socialism but in their art they had to depict the full complexity of social life with all its contradictory elements.

When the French writers returned to Paris a meeting was organised at the *Palais de la Mutualité* on 23rd October.⁸⁸ Here André Gide made a speech on “Literature and Revolution” in which he articulated the case for literature to be part of a project for transforming society as in the Soviet Union.⁸⁹ For Gide to make such a call was most significant. Traditionally he had always shied away from political statements and involvement. The Moscow experience had obviously left its mark. Gide had been moving towards the idea of a ‘committed’ writer for some time. The key event that influenced him was a trip he embarked on to the Congo in the late 1920’s. On his return he wrote his book *Le Voyage du Congo* which was published in 1927. Gide had been mortified by the experience of colonial rule in Africa and the treatment he witnessed towards Africans.⁹⁰ His outrage at colonial brutality combined with enthusiasm for revolutionary change won him a mass audience in Paris. Nine months after the Moscow meeting the first International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture was convened in Paris, also at the *Palais de la Mutualité*.⁹¹ The sessions were held from 21st-25th June 1935 and over two hundred delegates from thirty eight

⁸⁸ Schneider, *II Congreso*, p 33.

⁸⁹ See *Commune*, no. 15, November 1934, pp. 161-181.

⁹⁰ Schneider, *II Congreso*, p 37

⁹¹ Schneider, *II Congreso*, p 34.

countries attended.⁹² Gide presided over the conference and its organising committee was composed of leading French writers such as André Malraux, Louis Aragon, Romain Rolland, Henri Barbusse, J.R. Bloch, P. Abraham, E. Bove, J. Cassou, A. Chamson, R. Crevel, E. Dabit, E. Faure, Giono, Guehenno, Guilloux, R. Lalou, V. Margueritte, L. Moussinac and A. Vollis.⁹³ International writers who attended included Heinrich Mann, E.M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, Stephen Spender, Waldo Frank, Isaac Babel, Maxim Gorki, Virginia Woolf, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Pablo Neruda, Thomas Mann, Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill, Ernest Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, H.G. Wells, Bertolt Brecht and Boris Pasternak.⁹⁴ The Congress was a tremendous gathering of Europe's greatest literary figures who came together to express opposition to the rise of fascism across Europe. They had witnessed the plight of fellow writers in Italy and Germany who faced harassment, arrest and the confiscation and burning of their books. In addition the Japanese invasion of China signalled the ascendancy of the Axis powers, which threatened to sweep away democratic rights, freedom and justice. The fear of fascist totalitarianism propelled intellectuals in Europe to act. The choice of France was significant in this respect as traditionally the centre of intellectual gravity had been to the right in the preceding century. The history of the Dreyfus affair had left a deep anti-Semitic strain amongst the French intelligentsia and in the early 1930s several writers had openly declared their pro-fascist sympathies. This international congress was an opportunity for those with progressive ideas to alter the nexus of French intellectual life. To this end the venue was also noteworthy. The *Mutualité* was situated on the Left Bank and was associated with the French left and progressive causes. As Teroni

⁹² S.Teroni, and Wolfgang Klein, *Pour la Défense de la culture: Les textes du Congrès international des écrivains, Paris, juin 1935*, Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2005, p 13.

⁹³ Schneider, *II Congreso*, p 36.

⁹⁴ Schneider, *II Congreso*, p 38.

states, this congress succeeded in uniting communists, surrealists, avant-garde types, old Dreyfus supporters, pacifists and liberals in the struggle against fascism.⁹⁵ The title of the Congress expressed an analogy with the defence of culture and that of democracy and as such it was a platform that a diverse collection of writers could share.

For five days, this extraordinary assembly of cultural heroes debated the *big* questions of the day. They spoke to grand themes of cultural heritage: the writer's role in society; the individual; humanism; nations and culture; the problems of literary creation and dignity of thought; defence of culture.⁹⁶ In addition to writers hundreds of other people poured into the hall paying their three franc fee to hear intellectuals concerned with their public role speak on a very public platform. And they were not disappointed. If Gorki had been the dominant literary figure at the Moscow writers meeting, that of André Gide stood out at the Paris congress. Apart from opening the conference his most important contribution was his speech delivered on the second day on "The Individual". He derided those who assumed that individuality would wither if writers organised collectively and made his sympathies with the Soviet Union clear: 'it is only in a communist society where the individual can truly blossom'.⁹⁷ The speech is full of praise for what Gide felt were the achievements of the Soviet literature and the openness of this young society. For him 'art that had no contact with reality, with life was artificial'.⁹⁸ He argued that great literature always came from below, through the experiences of ordinary people. He contrasted the insincerity of western society which to him kept people in a 'state of

⁹⁵ Teroni, *Pour la Défense*, p. 15.

⁹⁶ Teroni, *Pour la Défense*, pp. 68-69.

⁹⁷ Speech of André Gide in *Pour la Défense*, p 182.

⁹⁸ Gide speech, p 183.

servitude, stupidity and ignorance⁹⁹ with what he and others held to be the greatest creative and social endeavour unfurling in the Soviet Union. His conclusion was that for individual writers, literature of any worth could only be a literature of opposition.¹⁰⁰ Here Gide was clearly articulating the case for writers to be committed to a set of values that were based on the necessity to change society. These were remarkable words coming from the lips of a man who was often deemed to be the greatest intellectual in France at that time. Although Gide was open about his homosexuality he remained diffident about political involvement and eschewed political statements. He was held to be an individualist, a libertarian and a very bourgeois one at that. But at the age of 66 Gide was unmistakably articulating the case for a writer *engagé*.

The enthusiasm that initially accompanied this event marked the beginning of a collective consciousness regarding general problems, namely the need to redefine the relationship between intellectuals and society in a rapidly changing political climate where expectations were high. The programme was divided into eight sessions: the cultural heritage; the writer's role in society; the individual; humanism; nations and culture; the problems of literary creation and dignity of thought; defence of culture.¹⁰¹ There were sixty one presentations including presentations by Alexei Tolstoy, Michael Gold, Ilya Ehrenburg, Tristan Tzara, André Chamson, Mikhail Koltzov, Vaillant Couturier, André Malraux, John Strachey, Ambroglio Donini, Jeff Last, Erich Weinert and Léon Moussignac. This clearly indicates that the event was much more than a cultural gathering. It had a political significance which compelled writers to organise in a collective manner.

⁹⁹ Gide speech, p 184.

¹⁰⁰ Gide speech, p 186.

¹⁰¹ Teroin, *Pour la Défense*, pp 68-69.

Between the Moscow congress of 1934 and the one in Paris in 1935 there was a noticeable difference as regards the question of Nazism-Fascism. According to Schneider 'the first congress was mainly aimed at solidifying artistic theories linked to Russian communism. In the Paris gathering the question before delegates was more related to the defence of culture in the face of Nazi-Fascist barbarism'.¹⁰²

The second congress was convened in Spain two years later. The choice of venue was significant. The political situation in Spain was tense as the country was becoming increasingly polarised between right and left wing parties. On one side stood a Republican coalition which included liberals, socialists, anarchists, communists, and various regional parties from Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country. On the other stood a National Front consisting of conservatives, monarchists, clerics, Falangist groups, and the influential CEDA (*Confederacion Espanola de Derechas Autonomas*, or Spanish Confederation of Autonomist Right Wing Parties). In October 1934 an uprising by miners and their supporters in the Asturias had been crushed by right wing paramilitaries. This created genuine concern as to whether the next fascist threat would be in Spain. In addition the Republican coalition won the general election in February 1936, but quite narrowly. This signalled the beginning of a very fraught and unstable period for the republic. At the first writer's congress there had been support for their next session to be held in Spain. This call was led by Spanish delegates but widely supported by others. They clearly felt that an international event of eminent writers would favour the progressive anti-fascist alliance within the country. So at a plenary meeting of the secretariat in London in June 1936 the invitation to hold the conference in Spain was

¹⁰² Schneider, *II Congreso*, p 39.

extended and accepted.¹⁰³ However, after July 1936 Spain was engulfed in civil war. This did not deter writers or the Republican government, which on 6th November that year confirmed that the Second International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture would take place in Spain as scheduled in July 1937.¹⁰⁴ Sessions were held in Valencia on 4th July, Madrid 6th and 7th July, Valencia again on 10th July and Barcelona on 12th July, with the final session at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin in Paris from 16th -18th July.¹⁰⁵ The reason for the final session to be held in Paris was two-fold: firstly, the British government refused to issue visas to delegates and secondly, some Republican sympathisers, such as Bertolt Brecht, Heinrich Mann, Paul Nizan and African-American poet Langston Hughes, were unable to go to Spain.¹⁰⁶

To its detractors, the Congress was a thinly veiled Communist front which was more in tune with attempting to provide legitimacy for the policies of the Soviet Union. Teroni has stated that in Paris the French Communist Party had a major role in organising the event,¹⁰⁷ whilst in Spain many intellectuals were organised through the Communist International to join the International Brigades. So for example the British writer Ralph Fox went as a soldier to Madrid and was killed in action.¹⁰⁸ However, the range of writers that were drawn to this Congress demonstrates that many were far from being Communist stooges. Many were merely sympathetic to the Soviet Union as Communism was the antithesis of fascism and in the thirties it appeared to be the only bulwark against fascist aggression. The republican cause had moved a generation of writers more than any previous war and Indian writers were

¹⁰³ D. Kahn, *Left Review*, vol. 2, no. 10, July 1936, p 484.

¹⁰⁴ Schneider, *II Congreso*, p 41.

¹⁰⁵ Schneider, *II Congreso*, p 52.

¹⁰⁶ Schneider, *II Congreso*, p 77.

¹⁰⁷ Teroni, *Pour la Défense*, pp 22-23.

¹⁰⁸ See *Left Review*, 3, 1938, pp

no exception. Mulk Raj Anand attended the second Congress as the elected representative of India.¹⁰⁹ He had been in London since 1925, studying but also actively engaged in political discussion and activism. The Second congress ended with the establishment of an international committee representing all the countries that had been present as well as the proposal to have affiliates from each country.

In Britain new and young writers were making their mark on the literary scene. One product of this was *New Writing* established in 1936 by John Lehmann. This was a biennial and was devoted to new and imaginative writing that sought to give space to young writers from home and abroad. He was particularly keen to encourage writers from the colonial countries as well as continental Europe and the Americas. He had insisted on the magazine having its aims and objectives embodied in a manifesto. This did not mean the publication had a direct political affiliation. Lehmann was insistent that the contributors should come from a wide and representative pool. There was one stipulation that the manifesto made in relation to its political outlook: its pages would remain closed to writers who expressed sympathy for reactionary or fascist sentiments.¹¹⁰ The rationale for this reflected the period. Fascism was held to be the greatest threat confronting humanity, an idea which other European writers echoed. Another publication from the period was *Left Review*, again published from London. This was a monthly journal which appeared from 1934-38. The rationale behind this was similar to *New Writing* in that no space was provided to writers who were defined as fascist or reactionary but the editorial board was much more forthright in its partisan views and overtly critical of the types of literature it considered futile and reactionary.

¹⁰⁹ Schneider, *II Congreso*, pp 77-79.

¹¹⁰ See Preface to *New Writing*, Vol. 1, Spring 1936, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Left Review was the first avowedly Marxist journal of cultural studies in the English language and in its time it attracted an extraordinary layer of radical writers, poets, and journalists to its pages, including some from South Asia. It was part of the Writers' International (British Section) which was launched following a meeting of writers at Conway Hall in February that year. Its first issue stated the following as a manifesto pledge:

Increasing numbers of people are reading seriously, trying to get some insight as to the causes of events that are shattering the world they know, and some understanding of the reasons for men's actions. And increasingly they are being given, not insight or understanding, but "distraction." Journalism, literature, the theatre, are developing in technique while narrowing in content; they cannot escape their present triviality until they deal with the events and issues that matter; the death of an old world and the birth of a new...It is the collapse of a culture accompanying the collapse of an economic system.¹¹¹

The desire to make sense of a world out of control, one unleashing untold misery on innocent lives, was fundamental to writers who felt they had a public role in the political arena as well as in the literary world. Making sense of the world implied a move from merely writing history to making it. This outlook was felt starkly in South Asia where a writers' movement was about to be launched that would mobilise the most talented, well established and soon to be well established artists and writers that South Asia has produced in the last century.

Both these publications printed articles by Mulk Raj Anand as well as short stories or extracts of novels by him and other Indian writers. *Left Review* also carried copies of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association manifesto as well as devoting a whole volume to Indian writers and their works. Though the sympathies of these journals were with the left and in particular with the British Communist Party, during the late

¹¹¹ *Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, October 1934, p. 38.

thirties both journals were a very broad church that consciously attempted to win over large sections of the intelligentsia to the Left cause. In this way British and European writers were attempting to build a project within the literary world that would hegemonise the cultural front. If the first congress in Moscow was primarily aimed at cementing support for the Soviet Union and its artistic endeavours, then the Paris congress was critical in widening the scope of discussions that had been laid out at the Soviet Congress, and in Spain the issue of confronting fascism and its supporters was central. The discussions that Anand and his fellow writers from India had in these circles was crucial to how Indian writers were thinking about their role in the wider picture in general and within India in particular.

Conclusion

In many ways it is apparent that what the progressive writers set out to achieve in the 1930s was very similar to what Trotsky and Gramsci had theorised in the 1920s. A literary project that was inextricably linked to the goal of independence brought writers and artists into political activity in an organised fashion not seen before in India. Not only did progressive writers reject the isolationist, ivory towers of the art for art's sake school, they proudly proclaimed their political allegiance. In doing this writers unashamedly sought to connect their craft with the social and political realities of their time. Contact with European writers during the 1930s had made a huge impact on young Indian minds in London. Indian students were grappling with questions of colonial rule, racism, literature and the arts, the threat of fascism and a mixture of Fabian and Marxist ideas. As Sajjad Zaheer had noted in 1940,

we were gradually drifting towards socialism... Most of the members of our small group wanted to become writers. What else could they do? We were incapable of manual labour. We had not learnt any craft and our

minds revolted against serving the imperialist government. What other field was left?¹¹²

Their discussions on literature and political questions were informed and influenced by the experiences of their western counterparts. The Indian Progressive Writers' Movement was part of an international body of writers and artists who formed organisations to act collectively in opposition to fascism. This chapter has focused on the international climate governing global politics and literature in order to locate the ideological coordinates of the PWA movement. The next chapter will turn to an examination of conditions in India that impacted on writers.

¹¹² Zaheer, *Reminiscences*, p 49.

CHAPTER 2 THE PWA IN INDIA

Introduction

Modern cultural movements in India certainly did receive a major impetus from political currents in Europe and intellectuals felt the need to respond to the challenge that their western counterparts were struggling with. But external factors alone cannot explain the rise of a Progressive Writers' Movement. There was an internal dynamic influencing the Indian intellectual throughout the thirties. The freedom struggle was emerging as a mass movement at the forefront of Indian politics with ideas of socialism and liberation from colonial rule gaining an increasing currency amongst activists. The nationalist movement had entered a new phase with Gandhi issuing the call for a mass campaign of civil disobedience. This resulted in mass agitation, protests and direct action not seen before under colonial rule. Strong nationalist feelings began to emerge in literature, particularly Urdu literature which, according to Ralph Russell, reflected empathy for the poor, a questioning of existing customs as well as desire for liberation from foreign rule and indigenous elites.¹ As writers' movements had been organising in Europe Indian writers felt compelled to do something as their contribution to this international development.

This chapter will account for the events leading up to the formation of the Progressive Writers' Movement in the form of a national writers' association. It will chart the development of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) and examine the rationale and principles behind this. Focusing on the first two national conferences, this chapter will examine the circumstances informing the

¹ See R. Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History*, London: Zed Books Ltd, 1992. p. 194. Urdu was the not the only medium expressing nationalist sentiment. There was a rich tradition in Bengali literature dating from the Bengal Renaissance which articulated emerging nationalist thought. In addition the progressive movement was well rooted in Bengali, Telegu, Marathi and Punjabi literatures.

drafting of the first manifesto in London. It will focus on the principal protagonists involved in this endeavour and examine their speeches and assess these in the light of European experiences. The chapter will then outline the way the association organised itself and focus on how Hindi as well as Urdu writers sought to organise within this movement at its early stages.

Birth of the PWA

In December 1932 a small book entitled *Angare* (Burning Coals) was published in Urdu, from Lucknow. It contained ten short stories; five by Sajjad Zaheer, two each by Ahmed Ali and Rashid Jahan and one by Mahmuduzzafar. These four young writers had met in 1932 in Lucknow and became great friends. As one of their number, Ahmed Ali, recalls, what brought them together was a shared love of

art and literature and, inspired by the youthful discovery of the strange new world of European culture, were filled with a zeal to change the social order and right the wrongs done to man by man.²

Although external influences clearly played a major role in politicising these writers they were also passionately anti-British and it was the struggle for independence and what they perceived as oppressive practices at home that propelled them to write.

Like Rashid Jahan the others were from upper middle class backgrounds. Ahmed Ali (1910-1994) was born in Delhi to a cultured, traditional urban Muslim family. His father had been a civil servant in the British administration and posted as Assistant Commissioner to the Punjab.³ From an early age Ali imbibed a consciousness of political events and nationalist sentiment. His first political statement was made at school when he refused to wear a medal for the Prince of Wales' visit. Instead, he

² A. Ali, "The Progressive Writers' Movement and Creative Writers in Urdu", in Carlo Coppola, ed; *Marxist Influences in South Asian Literature*, Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1988, p. 44.

³ See M. Shamsie, ed, *A Dragonfly in the Sun: An Anthology of Pakistani Writing in English*, Delhi: OUP, 1997.

tied it round his shoe, for which he was soundly caned! He was educated at Aligarh and then Lucknow University, where he was appointed junior lecturer in 1931 before taking a post at Allahabad University. From 1944-47 he was Professor and head of English at Presidency College, Calcutta. Ali contributed *Mahavaton ki ek rat* (A Night of Winter Rains) and *Badal nahin ate* (Clouds Do Not Come) to *Angare*.⁴ They are both critical of the treatment meted out to Indian women by men and society at large. During the war Ali worked for the BBC in Delhi and in spite of his devotion to his native city, he left for Pakistan in 1947, never to return to India.

Mahmuduzzafar (1908-1956) came from the royal family in the princely state of Rampur. He received his entire education in Britain and could not read or write in Urdu sufficiently when he returned to India. His lone contribution to *Angare* was the short story, *Jawanmardi* (Manhood) which parodies the supposed modernity and superiority of an English educated Indian man who seeks to impregnate his wife in spite of her illness. Mahmuduzzafar was married to Rashid Jahan and he spent most of his time in the PWA as a Communist activist and organiser. Just before Jahan's death from cancer in 1952, Mahmuduzzafar took her to Moscow for treatment.

Whilst there he wrote a travelogue based on his travels throughout the Soviet Union, as well as charting the desperate but vain search for a cure for his wife's illness.⁵

The final member of this quartet, Sajjad Zaheer (1905-1976), was to be the future linchpin of the PWA in India and later in Pakistan. Born in Lucknow into a highly respected, almost patrician family, Zaheer's father was judge of the High Court of

⁴ Ahmed Ali also published three collections of short stories, *Hamari Gali*, Delhi: Insha Press, 1942; *Qaid Khana*, Delhi: Insha Press, 1944 and *Maut Se Pahle*, Delhi: Insha press, 1945. His most famous novel is *Twilight in Delhi*, London: Hogarth Press, 1940.

⁵ See S. Mahmuduzzafar, *Quest for Life: a record of five months in the Soviet Union*, Bombay: PPH, 1954.

Justice in Allahabad. He had studied at Lucknow University and then went to Oxford to take a degree in Law. Zaheer contributed the greater portion of stories to *Angare* and they were all deemed to be provocative but particular condemnation was directed towards two of these, *Nind nahin ati* (Sleep Does Not Come) and *Jannat ki Basharat* (Vision of Heaven). Both stories had a sexual theme but one which invoked the idea of God, the Koran and prostitutes! This was sufficient ground to cause uproar within ~~United Provinces~~ in particular and India in general.⁶

In addition to material with sexual overtones, this anthology contained material that made protests against the social and economic inequalities of Indian life, bemoaned acquiescence in foreign rule and severely criticised religious practices that they viewed as dogmatic and oppressive. This booklet was to herald a controversy over writers and their work hitherto not seen in South Asia. The response was swift. The Central Standing Committee of the All-Indian Muslim Conference, Lucknow, passed a resolution which declared that the meeting,

strongly condemns the heart rending and filthy pamphlet called *Angare*...which has wounded the feelings of the entire Muslim community by ridiculing God and his Prophets and which is extremely objectionable from the standpoints both of religion and morality. The Committee further strongly urges upon the attention of the UP Government that the book be at once proscribed.⁷

The Urdu Press was equally vitriolic in its denunciations. So an article in *Medinah*, published from Bijnor on 13th February 1933, stated the following:

...Praise be to God that we are to a large extent protected from the frivolities of the world. Alas from time to time journalism acquaints us

⁶ Sajjad Zaheer was not much of a literary figure, instead acting as an organiser and propagandist for the AIPWA. He did however publish a novel *London ki ek rat* (One Night in London) in 1937 and a play *Bimar* (The Sick Man) in *New Writing*, London, vol. 1, no. 4, August 1941, pp. 191-203. He also wrote two memoirs about the PWA, *Roshnai* and *Reminiscences*, which will be quoted later.

⁷ "Urdu Pamphlet Denounced: Shias gravely upset" in *The Hindustan Times*, 21st February 1933.

with some of the mischiefs to which the sons of Adam are prey, and after making their acquaintance it becomes difficult for us to sustain our patience and steadfastness...⁸

On the quality and content of the stories the article complained that

...we could not find in them anything intellectually modern except immorality, evil character and wickedness. To mock at the creator of the world, to ridicule religious beliefs and to make indecent jokes are the main characteristics of this bundle of filth. There is no regard for the greatness and majesty of God nor any respect for the sanctity and honour of prophets, nor any respect for human dignity. Instead one finds a bold and shameless display of every kind of foul language...⁹

These articles are indicative of the outrage that greeted the publication of *Angare* and so perhaps it was no surprise that on 15th March 1933, the book was banned by the Government of the United Provinces under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code, which reads as follows:

Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of His Majesty's subjects, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend for two years, or with fine, or with both.¹⁰

It is clear that the stories had offended religious sensibilities of some Muslims and the clergy deemed them and the authors blasphemous. They had decided to act as the defenders of Islam along with various aspects of the Urdu Press united to ensure the banning of the pamphlet. However it is not the case that all "Muslim opinion" was of this viewpoint. In Aligarh outrage against *Angare* and the authors led to a smear campaign which was orchestrated by a Mullah Shahid Ahrarwi against the Womens'

⁸ Quoted in S. Mahmud, "Angare and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, no. 2, 1996, pp 448-449.

⁹ Mahmud, "Angare" pp 448-449.

¹⁰ IOR, File no. V/8/349. The original code, 295, referred to the protection of places of worship from insults. An amendment was introduced in 1927 to include insults by the printed and spoken word to communities as well as buildings.

College of Sheikh Abdullah, which he characterised as a “brothel”! He called for the closure of the college and published obscene cartoons of Rashid Jahan. A young woman, Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991), who would go on to be a leading member of the PWA in the early 1940s, penned an article which attacked the irrational and ludicrous words of Ahrarwi. She recalls how her piece was published in the Aligarh Gazette and after reading it the students lead a demonstration on Ahrarwi’s office and physically beat him up. Not one person came to support the Mullah!¹¹ However, this did not stop the onslaught that had been brewing. Fatwas were decreed against the book and authors. Questions were raised on the floor of the United Provinces Assembly calling for the prosecution of the authors and suggested punishments included death by stoning or hanging!¹²

Such hostility had not been anticipated by the writers who continued with their every day lives. Ahmed Ali notes:

We knew the book would create a stir, but never dreamt it would bring the house down. We were condemned at public meetings and private; bourgeois families hurried to dissociate themselves from us and denied acquaintance with us... We were lampooned and satirized, condemned editorially and in pamphlets... Our lives were threatened, people even lay in wait with daggers to kill us.¹³

Rather than being cowered by this censorship and harassment, the writers refused to go into hiding or issue an apology. Instead, a statement was issued to the press from Delhi. It was drafted by Mahmuduzzafar and signed by him on behalf of all four authors. To appreciate the full weight of the opposition and the determination with which the writers responded it is necessary to quote the whole text:

¹¹ I. Chughtai, *Kaghazi hai Pairahan*, New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1994, p.163.

¹² Mahmud, “Angare” p 449.

¹³ Quoted in C. Coppola, “The Angare group: the enfants terribles of Urdu literature”, in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, Vol. 1, 1981, p 61.

Some five months back four young authors, among them a young woman, brought out a collection of short stories in Urdu under the title *Angare*. I happened to be one of the contributors to this collection. This book at once raised a storm in Moslem circles. It was said to be a shameless attack on Islam and everything decent in society. The book has already been proscribed by the U.P. Government under Section 295A of the I.P.C. It is even said that funds are being collected to start the prosecution of the authors. Shall we submit to such gagging? That is the question I wish to raise here. Coming to the contents of the book itself, the stories of my friend S. Sajjad Zaheer are concerned chiefly with the criticism and a satire of the current Moslem conceptions, life and practices. His attack is directed primarily against the intolerable theological burden that is imposed from childhood upon the average Moslem in this country – a burden that leads to a contortion and a cramping of the inquisitive or speculative mind and the vital vigours of body of both man and woman. Ahmed Ali essays into the realms of poverty, material, spiritual and physical, especially the poverty of the Moslem woman, and imagination and admirable boldness breaks through the veils of convention to expose the stark reality. Rashid Jehan, who is also a Doctor of Medicine drawing on her practical experience, also portrays vividly the ghastly plight of the woman behind the purdah. My own single contribution, is an attack on the vanity of man who seeks to find an outlet at the expense of the weak and defenceless womanhood. Nobody can deny the truthfulness of those portraits, and anyone who chooses to exert himself can see that they are not drawn for the sake of literary ‘flair’, but spring from an inner indignation against ‘this sorry scheme of things.’ The authors of this book do not wish to make an apology for it. They leave it to float or sink of itself. They are not afraid of the consequences of having launched it. They only wish to defend ‘the right of launching it and all other vessels like it’...they stand for the right of free criticism and free expression in all matters of the highest importance to the human race in general and the Indian people in particular. They have chosen the particular field of Islam, not because they bear any ‘special’ malice, but because, being born into that particular society, they felt themselves better qualified to speak for that alone. They were more sure of their ground there. Whatever happens to the book or the authors, we hope that others will not be discouraged. Our practical proposal is the formation immediately of a League of Progressive Authors, which should bring forth similar collections from time to time, both in English and the various vernaculars of our country. We appeal to all those who are interested in this idea to get in touch with us. They may communicate to S Ahmed ‘Ali, M. A., Jalal Manzil, Kucha Pandit, Delhi.¹⁴

From this it is quite clear that not only were the writers refusing to admit any wrong but they were also in no mood to compromise. The *Angare* booklet was important in that it signalled a new phase in Indian writing. Here were a group of young writers

¹⁴ “In Defence of *Angare*. Shall We Submit to Gagging?” in *The Leader*, 5th April 1933, Allahabad.

who were thoroughly unorthodox, openly contemptuous of religious and social customs and desirous for social change. They were idealistic and impatient for radical change. To many readers the ten stories in this collection bore all the signs of immaturity and youthful exuberance but this was not mere play-acting or a “youthful phase”. These four young writers were extremely serious about the battle they had embarked upon and resolute in the belief that a wind of change had begun to sweep India. According to Aziz Ahmad *Angare* represented the ‘first ferocious attack on society in modern literature, it was a declaration of war by the youth of the middle class against the prevailing social, political and religious institutions.’¹⁵ Hence, the call at the end of the above statement to set up a League of Progressive Authors signalled the beginnings of a realisation that writers had to be organised. This does not in any way imply that this was the original intended goal of the *Angare* authors. Ahmed Ali commented that it was published ‘as a result of a creative urge of a few young writers...its direction being determined not by any foreign influence but by social conditions and the degrading state of society.’¹⁶ What is apparent is how the controversy surrounding the publication of this work catapulted these writers into the political limelight and left them with no alternative but to defend themselves and their independence. So in this respect the publication of *Angare* as early as 1932 paved the way for the establishment of the Progressive Writers’ Association four years later.

Whilst Ahmed Ali and Mahmuduzaffar were conducting the defence of their publication Sajjad Zaheer had been sent to London by his father. In London Zaheer met with fellow Indian students and academics who would meet once or twice a

¹⁵ A. Ahmad, *Taraqqi Pasand Adab*, Hyderabad: 1945, p 44.

¹⁶ Quoted in Mahmud, “Angare” pp 451-452.

month to discuss stories they had written and the political situation in India and Europe. His account of his time in Europe is contained in a short memoir “Reminiscences” which was written in Urdu in 1940 and translated into English to allow for a wider audience in India.¹⁷ It was here that the name PWA was given to their small group following the call made by Mahmuduzzafar in India.¹⁸ There had been much discussion over the first manifesto drafted in London. This was carefully dissected by Indian writers present in London, Oxford and Cambridge. At an initial meeting consisting of six or seven individuals in Sajjad Zaheer’s room in London perhaps in late 1934, a committee was instituted to organise the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association. This consisted of Mulk Raj Anand, Jyoti Ghosh, Promod Sen Gupta, Mohammed D. Taseer and of course Zaheer himself.¹⁹ Although everyone was enthusiastic their work was quite slow to begin with, with much of the burden falling on Zaheer to keep the momentum going. However it was decided that a manifesto be drafted to formulate the aims and objectives of the association. Four or five people were commissioned to draft this. Mulk Raj Anand prepared the first draft, which according to Zaheer was far too long.²⁰ Dr. Ghosh prepared the second draft which was presented before the committee and finally Zaheer was asked to re-write the whole draft after intensive discussions on the committee. So the draft that appeared in *Left Review* in London and was also published in *Hans* by Premchand in India, was the final one drafted by Zaheer. According to Ralph Russell the first meeting of the PWA took place in the Nanking restaurant in Denmark Street, November 1934.²¹ The meeting attracted about thirty five Indians and Anand was elected President. The manifesto was presented by the committee and after some

¹⁷ See S. Zaheer, “Reminiscences”, in *Indian Literature*, Vol. 2, Bombay: PPH, 1952, pp. 47-57.

¹⁸ Zaheer, “Reminiscences”, p. 51.

¹⁹ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 27.

²⁰ Zaheer, “Reminiscences”, p. 50.

²¹ Russell, *Pursuit of Urdu Literature*, p. 204.

minor amendments was adopted unanimously.²² This was the manifesto that Zaheer took with him to India when he returned a year later. The manifesto was short but coherent and bold in its declarations,

Radical changes are taking place in Indian society. Fixed ideas and old beliefs, social and political institutions are being challenged. Out of the present turmoil and conflict a new society is arising. The spirit of reaction, however, though moribund and doomed to ultimate decay, is still operative and is making desperate efforts to prolong itself.

It is the duty of Indian writers to give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and to assist the spirit of progress in the country.

Indian literature, since the breakdown of Classical culture, has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life. It has tried to find a refuge from reality in spiritualism and idealism. The result has been that it has produced a rigid formalism and a banal and perverse ideology. Witness the mystical-devotional obsession of our literature, its furtive and sentimental attitude towards sex, its emotional exhibitionism and its almost total lack of rationality. Such literature was produced particularly during the past two centuries, one of the most unhappy periods of our history, a period of disintegrating feudalism and of acute misery and degradation for the Indian people as a whole.

It is the object of our association to rescue literature and other arts from the priestly, academic and decadent classes in whose hands they have degenerated too long; to bring the arts to the closest touch with the people; and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future.

While claiming to be the inheritors of the best traditions of Indian civilisation, we shall criticize ruthlessly, in all its political, economic and cultural aspects, the spirit of reaction in our country; and we shall foster through interpretative and creative work (with both native and foreign resources) everything that will lead our country to the new life for which it is striving. We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence today--the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection, so that it may help us to understand these problems, and through such understanding help us act.²³

²² Zaheer, "Reminiscences", p. 50.

²³ Published in *Left Review*, Vol. 2, no. 5, February 1936, p. 240.

After this preamble it sets out a list of ambitious tasks that the association should take up and the cultural and literary objectives for which it set out to win support.

This included the resolution to

produce and to translate literature of a progressive nature and of a high technical standard, to fight cultural reaction; and in this way, to further the cause of Indian freedom and social regeneration.²⁴

The manifesto makes explicit the progressive agenda in terms of defining the concept of progressivism, what their aims were and how they should work. In this respect it was a landmark in Indian history and a first in terms of establishing a platform for writers to organise and propagate views on political, social, economic as well as literary concerns.

Every sentence, phrase and word was discussed at length before the wording of the manifesto was agreed upon.²⁵ By the time the first conference was being planned in India this manifesto had been revised and reformulated quite extensively and the version that was finally presented and adopted in Lucknow read as follows:

Great changes are taking place in our country. Decadence and reaction, although having received their death decree, have not yet become powerless and extinct. Continuously taking new shapes, this fatal venom is infecting every sphere of our culture; for this reason, it is the duty of Indian writers to interpret those new progressive tendencies which are emerging in the country and to participate fully in their development.

The prominent characteristic of Indian literature has always been that it fights shy of the obvious and real conditions of life. Escaping from reality, our literature has taken refuge in baseless spiritualism and in the shelter of idealism. For this very reason, its elements and parts have become exhausted. The purpose of our association is to liberate literature and the other fine arts from the fatal grasp of the conservatives and,

²⁴ Manifesto of IPWA published in *Left Review*, vol. 2, no. 5, p. 240. The manifesto was published in the name of Indian Writers and not the All-India PWA as they did not have a mandate for a national body until their first conference in Lucknow.

²⁵ Zaheer, "Reminiscences", p. 50.

making them the interpreter of the suffering and happiness and the struggle of the people, to show the path of the bright future towards which mankind is striving.

We claim to be the heirs of the highest values of Indian culture. For this reason, we will expose the traces of reaction in whatever sphere of life in which we find them. Through the association, we will interpret every such sentiment as may show the path of a new and better life in our country. In this work we will make use of the culture and civilisation of our own country and of others as well.

We want a new literature of India to make as its subject the basic problems of our life. These problems are those of hunger, poverty, social backwardness and slavery. We oppose all those traces which are taking us towards helplessness, lassitude and superstition. We accept as means of change and progress all those forces which bring out our critical faculties and which test custom and institutions on the touchstone of reason.²⁶

And the original six resolutions had been changed to the following four:

To propagate our aims by holding consultative sessions with the help of progressive writers from all of India and by publishing literature.

To encourage the writers and translators of progressive articles to strive for the freedom of our countrymen by struggling against reactionary tendencies.

To help progressive writers.

To try to safeguard the freedom of opinion and freedom of ideas.²⁷

The London manifesto was drawn up in late 1934/early 1935, whereas the Lucknow version was drafted in early 1936. The original version is full of scathing comments about the state of Indian literature and its society. It is striking in its denunciations of past forms and bold in its assertions of transforming the literary world. By comparison, the Lucknow version is mild in its tone and though seeming less radical still called on progressive writers to play a significant role in the wider society. There

²⁶ Published in *Naya Adab*, February 1941.

²⁷ *Naya Adab*, Bombay, February 1941.

is some dispute as to which manifesto was adopted at the inaugural conference. In the accounts by Sudhi Pradhan in his collection of documents he cites the first one, published from London, as does the publication *50 Years of PWA* to mark the Golden Jubilee celebrations of 1986 in Lucknow²⁸, whereas Carlo Coppola quotes the latter manifesto. But what is clear is that there were some adjustments made to the version that was taken by Zaheer to India. Some have interpreted this variation in manifestos as indicative of irreconcilable differences between the more ideological wing of the writers' movement and those less pre-disposed towards the left. In addition, some have claimed that this difference in the manifesto reflected fundamental differences between Hindi and Urdu writers that were present from the beginning.²⁹ It is difficult to ascertain exactly what lay behind these changes. What is undeniable is the fact that in London and Paris exposure to radical currents within the literary world would have emboldened Indian writers to be more forthright in their own thinking. In addition, distance from home meant they were not subject to the same social pressures as those writers in India. In London linguistic or religious differences amongst the small Indian community would have seemed immaterial compared to their status as Indians and the cohesion this would have engendered. This situation was more likely to produce a dynamic and daring response when drafting the manifesto and its tasks. On a more fundamental level, by the time the manifesto was finalised in early 1936, the *Angare* controversy was still fresh in people's minds and the ban on this booklet was still in force. This would have made writers, of all linguistic backgrounds, quite cautious in how they worded their public announcements and notices. One final point to be made on the manifesto is the fact that it was originally drafted in English. The reason for this is that in London there

²⁸ See S. Pradhan, ed, *Marxist cultural Movement in India*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Santi Pradhan, 1979, pp. 74-75 and *50 Years of PWA*, Golden Jubilee Souvenir, Lucknow: 1986, p.28.

²⁹ See C. Coppola, *Urdu Poetry, 1935-1970: the Progressive Episode*, vol. 1, 1975. pp. 165-166.

were Bengali, Hindi and Urdu writers. English seemed the natural and neutral language for this purpose. But once the manifesto was taken to India it was translated into the various vernaculars.

Whilst in London Sajjad Zaheer had met with Ralph Fox, a leading writer who was on the editorial board of *Left Review*. Fox had been a British delegate to both the Paris and Spanish congresses and had joined the International Brigades to fight in the Spanish civil war, where he was killed.³⁰ Fox was much older than Zaheer and the other Indian students and Zaheer felt there was much to be learnt from him. Though Fox was a member of the British Communist Party, he advised his Indian counterparts not to be sectarian and dismissive of writers who did not agree wholeheartedly with their definitions of progressivism.³¹ In fact he went so far as to berate one Indian student for dismissing Tagore as a supporter of the Indian capitalist class. Fox described this type of view as a 'caricature of Marxism'.³²

Sajjad Zaheer left London in spring 1935 and went to Paris. It has always been assumed that there was no Indian present at the Paris Congress. However, from Zaheer's account of his time in Europe in *Reminiscences* we get an impression that he was present in Paris at the time of the Congress and may even have attended it. In this account, Zaheer describes the Paris conference in some detail and states that he was staying in Paris during this period.³³ He further states, 'I considered my stay at the centre of the new literary movement to be useful for my technical training.'³⁴ One Indian who definitely did attend the Paris Congress was Sophia Wadia, who

³⁰ See *Left Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, February 1937, p. 1.

³¹ Zaheer, "Reminiscences", p. 50.

³² Zaheer, "Reminiscences" p. 50.

³³ Zaheer, "Reminiscences" pp52-54.

³⁴ Zaheer, "Reminiscences" p. 54.

apparently participated as an India representative, though there was no authorisation for this as no Indian literary organisation had agreed to send anyone. However, Wadia was a member of Indian PEN and it was in this capacity that she attended.³⁵ Wadia participated in the session on “For the Defence of Culture” and in her contribution she stated that the fact of colonial subjugation was a concern for all and not just the peoples of the colonies. She spoke at length about the sense of inferiority fostered by the colonial project that had to be resisted for true human liberation.³⁶ However, she also stated her belief that the cradle of civilisation was India and that although Indian literary culture does not ‘exclude Arabic and Persian Islamic influences nor Jewish elements, but we consider the root of all Indian culture to be Aryan’.³⁷ The whole tone of her contribution was fervently patriotic and embedded a concept of India’s past that glorified the nation. As the PWA manifesto stipulates, the past had to be viewed critically and inspiration sought from a variety of cultural influences. Perhaps it was for this reason that Sajjad Zaheer stated, ‘it would have been better to leave India unrepresented rather than send her to represent her country.’³⁸

Whilst in Paris Zaheer had the opportunity to meet the French writer, Louis Aragon, who was the secretary of the Association of French Writers and worked at the newly established office of the International Writers’ Association.³⁹ Aragon was just as interested as Ralph Fox had been in Indian literature and the prospects of an Indian Progressive Writers’ Movement. Zaheer was most impressed by his knowledge and

³⁵ See Teroni, and Wolfgang Klein, *Pour la Défense de la Culture: Les texts du Congrès internationale des écrivains, Paris, juin 1935*, Dijon: EUD, 2005, pp 495-498.

³⁶ Sophia Wadia speech in *Pour la Défense*, pp. 495-497.

³⁷ Wadia speech, in *Pour la Défense*, p 497.

³⁸ Zaheer, “Reminiscences”, p 53.

³⁹ Zaheer, “Reminiscences” p. 56.

enthusiasm for their venture.⁴⁰ When Zaheer asked Aragon for his advice on organising a writers' movement, Aragon laughed and replied,

Don't ask that. No other group is more difficult to organise than the writers. Every writer wants an exclusive path for himself. Even then we must continue our efforts. The conditions of the modern world are forcing the writers to organise themselves for the defence and progress of their art.⁴¹

This advice as well as Fox's admonishment of sectarianism was to stand Zaheer in good stead in his plans and preparations for India. He left Paris in the autumn of 1935 and arrived in Bombay in November carrying with him the manifesto penned in London and enthused with a determination to organise a movement in India.

In the intervening years literary activity by writers sympathetic to the *Angare* authors had continued. So in Hyderabad, Deccan, Sibtey Hasan was assistant editor of a magazine entitled *Payam* (Message) and had been in correspondence with Zaheer in London. In Kanpur the magazine *Zamana* carried articles by Premchand and other liberals sympathetic to the *Angare* authors.⁴² But the formal launch of a national organisation took place in April 1936, when the All-India Progressive Writers' Association was formed in Lucknow. This conference was conducted over two days and the sessions included discussion on the role of a writers' organisation as well as the defining features of progressive literature. As with the international congresses in Europe the organisers felt it was acutely important to have a wide and broad basis of support for this project.

⁴⁰ Zaheer, "Reminiscences" p. 56.

⁴¹ Quoted in Zaheer, "Reminiscences" p. 56.

⁴² Zaheer, *Roshnai*, pp 40-41.

Zaheer, who was member of the Indian Communist Party along with Rashid Jahan and Mahmuduzaffar,⁴³ wrote a short history of the origins of the PWM entitled *Roshnai*. This is his personal account of the background and setting up of the PWA. The text was written in 1957 whilst Zaheer was in a Baluchistan prison. He had been arrested and found guilty by the Pakistani state for his role in a conspiracy case in the early 1950s. (This will be discussed in chapter 6.) Zaheer admits in the opening pages that he had no notes or documents to aid him in writing this manuscript and that he was writing from memory. His main purpose in putting pen to paper was to dispel the many misconceptions that surrounded the Progressive Writers' movement.⁴⁴ The whole text consists of his memories of events as they unfolded and though this is a highly personalised account it nevertheless is the most coherent and comprehensive report that exists on the early stages of the movement.⁴⁵

As soon as Zaheer landed at Bombay harbour in November 1935, he set about the task of preparing the ground. Contact had been made with several established writers across India who were already predisposed towards the progressive cause. Zaheer had maintained contact with Ahmed Ali who was in Allahabad and Rashid Jahan and Mahmuduzaffar who were both in Amritsar. Copies of the manifesto had been sent to them as well as to Hiren Mukherjee in Calcutta and Dr. Yusuf Hussain in Hyderabad, Deccan.⁴⁶ Whilst in Bombay, Zaheer was introduced to some Marathi writers who were sympathetic to his mission but he also encountered resistance amongst some

⁴³ R. Russell, *Pursuit of Urdu Literature*, pp. 205-206.

⁴⁴ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, Karachi: Maktaba-i-Danyal, 1976, p. 21-22.

⁴⁵ This along with "Reminiscences" represents the most comprehensive accounts available on this movement. "Reminiscences" covers the period in Europe whereas *Roshnai* begins with Zaheer's arrival in Bombay. On the basis of reading them together the two accounts seem to complement each other.

⁴⁶ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, pp. 27-28.

writers who lectured him about the reality of religious, caste and communitarian strength in India.⁴⁷ This encounter initially deflated Zaheer, who wondered,

Was it possible to unite Hindi and Urdu litterateurs? Was unity possible in a land of such diverse cultures, religions, castes and poverty? Can freedom and true democracy ever be possible here?⁴⁸

What is apparent here is that the enormity of the task that confronted Zaheer and his associates only became evident to him at that moment. It was only when he travelled back to his native UP and met up with his colleague and comrade Ahmed Ali that he began to feel more assured of the task. In Allahabad Ali introduced Zaheer to his colleagues from the university. Here he met some leading Hindi academics, including Dr. Tara Chand who was drawn to the prospect of a progressive movement in literature.⁴⁹ According to Zaheer, in late December 1935 a meeting of Hindi and Urdu writers was convened by Tara Chand, in his capacity as Secretary of the Hindustani Akademi. Here a pledge was given to defend the cause of *Angare* and to publish the signatories for this.⁵⁰ This gathering brought together the authors of *Angare* with Abdul Haq, Josh Malihabadi, the 'self-styled poet of revolution' (*Sha'ir-i-inqilab*) Dayanarayan Nigam, the editor of *Zamana* from Kanpur, Dr. Tara Chand and Premchand.⁵¹ At this informal meeting the initial problems that some in Bombay had forecast between Hindi and Urdu litterateurs seemed irrelevant as writers agreed on the need to translate and transliterate each others works and to publish them in various journals.⁵²

⁴⁷ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 31.

⁴⁸ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 32.

⁴⁹ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, pp. 34-35.

⁵¹ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 35.

⁵² Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 35.

Zaheer had been desperate to meet Premchand as he held him in the greatest esteem and felt he above any writer at that time completely shared his aspirations for a new movement. There was a garden party the day after the Allahabad meeting and this provided the opportune moment. Zaheer's description explains why he was so drawn to Premchand:

Seated on the comfortable sofas were high court judges, the Deputy Commissioner, Maulvis and Pandits, vice chancellors and solicitors – all great men. But who was greater than Premchand? I came to the sofas as I presumed he'd be there but he was perched on the edge of the group. He was short, thin, pale and very bony, in sherwani and pyjamas and a white coarse cotton cap, which looked too small for him with his hair sticking out.⁵³

As Zaheer was introduced Premchand said 'I am an open book. If you're interested please read me'.⁵⁴ Zaheer felt an immediate intimacy with this self-effacing elder statesman of literature who treated the young writer as an equal. Zaheer identified with his down to earth attitude and the simplicity of his ways. In spite of this, Zaheer was conscious of the fact that mainly Urdu writers had so far willingly voiced their approval and support for a progressive writer's movement. So Hasrat Mohani, the great *ghazal* writer of the early twentieth century lent his support enthusiastically to this venture as did Josh Malihabadi. Zaheer knew that if the movement was to be successful it needed to be representative of all the linguistic traditions of India. Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi and writers representing south Indian languages were quick to respond and gave their blessing and support to the project but Hindi writers were slow to respond. So he was delighted when Firaq Gorakhpuri, who was an eminent writer of Hindi as well as of the Urdu literary world, came forward with his support. But he also knew that in the 'cow belt' of north India it was vital to secure

⁵³ Quoted in Zaheer, *Roshnai*, pp. 36-37.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 37.

the support of Hindi as well as Urdu writers. It was for this reason that Zaheer visited Premchand in Allahabad at the end of 1935. Premchand, as has been documented earlier, was the doyen of Urdu and Hindi literature and as such his support for the movement was paramount. Premchand had welcomed the proposal immediately upon learning of it from London:

We were truly pleased to learn that our well-educated and thinking young men have been inspired to bring about a new vitality and awakening in literature. The Indian Progressive Writers' Association has been founded in London with just this objective, and the manifesto which they have sent us gives rise to the hope that if this body adheres to its new path, we may see the dawn of a new age in literature.⁵⁵

Premchand had been so enthusiastic that he printed the entire manifesto and the aims of the association forwarded to him in his paper *Hans*.⁵⁶ Zaheer had moved to Allahabad and invited some writers to help organise the movement. Maulvi Abdul Haq was present along with Josh Malihabadi, Munshi Dayanarayan and Premchand. Premchand signed the draft manifesto immediately and chuckled, 'I am an old man, and you young fellows are really galloping away. Were I to try to keep pace with you, all I'll get is bruised knees...'.⁵⁷ On 10th March 1936, Premchand received a letter from Zaheer informing him of the plan to hold a conference of progressive writers in Lucknow the following month. The letter also requested him to preside over this meeting. Premchand's anxiety over his maturity led to his initial reluctance in accepting the invitation to preside over the first conference. He felt he was ill-equipped to deliver a speech and impressed upon Zaheer the desirability of other writers whom he thought would be more appropriate. He even suggested Nehru who

⁵⁵ Quoted in A.Rai, *Premchand: His Life and Times*, trans. By Harish Trivedi, New Delhi: OUP, 1990, p 339.

⁵⁶ *Hans*, October 1935.

⁵⁷ Rai, *Premchand: His Life and Times*, p 340.

had expressed his support for the movement.⁵⁸ But Zaheer would not accept no for an answer and eventually on 19th March 1936 Premchand agreed. He displayed tremendous enthusiasm and energy for this movement. His son's biography states again and again how excited Premchand was at the prospect of young writers organising for a new movement. So it would seem perfectly natural for the organisers of the conference to have chosen Premchand.⁵⁹

Zaheer and his colleagues had been extremely anxious over their first meeting but the opening conference this year was a tremendous success. It was held at a packed hall in the Rifah-e-Aam and was attended by 300 delegates from all over India and numbered writers, students, teachers, peasants and workers sympathetic to the leftist progressive cause.⁶⁰ Zaheer and the organisers had secured the support of many established writers and individuals of repute. In addition to Premchand, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, a leading woman writer spoke and welcomed the movement; Sarojini Naidu, a close associate of Gandhi and a poet, sent a message in which she endorsed the aims of the movement.⁶¹ Securing the presence of Premchand for the opening address was a stroke of genius for the movement. This was not only due to his stature and pre-eminence in Hindi and Urdu, but also, the content of his speech. Premchand defined literature as the 'criticism of life'. He defined 'progressive' as

that which creates in us the power to act; which makes us examine those subjective and objective causes that have brought us to such a pass of

⁵⁸ Nehru had been emerging as a radical spokesperson for the left throughout the 1930s and his support for the PWA was natural. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

⁵⁹ Rai, *Premchand: His Life and Times*, pp. 340-342.

⁶⁰ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 109.

⁶¹ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, pp. 124-125.

sterility and degeneration; and finally which helps us to overcome and remove those causes, and become men once again.⁶²

He continued to deride those writers who produced literature that was moribund and devoid of life and dynamism. If literature ‘does not arouse in us a critical spirit... which does not make us face the grim realities of life in a spirit of determination, [it] has no use for us today. It cannot even be termed as literature’.⁶³

And he concluded by re-affirming his central belief:

We shall consider only that literature as progressive which is thoughtful, which awakens in us the spirit of freedom and of beauty; which is creative, which is luminous with the realities of life, which moves us, which leads us to action and which does not act on us as a narcotic, which does not produce in us a state of intellectual somnolence – for if we continue to remain in that state, it can only mean that we are no longer alive.⁶⁴

Just as Gorki and Gide had dominated the Moscow and Paris conferences respectively, so Premchand’s speech came to epitomise the Lucknow conference. Along with the manifesto this address would become the hallmark by which the progressive movement would be judged in future.

There were two other noteworthy speeches at this gathering. The first was delivered by Ahmed Ali on the “Progressive View of Art”. Here Ali defined art as a product of its environment and stated that an artist ‘cannot escape tendencies which work in that society in that particular period’.⁶⁵ In a long speech Ali castigated the art of the past as mythological, decaying and obscurantist. Although he quoted André Gide favourably as evidence to support his thesis he ended his speech with an attack on Iqbal and Tagore as mentioned in chapter 1. He stated that the poetry of both

⁶² Premchand Address to 1st AIPWA, “The Nature and Purpose of Literature” in *50 Years of PWA: Golden Jubilee Celebrations*, 1986, p 36.

⁶³ Premchand Address, p. 35.

⁶⁴ Premchand Address, p. 38.

⁶⁵ Ahmed Ali, “Progressive View of Art” in *50 Years of PWA*, p. 39.

...is morbidly escapist, born of a desire to forget the reality, and despite its beauty is but a dreamer's dream. Instead of awakening our critical faculty, instead of assisting the progressive forces working in society, it only drags us down to inaction, and is in the highest degree reactionary.⁶⁶

In some respects his contribution echoed the sentiments of Premchand but this last remark was viewed as an embarrassment by many writers present. In fact Zaheer noted that this was a considerable weakness of his speech and thought, in hindsight, it would have been preferable to discuss the contents of this before the conference.⁶⁷ This sectarian approach to Iqbal and Tagore seemed to ignore the advice that Ralph Fox had given Zaheer in Paris the previous year. What makes this comment so remarkable is that Ahmed Ali was the only member of the *Angare* group who never joined the Communist Party of India, arguing that this stunted the creative spirit of writers and meant 'accepting one set of dogmas and sticking to it.'⁶⁸ Ali formally broke with the AIPWA in 1939 claiming that the Communist element was far too sectarian and negative to non-Communist writers. And yet at the birth of the AIPWA it was his contribution that struck a sectarian, dismissive note.⁶⁹ A more measured speech was delivered later by Mahmuduzzafar on "Intellectuals and Cultural Reaction". Here Mahmuduzzafar argued that intellectuals had always played a significant role in any society and that a careful analysis of their works would 'always reveal the "tendency" of certain literature and the sympathies of certain authors.'⁷⁰ He argued against those who fomented a culture that provided succour to "Imperialism, Fascism, feudal superstitions, irrationalism and mysticism" whilst

⁶⁶ Ali, A. "Progressive View of Art", p. 44.

⁶⁷ Zaheer, S. *Roshnai*, p. 120.

⁶⁸ See Ahmed Ali, "The Progressive Writers' Movement and Creative Writers in Urdu" in Coppola, ed, *Marxist Influences*.

⁶⁹ Ali's views were not shared by most progressives. In a review of Iqbal, Ali Sardar Jafri argued that his philosophy was contradictory in that Iqbal's belief in the revival of an Islamic cultural renaissance following the failure of the *Khilafat* movement should be based on radical principles. But Iqbal's belief in a pan-Islamism provided openings for conservative and separatist tendencies based on exclusivity. See Review by Jafri in *New Indian Literature*, vol. 1, 1939.

⁷⁰ Mahmuduzzafar, "Intellectuals and cultural Reaction" in *50 Years of PWA*, p. 51.

maintaining that the body of the AIPWA had to 'appeal primarily to all those who stood for social progress.'⁷¹ This appears to be a more open and accommodating approach and one that corresponded with the original aims of the manifesto and Premchand's address.

The second All-India conference was held in Calcutta at the Ashutosh Memorial hall on 24th and 25th December 1938. The proceedings at this gathering were conducted by Mulk Raj Anand, Sudhindra Nath Datta, Buddhadeva Bose, Sailajanda Mukherjee and Pandit Sudarshan.⁷² This began with an address by Rabindranath Tagore who endorsed the movement in much the same way as Premchand had done two years previously. Tagore had been unable to attend the first conference due to illness, though he had sent a message of support. In this speech he argued,

To live in seclusion has become second nature to me, but it is a fact that the writer who holds himself aloof from society cannot get to know mankind. Remaining aloof, the writer deprives himself of the experience which comes from mingling with numbers of people. To know and understand society, and to show the path to progress, it is essential that we keep our finger on the pulse of society and listen to the beating of its heart. This is only possible when our sympathies are with humanity, and when we share its sorrows...New writers must mix with men, and recognise that if they live in seclusion as I do they will not achieve their aims. I understand now that in living apart from society for so long I have committed a grave mistake... This understanding burns in my heart like a lamp, and no argument can extinguish it.⁷³

As the most famous Indian writer known to the west at that time, Tagore berated himself for "living apart from society" but he had expressed his solidarity with his fellow country men earlier. In 1920 he had, as a protest against the massacre at

⁷¹ See Mahmuduzzafar, "Intellectuals and cultural Reaction", pp. 51-52.

⁷² Report of 2nd AIPWA conference in *National Front*, 8th January 1939.

⁷³ Quoted in Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature*, p. 210. Tagore did not respond specifically to Ahmed Ali's charge but this message seems to answer his accusation admirably.

Jaillianwala Bagh in Amritsar, returned the knighthood he had been awarded.⁷⁴ So his support for this venture did not seem strange. What is the case is that Tagore was able to see more purpose in a writer actively engaged in society through the auspices of an organisation that was able to unite and give direction to a new project and vision. Tagore's endorsement of this venture seems to vindicate the approach taken by Mahmuduzzafar two years earlier as opposed to the one adopted by Ahmed Ali.

Mulk Raj Anand was in attendance at this conference. He had just returned from Spain and the audience anticipated his speech with great excitement and impatience. Since he was the co-author of the founding manifesto and of the association, the writers assembled here were most keen to hear his address. Anand reiterated the case for the association and the need for intellectuals to organise in the light of war and fascism. This represented the greatest threat to culture and civilisation. Anand's speech was both his personal manifesto as well as giving direction to the new organisation. Much of the speech covered his time in Europe and he spoke at length about the international writers' congresses and how they had shown the direction of the movement.⁷⁵ Anand quoted the congress speeches of Gide and Julien Benda on the need for universalism against nationalism and called on writers to 'adopt the point of view of the man in the street in their writing'.⁷⁶

In a speech strongly reminiscent of Premchand's two years earlier he called on Indian writers to

fulfil their creative aspirations by a radical realisation of the causes that hamper our social life and by the portrayal, through a heightened

⁷⁴ K. Dutta and A. Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 215-216.

⁷⁵ Mulk Raj Anand's speech to 2nd AIPWA conference, in *New Indian Literature*, 1, 1939.

⁷⁶ Anand speech.

sensibility, of all those tragedies in the obscure lanes and alleys of our towns and villages which have only just begun to find utterance in the literature of India.⁷⁷

He concluded:

The task of building up a national culture out of the debris of the past, so that it takes root in the realities of the present, is the only way by which we will take our place among those writers of the world who are facing with us the bitterest struggle in history, the struggle of the peoples of the world against Imperialism, its twin brother Fascism, its old aunt Feudalism and all other aunts who refuse to let the new shoots of life burst into the future.⁷⁸

Here, as has been stated in the previous chapter, Anand was setting forth the manifesto for a new popular culture that was part of a new type of politics emerging in India. By 1938, the PWA had flourished right across India with branches established in Bombay, Calcutta, Allahabad, Delhi, Cawnpore, Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Bopal, Agra, Hyderabad, Lahore, Amritsar and Patna. In Lucknow in 1936 there were 300 writers and other delegates present and by 1947 according to Zaheer its membership had risen to over 3900 in fifty branches.⁷⁹ Anand commented himself that in two years the association had achieved the feat of organising the most significant writers of the land with a membership so large that quantitatively it formed one of the 'largest blocs for the defence of culture in the world'.⁸⁰

Organisational structures of the Movement

The organisational structure of the movement was modelled on the European movement. The AIPWA had already affiliated to the International Congress of World Writers as the Indian branch. What Anand and Zaheer had experienced in

⁷⁷ Anand speech

⁷⁸ Anand speech.

⁷⁹ Report of the Activities of the AIPWA, 1943-47, in *50 Years of PWA: Golden Jubilee Celebrations*, Lucknow: 1986, pp. 62-63.

⁸⁰ Paper read by M.R. Anand at the 2nd AIPWA conference, *New Indian Literature*, 1, 1939.

London, Paris and Madrid would now be implemented in India. The first conference in Lucknow had laid the basis for the structures. The name of the organisation was agreed as the All-Indian Progressive Writers' Association and the manifesto and aims and objectives listed above were also agreed. This was to be a national body but organised on a federal basis with broad democratic structures. At this first gathering an all-India committee was adopted, which was to consist of representatives of the various linguistic areas, secretaries or presidents of branches, notable authors and sympathisers elected by the All-India committee and editors of any periodicals which were published by any branch or the All-India committee.⁸¹ The role of the All-India committee was to encourage and help set up branches across the country and to coordinate the activities of these. They were responsible for formulating policy and ensuring the proper functioning of the organisation. They elected a publications committee of each linguistic area whose remit was to supervise all publications of books and pamphlets in that language. They agreed to produce a magazine in English and elected an editorial board for this purpose. Finally, it was agreed that an executive committee would be elected to conduct the day-today routine work of the All-Indian committee. The executive consisted of a General Secretary and four other persons. It would meet every three months and was charged with ensuring that policies were implemented. Annual general meetings were instituted where each linguistic and/or regional branch would submit reports documenting the work of the branch. One of the key responsibilities of the national body was to implement policy agreed by national conference and to formulate tasks and identify the broad political

⁸¹ The Constitution of the AIPWA as adopted in Lucknow on 10th April 1936.

alignments of the association in the light of national and international considerations.⁸²

The branch meetings and regional and national conferences consisted of literary activities such as the presentation of individual works. So in regional and branch gatherings writers would read out their short stories and poems. Other members were invited to comment, ask questions and offer constructive criticism. Papers would be read for discussion on matters relating to writers' concerns. So at the second conference papers were read on "Modern Bengali Literature", "Revolutionary Poetry in Urdu", "The Problem of Hindustani" and "The Village Poet and the Revolution". A session was devoted to the topic of "Crisis in Culture". This was introduced by Professor Hiren Mukherjee, who argued that the main threat facing writers was from fascism. Reports were also taken from UP, Andhra and Bengal on the work of writers in those provinces.⁸³ In this respect the literary activities of the AIPWA was modelled on the methods Indian students had developed in London

Although the first conference called for regional and linguistic branches to be established, very little in terms of records of these units are available. This does not mean that they did not exist or function but that some of the documents were either destroyed, lost, stolen or confiscated. Carlo Coppola does cite some conference meetings of the Urdu PWA in the late 1930s. From his account it is possible to discern the chief concerns of progressive writers on a local basis in the early years. According to Coppola there were four major provincial meetings of the Urdu PWA in UP.⁸⁴ The first conference was in Allahabad in 1937 and this brought together

⁸² Report on activities of AIPWA by Zaheer, in *50 Years of PWA*, p 63.

⁸³ Report of 2nd AIPWA conference in *50 Years of PWA*, pp 56-57.

⁸⁴ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 186.

political leaders and writer. So the Congress politicians Acharya Narendra Dev and Jayparakash Narayan attended as well as the Hindi writers Narendra Sharma and Ramnaresh Tripathi.⁸⁵ The main discussion here was on the relationship between traditional literature and progressive literature. The address was provided Maulana Abdul Haq who argued the following,

The idea that everything connected with the previous age is vitiated by reactionism is not correct. We should not break our link with the past just because we have advanced. Doing this is tantamount to cutting our roots. We are the heirs of the past and if an heir is oblivious of his past and not aware of it to the fullest extent, then however intelligent, active and revolutionary he may be, he can neither affect any reform, nor can he himself derive any benefit. [from the past] Therefore, it is the obligation of every progressive writer to study the literature of the past and to see to what extent ours has the capacity for advancement. What things are to be abandoned and what means are necessary to elevate literature to a high position?⁸⁶

This speech completely rejects the sentiments expressed by Ahmed Ali the previous year and is very reminiscent of the viewpoint theorised by Trotsky on the connections between the past and new literature. For progressive writers it was essential to decipher what was useful from past traditions to enable them to go forward.

One other issue discussed at this meeting was the relationship of middle class writers to workers and peasants, who were chiefly the subjects of their work. Here the PWA had participated in a meeting sponsored by the Amritsar *Kisan Sabha* (Peasant Organisation) in the summer of 1937.⁸⁷ Symbolically the meeting was held in Jaillianwala Bagh and the key discussion centred on the question of whether middle class writers could identify with and relate to workers and peasants. According to

⁸⁵ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 186.

⁸⁶ Speech by Abdul Haq delivered to 1st UPWA in Allahbad, 1937, quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 189.

⁸⁷ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 190.

Coppola the Urdu poet Faiz had organised the meeting as he was a leading activist in the labour movement in the Punjab and Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, Mahmuduzaffar, Mohammed Taseer and K.M. Ashraf attended the conference.⁸⁸ As stated in the introduction Faiz argued that class background was immaterial. What counted was the extent to which writers familiarised themselves with the conditions and lives of industrial workers and the peasantry. It was after this conference that Zaheer and Ashraf travelled to Lahore to meet with Iqbal who readily gave his support to the PWA project.⁸⁹ Again this is illustrative of the broad based nature of the AIPWA and the type of unity that its proponents were attempting to garner, which they had learnt from their European counterparts.

The second UPWA conference was in 1938 in Allahabad again and it was significant for the presence of a small group of distinguished Hindi writers' including Premchand's son Amrit Rai and the poets, Sumitranandan Pant and Maithili Sharan Gupta.⁹⁰ This is indicative of more open attitude of Hindi writers to the association and more importantly their willingness to be involved, as Pant was elected as one of the co-presidents.⁹¹ One other highlight of this session was the presence of Nehru who spoke on the theme of progressive literature and the role of writers. He argued that as an artist the writer is an individual but he cautioned, 'if his individuality is such that he remains aloof from society, he is a useless writer.'⁹² He went on to insist that 'if society has a part in his individuality...then the individuality acquires the strength of the nation and moves the world.'⁹³ Here Nehru was echoing the words of the Paris international writers' congress of 1935. For him a progressive writers'

⁸⁸ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 190.

⁸⁹ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 192.

⁹⁰ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 193.

⁹¹ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 194.

⁹² Quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 195.

⁹³ Quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 195.

movement could only be 'progressive' if it was linked to social movements that were advancing society. According to Coppola the third UPWA conference was held in Delhi where an anti-fascist committee was established to raise support for the republican cause in Spain. The fourth meeting was held in late 1938 in Haripura at the same time as the AICC and on this occasion Sarojini Naidu presided over the PWA session.⁹⁴ These meetings of the UPWA demonstrate how the movement advanced from their first conference and succeeded in attracting the active support of Hindi writers. The inclusion of leading figures of the nationalist movement at these sessions is indicative of the support they had in these circles but also of the PWA commitment to engage itself in the political arena and align its literary project to the cause for freedom. The international situation with the threat of fascism that had galvanised writers in Europe was also something that Indian writers were now actively organising for.

A further means of organising was through the establishment of some progressive journals. These were a means of inviting writers to contribute their works and also to provide space for debate and discussion on political questions. Some journals from this early period provide some idea of what issues, literary and political, governed the thinking of Hindi and Urdu writers. The Urdu journal *Chingari* (Spark) appeared for a short while in the late 1930s. It was published from Saharapur outside Delhi and was a monthly publication edited by Sajjad Zaheer. The title took its inspiration from the Russian paper *Iskra* edited by Lenin in the years preceding the revolution. The editorial board of assistant editors was composed of K.A. Ashraf, Shohan Singh 'Joshi', Rashida Mahmuduzzafar Khan (Rashid Jahan), Tika Ram 'Sukhan', Firoz

⁹⁴ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 199.

Din Mansau and Har Kishan Singh Surjeet.⁹⁵ Judging by the names of this editorial board it is apparent that the Urdu literary world comprised progressive writers from diverse religious communities, not simply Muslim. In its editorial it stated that it was a journal designed for the support of ‘labourers, peasants, and everyone who seeks freedom’.⁹⁶ It poured scorn on the colonial state for trying to introduce legislation that delivers little freedom and castigated landowners and national leaders who were prepared to entertain such compromises.⁹⁷ The editorial called on its supporters to ‘bring together the scattered socialists, radicals and communists onto one platform to challenge conservative sections within Congress.’⁹⁸ This journal was published during the period of united front activity inside Congress between left groups and the editorial reflects the concerns of progressive writers over the course of the nationalist struggle (this will be discussed in the next chapter). The second issue of the journal carried a piece by Mulk Raj Anand who welcomed the publication by stating that

there are major issues confronting humanity and we have to present them scientifically before the people and I hope that *Chingari* can lay the foundation of a future political and cultural literary tradition.⁹⁹

Anand was still in Europe, having returned to London from Spain where he had met republican supporters and volunteer fighters in the civil war. His reference to a scientific understanding reflects his belief that the problems of the world in terms of war and fascism had to be analysed politically and be confronted in this manner. The journal carried short stories and articles by writers on themes relating to the threat of

⁹⁵ See *Chingari*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1st August 1938.

⁹⁶ *Chingari*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1st August 1938, p. 2.

⁹⁷ *Chingari*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 3.

⁹⁸ *Chingari*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 3.

⁹⁹ *Chingari*, vol. 1, no. 2, September 1938, p. 3.

war and national freedom.¹⁰⁰ This illustrates that the key concerns of Urdu progressive writers were those laid out in the first two national conferences. Another reason why Anand would have welcomed the publication was that although it was an Urdu publication its language was neutral and direct reflecting the popular vernacular of much of north India. This also indicates how writers were attempting to implement their championing of a popular idiom which could unite Hindi and Urdu writers.

An English publication set up was entitled *New Indian Literature*. It was supposed to be a quarterly journal and was first published in 1939. The editorial board was composed of writers representing many linguistic zones. Sumitra Nandan Pant, Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali and Krishan Chander represented Hindustani (which included both Hindi and Urdu); Hiren Mukherjee, Bengali; Umashankar Joshi, Gujarati; Anant Kanekar, Marathi; R. P. Setu Pillai, Tamil; Rama Krishna, Telegu; C. Achyuta Menon, Malayalam; B. Srikantayyer, Kannada; Leonard Schiff, S. Mahmuduzaffar, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, English. Abdul Aleem was elected as editor.¹⁰¹

The title of this journal was significant in that it indicated the sense in which the movement of progressive writers was something different and unique in India. The title also seems to mark a clear distance between the type of literature that progressive writers would produce and that which came before. But the title is also taken from their European counterparts who called their publications “new” culture or literature or writing. Through the naming of this journal the PWA was making

¹⁰⁰ See Sohan Singh Joshi, “Ane Wali Jang” (The Coming War), in *Chingari*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1st August 1938, pp. 50-52; S. Zaheer, “The Latest Urdu Revolutionary Poetry”, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 41-46 and Rashid Jahan, “Hamari Azadi” (Our Freedom) in *Chingari*, vol. 2, nos 2&3, February/March 1939, pp. 9-14.

¹⁰¹ A. Aleem, Bulletin to 2nd AIPWA conference, Calcutta, 1938.

clear its allegiance to an international writers' movement as well as signalling the launch of a phenomenon in India.

Despite being a literary association with strong views on political questions, the activities of the movement were under close scrutiny from the very beginning. So when Sajjad Zaheer arrived in Bombay in autumn 1935, he felt he was under surveillance from the moment he disembarked from the ship.¹⁰² His passport was carefully examined and all his stamps were noted by the immigration officer, who painstakingly listed the cities he had visited, with dates.¹⁰³ In addition customs made him open his suitcases and the customs officer made a note of every book and pamphlet he had.¹⁰⁴ Zaheer was held at customs and immigration for three hours before he was eventually allowed into his native country! He admits that he only brought Fabian Society literature and French novels as he had anticipated this problem.¹⁰⁵ The PWA was never a proscribed organisation in pre-independent India. However, a circular from the Home Secretary of the Government of India, M. G. Hallet, noted with concern the rapid growth of the association in India following its inaugural conference in Lucknow.¹⁰⁶ The circular goes on to assert that the inspiration for this organisation

...comes from and it has close contacts with organisations and individuals who are in some cases avowed and active communists and in others are advocating policies akin to those of the communists.¹⁰⁷

It ends with a strong recommendation to all local government officials to give "friendly" warnings about this association to journalists, educationalists and writers

¹⁰² Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p 28.

¹⁰³ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p 29.

¹⁰⁴ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, pp 28-30.

¹⁰⁵ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁶ File No. 7/9/36 Home Political, 1936.

¹⁰⁷ File No. 7/9/36 Home Political, 1936.

in order that they might be forewarned about the “Communist” plot.¹⁰⁸ It is interesting that Hallet felt it necessary to state that the AIPWA conference had taken place simultaneously with the annual session of the Congress. It has been suggested that the PWA deliberately chose the venue and timing to coincide with the Congress meeting as this would provide greater legitimacy. The Communist Party of India had been proscribed for two years when the PWA conference took place. As Congress was a legal organisation it was perhaps a convenient vehicle through which the association could be established. However, we must bear in mind that Congress itself and many of its leaders were under surveillance. The Civil Disobedience campaign that Gandhi had launched in 1934 had been called off. Many Congress activists had been arrested and imprisoned during this period. This was before the announcement of provincial elections that would see elected Indians take office for the first time in colonial India. Sajjad Zaheer and other organisers certainly courted the approval of established nationalist leaders and actively sought their endorsement for the association. Nehru had attended one of their meetings in London and spoke at their Urdu and Hindi branch affiliate in Allahabad in 1938. In addition there were close ties between writers and Congress political structures. Zaheer, along with the writers Dr. Z.A. Ahmad and K.M. Ashraf, were members of the Congress Socialist Party. Zaheer was put in charge of the UP Provincial Congress Committee and other progressive writers were appointed by Nehru to the Economic and Political Departments of Congress. Zaheer was also a member of the All-India Congress Committee.¹⁰⁹ (This will be discussed fully in the next chapter.) It is safe to assume that this was common knowledge to the state and in some ways rather than acting as a cloak of respectability for the AIPWA to be held concurrently with the Congress

¹⁰⁸ File No. 7/9/36 Home Political, 1936.

¹⁰⁹ Ansari, *Emergence of Socialist Thought*, pp 166-167.

conference it perhaps provided the state with additional cause to scrutinise the progressives.

Another example of surveillance activities by the state included the confiscation of material that came from abroad. So the first copy of the journal *New Indian Literature* was confiscated on arrival in Bombay by the police under the Sea Customs Act in 1940.¹¹⁰ This law was used to confiscate material that was viewed as seditious, inflammatory and not conducive to public order. Perhaps it is for this reason that another publication, also in English, was launched from London in 1940. *Indian Writing* was a journal that appeared for two years from spring 1940 to summer 1942. Its editors were Ahmed Ali, Iqbal Singh, K.S. Shelvankar and A. Subramaniam. The first editorial declared its intention to propagate progressive culture in the face of war and revolution and invoked Maxime Gorki's observation that "Culture is more necessary in storm than in peace".¹¹¹ This publication was an Indian journal, written by Indians on Indian affairs but it was published for a western audience. This was designed to avoid the British censor in India but also to inform the wider community of international writers about the activities their Indian counterparts were engaged in. The journal consisted mainly of imaginative literature and reviews of journals and novels. In spite of Ahmed Ali's political differences with his former comrades in India he still published stories by Sajjad Zaheer, Mulk Raj Anand and other progressive writers.¹¹² Ali had been in London from August 1939 to try to get his novel *Twilight in Delhi* published. Whilst there he met with John Lehmann, editor of *New Writing* and E. M. Forster, along with members of the

¹¹⁰ IOR, L/PJ/12/17.

¹¹¹ See *Indian Writing*, vol.1, no.1, London, Spring 1940, p. 3.

¹¹² See Mulk Raj Anand "The Liar" in *Indian Writing*, vol.1, no. 1, Spring 1940, pp. 40-46; K. A. Abbas "The Swallows" vol, 1, no. 2, Summer 1940, pp. 85-88; Sadaat Hasan Manto "The Coachman and the New Constitution", vol. 1, no. 3, March 1941, pp. 156-165 and Sajjad Zaheer "The Living and the Dead: a play in one act" vol. 1, no. 4, August 1941, pp. 191-203.

Bloomsbury Group.¹¹³ All these individuals were terribly enthusiastic about the Indian progressive writers project and for Ali to be editing an Indian journal in London which did not include stories by them would have seemed churlish and strange to his English audience and colleagues.

Conclusion

The culmination of the response to *Angare*, the statement issued by Mahmuduzzafar, the meetings and discussions of Indian students in London coming on top of the experiences of European writers guaranteed that a movement would be established in India. In spite of restrictions placed upon progressive writers in the early phase, they were able to utilise the space provided through their publications to express their literary and political outlook.

For those who maintained that there was no, or could not be any, connection between literature and politics, the confiscation of literary material, surveillance of members and banning of publications demonstrated that as far as the state authorities were concerned there were clear connections.

For Indian writers there was the added urgency of being part of a nationalist campaign to free India from colonial rule. In addition, writers hoped to be part of the project for constructing a new type of society based on principles of equality, social justice and freedom. This was the vision they held for an independent India.

As the 1930s drew to a close the world was engulfed in a new and bloody war that would change forever the face of the world. India entered a new period of unprecedented political turmoil as the nationalist struggle moved to an ever

¹¹³ See "Ahmed Ali in Conversation" in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 19, 1994, pp. 11-26.

increasing militant phase. Philosophically there was ideology at work inside literature. This ideology was imbued with a socialistic vision of what progressive writers hoped would emerge in India after independence. The PWA created space for the creativity of writers but also provided a mechanism for writers to engage in political activity. Many writers had been sympathetic to the communist movement and their sympathies and support for the Soviet Union made them natural allies of the Communist Party of India. In addition many non-communists within the Congress were also predisposed towards a left orientation. Nehru had always been sympathetic to the left and the Socialist Party set up by Jayprakash Narayan within Congress meant that the political pendulum of the independence movement had tilted decisively to the left. These political allegiances would make their mark in the late 1930s and early 1940s as the experience of war intensified the political climate in India and presented progressive writers with new challenges.

CHAPTER 3 THE POLITICS OF INDEPENDENCE

Introduction

During the inter-war years the Indian National Congress (INC) emerged as the dominant political strand within the freedom struggle. This body was to develop into a political party that claimed to represent all Indians irrespective of class, caste, religion, regional or linguistic differences. The ideology that the Congress attempted to project was a nationalism that pitted all Indians against the foreign power of the British. From 1935 onwards the All-India Muslim League, led by Mohammed Ali Jinnah was the second largest political formation in pre-independence India. The League claimed to be the official party of India's Muslim population and it too blended ideas of Muslim identity with a nationalist project, though it excluded non-Muslim Indians. The 1930s witnessed an increasing militancy in opposition to the British as mass agitation from the Civil Disobedience campaigns of the early 1930s gave way to virtual insurrectionary activity during the Quit India Movement of 1942. In this period radical currents had developed that sought to infuse the nationalist movement with a more overt militant and revolutionary message. Political formations of the left had emerged in the form of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Congress Socialist Party (CSP). These parties were fundamentally opposed to the separatist nationalism of the League and critical of the narrow and at times elitist nationalism of Congress.¹ The previous chapters have discussed the impact of external events on progressive writers in India and the specific events emanating

¹ Although the Communist Party of India was proscribed for much of its history pre 1947 its membership is estimated to have been 150 in 1934 rising to 125,000 in 1957. These figures are provided by the Party itself and quoted in G. D. Overstreet and M. Windmiller, *Communism in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959, p. 357. Even with these figures it is difficult to estimate actual membership as the semi-legal nature, various front organisational activities and scrutiny by the state would render membership lists unreliable. Additionally, the CPI sometimes found it necessary for certain individuals not to be registered as members and so they would not be included in their list. By 1945/46 the CPI came to form the third largest political bloc in India.

from the publication of *Angare* that led to the establishment of the AIPWA. This chapter will focus on the indigenous impetus of the struggle for freedom and how the synthesis of a progressive, militant strand of nationalism as espoused in the Nehruvian vision coalesced with socialist/communist ideology. The fusion of these ideologies had a direct impact on the flourishing of the writers' movement throughout the period before partition. This was an intensely politicised period but also one fraught with instability and tensions. In March 1940 the Muslim League passed the 'Lahore Resolution' at its conference; in June 1941 fascist Germany invaded the Soviet Union; in August 1942 the All-India Congress Committee launched the Quit India movement; Japanese forces attacked Singapore and Burma was under a similar threat; and by early 1943 a huge famine was ravaging Bengal. Against this background the organised cultural activism that had emanated from the launch of the PWA in April 1936 was to take on an even more vital force in the 1940s.

The aim of this chapter is to trace the convergence of a progressive nationalism with socialist ideology and examine how this fecundity provided progressive intellectuals from the writers' movement a political arena in which to operate. In order to examine this it is necessary to begin with the collapse of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1934 and the impasse this created within nationalism. This chapter will chart the impact this had on Indian writers as disenchantment with Gandhian principles and tactics followed. It will demonstrate how such dissatisfaction propelled writers towards a more radical approach to the freedom movement. The chapter will document the development of Nehru's radical politics during the 1930s and how this was reflected in some aspects of Congress policy. This left wing trajectory allowed for the flourishing of socialist politics within Congress and simultaneously the

development of a stratum of radical intellectuals who came to exercise a degree of influence within Congress. Whilst left wing interests attempted to drive the movement in one direction other interests militated against this. The nationalism of the freedom movement was never a homogenous entity and as the struggle unfurled tensions emerged between radical and conservative interpretations which would cause major ruptures. This chapter will conclude with an examination of some of these fissures and how the impact of the Second World War exacerbated tensions within the freedom movement.

Writers and the Freedom Struggle

Throughout the mid to late 1930s the movement for independence had been moving in a more militant direction. The character of the struggle had been transformed into a mass movement with a mass popular base. Gandhi's role had been pivotal to this transformation in many respects. His adopting of Indian dress, in particular *khadi*, travelling third class by rail and delivering speeches in Hindustani, contributed to his mass appeal. In this way he was able to reach out to ordinary people in a manner that went beyond the narrow, elitist confines of traditional Congress practice.² Gandhi had championed Hindu-Muslim unity through his support of the *Khilafat* Movement.³ Next to freedom, such unity, along with the elimination of untouchability, had been the central goals of his life's work.⁴ In addition to this his espousal of social reform and the uplifting of women had enabled him to exercise an influence over the nationalist movement that eclipsed the patrician, western educated, constitutionally-wedded approach of the established leadership of both the Congress

² See D. Arnold, *Gandhi: Profiles in Power*, Harlow: Longman, 2001, for an account of Gandhi's role in mobilising mass support for his programme.

³ See Gandhi, *Young India*, (1919-1920), vol. 2, pp. 1-2 and (1921), vol. 3, p. 148.

⁴ See M.K. Gandhi, *CWMG*, vol. 34, p. 484 and *Autobiography: the Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1927, pp. 405-407.

and Muslim League.⁵ His readiness to live amongst ordinary people and make them centre stage in the struggle for emancipation had endeared him to progressive-minded intellectuals. As mentioned in chapter 1, Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand and Rashid Jahan had all been inspired by Gandhi's simple message of non-cooperation and non-violent but mass opposition to colonial rule. In spite of the collapse of the *Khilafat* movement following Attaturk's abolition of the *Caliphate* in 1924, Gandhi was able to revive the momentum of the movement through his campaign of Civil Disobedience of 1929-31 with the salt *Satyagraha*. Following the collapse of the Round Table conferences of 1931 and 1932, another bout of civil disobedience was launched at Gandhi's behest in 1932. This stage of the movement was marked by the sheer numbers prepared to court arrest. It is estimated that some 120,000 men and women had been detained between January 1932 and March 1933.⁶ The increasing militancy and volatility of this upsurge was met with a less conciliatory approach by the new viceroy, Lord Willingdon, who refused even to meet with Gandhi. His recalcitrant approach resulted in Gandhi's arrest and imprisonment in Yeravada jail without a trial.⁷ As with previous campaigns the actual threat or use of violence were invoked by Gandhi to call a halt to the movement. So on 7th April 1934 he formally called off the civil disobedience struggle. The constant igniting of mass protest and then reining it in produced convulsions for frustrated activists who began to see the need for a more forthright approach. Activists within the intelligentsia began to question the viability and effectiveness of Gandhi's strategy. Disaffection with Gandhism found its clearest expression amongst young activists who had been his most fervent followers. One such individual was Kunwar Mohammed Ashraf, whose

⁵ See Gandhi, *Young India*, (1921), vol. 3, p. 411.

⁶ Arnold, *Gandhi*, p. 161.

⁷ See S.R. Bakshi, *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience Movement*, New Delhi: Gitanjali Publishing House, 1985, p. 126.

intiation into nationalist progressive politics had begun at an early age when he was a student at Aligarh. In a tribute to him, Saiyed Mohammad Tonki recollects an incident in school when a British teacher asked his students what they would do if an Englishman entered their compartment on a train. All the students replied that they would salute him and vacate their seat for him. But the young Ashraf refused to give this answer and said he would not do anything but continue to remain seated. When the incensed teacher demanded an explanation he retorted, 'Not me...I wouldn't do it'.⁸

In an interview given by Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf on 27th October 1960 to N.L. Gupta he explained his political development and why he became disillusioned with Gandhism.⁹ The interview is most revealing in terms of providing an insight into the radicalisation of the period from the end of Non-Cooperation to the Quit India movements. Ashraf, like many progressive young students in north India in the 1920s, was attracted to the vision and tactics of Gandhi in opposition to the British. He took to wearing *khadi* and believed that *swaraj* would be achieved soon by following Gandhi's policy of boycotting British goods. In addition Gandhi's support to the *Khilafat* movement was inspirational to young radical Muslim students at that time. However, by 1924 Ashraf had lost all faith in this strategy for liberation. The *Khilafat* movement had been subdued and Gandhi had called off the *Satyagraha* struggles. A whole layer of activists felt they had been let down by their leader. Gandhi's failed trip to London for the Round Table Conference in November 1930 and the hanging of Bhagat Singh whilst Gandhi was still in London seemed to

⁸ H. Krueger, *Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf: An Indian Scholar and Revolutionary, 1903-1962*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1969, p. 343.

⁹ Interview with K.M. Ashraf, dated 27th October 1960, recorded by N.L. Gupta, in Krueger, *Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf: An Indian Scholar*, pp 412-421.

confirm the helplessness of this course. For Ashraf the hanging of Singh was deliberately provocative as it was timed to 'spite the Indian leaders'.¹⁰ To express his anger at this apparent betrayal Ashraf penned his only work of fiction, a short story entitled *Anand*. It depicts the story of some young boys, who inspired by Gandhi's call for self-reliance, leave their studies at college to join the independence struggle in 1921/22. As the story unfolds, we see how disillusioned and confused the boys become as the protests are called off, following the incident at Chauri Chaura.¹¹ They visit ashrams and spend their days spinning and listening to recitals of religious texts. This is a world removed from their heady days of exhilaration when they first joined the movement. The story ends with the suicide of a young man who cannot live with what he feels is the futility of his life in the ashrams. Ashraf went on to join the Congress but moved in a left wing direction within the CSP and then the CPI.

Ashraf's response was shared by other writers so when Gandhi called off the Civil Disobedience campaign in 1934 Premchand expressed the following sentiment in his paper:

Now it is accepted that what Mahatmaji calls inner voice and which he claims does not go wrong is not that dependable since it has proved wrong on occasions more than once. In future politics should be viewed in the right perspective of the nation's interest only.¹²

For Premchand the struggle for independence had to be prosecuted according to Indian needs and not the machinations of the British or one individual.

Disillusionment with Gandhi did not enamour progressive writers to the existing Congress leadership. If anything established leaders were viewed with contempt.

Premchand again took up his pen but this time in fiction to expose the conservative,

¹⁰ Interview with Ashraf, in Krueger, *Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf: An Indian Scholar*, p. 413.

¹¹ K.M. Ashraf, "Anand" published in *Adabi Dunya*,

¹² *Hans*, Benares, 16th April 1934.

elitist nature of the average Congress leader. In his novel, *Gaban* (Stolen Jewels), written during the Civil Disobedience campaign and published in 1934, the character of Devideen Khatik is a peasant who expresses Premchand's thinking about mainstream Congress leaders,

Whatever these bigwigs do will come to nothing. All they know how to do is complain. They can't do any more than to weep and wail like little girls. These grand patriots can't be at ease without foreign liquor. If you go take a look at their homes you won't find even a single Indian. They'll have ten or twenty kurtas made of coarse homespun cloth for show, but all the other things will be foreign-made.¹³

And this character goads Congress leaders by asking them,

Saheb, tell me the truth, when you mention self-rule, what sort of picture comes before your eyes? Like the English, you'll draw a big salary too, live in bungalows too, enjoy the mountain air, and travel around wearing English styles... You eat five times a day, and good stuff too, while the wretched farmer doesn't even get a single meal of dry parched grain.... When you're so crazy about living it up now without even being in power yet, when you do get into power, you'll grind up the poor and swallow them back.¹⁴

Premchand's chief concern here was the social inequality between different social classes and his scepticism about the upper echelons of Indian society, which he distrusted utterly. For him this social layer could never be relied upon to deliver social justice for the masses. The theme of this novel reflected the direction of Premchand's philosophy and, taken alongside his final novel, *Gift of a Cow*, and his essay, *Capitalist Civilisation*, can be read as a social treatise on life. This explains why Premchand was moving towards a more radical, almost revolutionary position before his death.

¹³ Premchand, *Gaban*, trans. by Christopher R. King, New Delhi: OUP, 2000, p. 158.

¹⁴ Premchand, *Gaban*, p. 159.

The plight of peasants and industrial workers had come to occupy the concerns of Mulk Raj Anand throughout this period. Anand had moved away from Gandhian notions of social cohesion and interdependency to a more critical examination of social inequalities. Anand's second novel, *Coolie*, portrays an account of the Bombay textile strike of the 1930s.¹⁵ First published in 1936, it depicts the life a young peasant boy, Munoo, who travels through his mountain village across north India and eventually finds himself in Bombay. He is an orphan and so is forced to take whatever work he can in order to survive. He works as a servant, a rickshaw driver, in mines and a factory. In each of these situations he is subjected to intimidation, beatings and financial exploitation at the hands of employers, moneylenders and his so-called betters. Bombay had witnessed some of the bitterest industrial conflict in India under colonial rule. The textiles mills were the site of significant industrial disputes where the line of warfare was not only drawn between British employers and Indian labour. There were some mills owned and managed by Indians and this encapsulated the sense of grievance that progressive writers were sensitive to. Their outrage was not confined to an alien presence. It was also directed at those Indians who sought to exploit their fellow countrymen.¹⁶ For these writers nationalism did not simply mean a replacement of white rulers by brown ones. The social and political project that progressive writers were attempting to infuse into mainstream nationalist discourse was based on an understanding that a 'free' India would require a root and branch transformation if social and economic relations were to become less exploitative. It is these concerns that Anand brought to this novel and this is why there is a fictionalised account of a labour dispute in the mills. As the

¹⁵ M.R. Anand, *Coolie*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1993.

¹⁶ For a description of the textile mill structure in Bombay and an excellent account of industrial disputes and trade union organisation see M. Menon and Neera Adarkar, *One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices*, Calcutta: Seagull, 2004.

story progresses a workers' meeting takes place to discuss the ratification of strike action. Munoo attends this with his hero and friend Ratan, a fellow worker. The mill employees are comprised of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, who wait to hear what their leaders are proposing. There are representatives of the main trade union federation and the 'Red' trades union. The 'official' representative, Onkar Nath calls on the workers not to act in haste and that the mill owners can be reasoned with.¹⁷ He is described as a 'well-groomed man, dressed in a home-spun silk tunic and a silk dhoti...His lower lip was twisted into a sardonic contempt of everything but himself...'¹⁸ He insists on waiting for the decision of the Congress Working Committee before taking strike action and states his resolve to enter negotiations with the employers' federation.¹⁹ But the activists are in no mood for compromise and at the prospect of negotiation Ratan shouts, 'You did that at Jamshedpur with the Tatas last year, and nothing came of it!...Congress or no Congress, we will not go on short work'.²⁰ The reference to the industrialists Tatas, is significant as Gandhi received financial and moral support from them as well as from Birla.²¹ Anand had already distanced himself from Gandhian philosophy when he was writing this novel and was very enthusiastic about the left in India. In *Coolie*, the 'Red' trade union spokesperson, Sauda takes the stage and delivers a speech that could have been penned by Premchand or Ashraf,

...there is a world of difference between the mill owners, the exploiters, and you, the exploited...They are the robbers, the thieves, the brigands,

¹⁷ Anand, *Coolie*, pp. 230-232.

¹⁸ Anand, *Coolie*, p. 230.

¹⁹ Anand, *Coolie*, p. 231.

²⁰ Anand, *Coolie*, p. 231.

²¹ Sir Rajan Tata donated Rs. 25,000 to Gandhi in November 1909 to support his Non-Co-operation Movement in South Africa. This was the first of three generous donations to Gandhi's work. The leading industrialist Ghanshyam Das Birla became Gandhi's most generous supporter in India. See letter from Gandhi to Birla dated 25th January 1933 on funding for the English edition of *Harijan* in *CWMG*, vol. 50, p. 140. Also it was Birla House in Delhi where Gandhi spent the last days of his life.

the brigands who live in palatial bungalows on the Malabar Hill, on the money you earn for them with your work, ... They eat five meals a day and issue forth to take the air in large Rolls-Royces. You are the roofless, you are the riceless, spinners of cotton, weavers of thread, sweepers of dust and dirt; you are the workers, the labourers, the millions of unknown who crawl in and out of factories every day. You are the coolies, black men who relieve yourselves on the ground, you are the miserable devils who live twenty a room in broken straw huts and stinking tenements. Your bones have no flesh, your souls have no life, you are clothed in tattered rags. And yet, my friend Onkar Nath says that your interest and the interests of the mill owners are the same.²²

The workers are jubilant and it is obvious that they will strike. But suddenly there is commotion at the back of the hall as someone screams that her son has been kidnapped. Rumour circulates that a Hindu boy has been taken by Muslims. Although Ratan and Sauda appeal for calm a sense of hysteria grips the room and suddenly the workforce stare at each other as the room divides between Hindus and Muslims.²³ A communal riot ensues that leaves Ratan dead and Munoo eventually escapes but his only hope is to return to the hills. He finds his way back to Simla and works as a servant for an English woman. He eventually succumbs to fever and dies before his twentieth birthday. The depiction of the riot and the communal tensions that underpinned this were issues that Anand, like all progressive writers, were sensitive to. He also understood how some politicians could stoke religious hatred to further their own interests. There was also an explicit acknowledgement that although colonial India was exploited by an outside power Indian society was riddled with class and religious power interests that had to be confronted. What this experience of Ashraf, Premchand and Anand demonstrate is how progressive writers were grappling with a more overt challenge to the colonial order. They were looking towards a nationalism that was infused with some form of socialist ideology.

²² Anand, *Coolie*, p. 232.

²³ Anand, *Coolie*, pp. 234-235.

Nationalism Turns Radical

The abandonment of the Civil Disobedience Movement had created an impasse. In the absence of mass agitation constitutional politics and elections came to the fore. The collapse of the Congress-Khilafat alliance in 1924 had seen the revival of communal bodies and widespread Hindu-Muslim riots.²⁴ The Muslim League had started meeting separately from the Congress in December 1924 and the Congress old guard desired to settle controversies with the League over separate electorates, the reservation of seats in legislatures especially in Muslim-majority provinces like Bengal and Punjab, and over the weightings of representation in provinces where Muslims were a minority. Similarly, after 1934 the British were set to introduce the Government of India Act which would allow Indians to take office in provincial assemblies and the central legislature. In this situation the approach of established Congress leaders rested on an elitist strategy of merely dealing with leaders and not consulting the masses. As such it could do little to halt communal violence. The maturing of the nationalist movement and its increasing militancy could not be accommodated through this strategy. The impasse had created a space for radical currents both within and outside Congress. There were three pillars to this radicalisation: anti-colonial; anti-fascist and pro-socialist. The first was a 'given', and the crucial element in solidifying opposition to the British. As stated earlier, the threat of fascism concentrated the minds of militant activists who were moving towards the left. It was however the third pillar that really marked the radicalisation of the nationalist movement; the vision of socialism propelled the movement in a far more radical direction than it had been before. This vision based on socialist beliefs was staunchly secular and modern in its outlook. The left formations to come out of

²⁴ In UP between 1923 and 1927 there were 88 incidents classified as communal riots which left 81 people dead and over 2,300 injured quoted in J. Brown *Nehru: A Political Life*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 76.

this period were the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist Party of India. The Congress Socialist Party (CSP) had been established in March 1934 and was an integral part of Congress organisation. Individuals were members of the Congress and they came together to form a grouping inside this.²⁵ Its founding objective was 'the achievement of complete independence, in the sense of separation from the British Empire, and the establishment of a socialist society'.²⁶ Its leading members included Minoo Masani, Jayaprakash Narayan (known as J.P.) and Yusuf Merherally. Masani and Narayan had been in prison at Nasik jail during the Civil Disobedience campaign and on their release decided to form a socialist grouping within Congress. On this they had Nehru's support, who welcomed 'the formation of socialist groups in the Congress to influence the ideology of the Congress and the country'.²⁷ Masani had visited London in July 1935 where he had meetings with Stafford Cripps, the then leader of the Socialist League, and with the former MP Saklatvala. In addition he met with some Indian students who were behind the formation of the PWA.²⁸ The CSP arose out of the experiences of the Civil Disobedience movement from 1930-1934. Many of the individuals who formed it were disillusioned and angry with Gandhi for calling off the campaigns. They were further incensed when it was realised that a section of Congress wanted to resume the constitutional path and take part in elections by reviving the defunct Swaraj Party.²⁹ They had come to the realisation that only the complete and unconditional withdrawal of the British could be called for and insisted that this had to be the goal of nationalists. They also desired

²⁵ See Letter of 19th December 1933, from Masani to Nehru, in M. Masani, *Bliss was it in that Dawn...A Political Memoir up to Independence*, New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1977, p. 44.

²⁶ Constitution of Congress Socialist Party quoted in J.P. Narayan, *Why Socialism?* Benares: The All-India Congress Socialist Party, 1936, p. 20.

²⁷ Quoted in Masani, *Bliss was it in that Dawn*, p. 44.

²⁸ Masani, *Bliss was it in that Dawn*, pp. 67-74.

²⁹ Letter from Gandhi to M.A. Ansari, dated 5th April 1934, in *Modern Review*, Calcutta, May 1934, p. 585.

social justice and a redistribution of India's resources to redress grinding poverty and inequality. The CSP had not aligned itself to any international organisation and so retained its independence throughout its time within Congress. The establishment of the CSP was not universally welcomed within Congress circles. At the Congress session in May 1934 when the resolution to accept the CSP came before conference there were dissenting voices. So Rajani Mukherjee from Bengal spoke against the proposal and believed that such an organisation should be established outside Congress.³⁰ This proposal was defeated by 58 to 22 votes and the CSP was formally accepted into Congress with the following resolution,

In the opinion of this conference the time has come for an all India organisation of the Socialists in the Congress to be established. With this object in view it is resolved that a drafting committee consisting of the following be appointed to prepare the draft programme and constitution for an All India Congress Socialist Party.³¹

Activists within the CSP had reason to be hopeful that their presence could reposition Congress to the left. This seemed justified when in April 1936 the Indian National Congress held its 49th session in Lucknow at the same time as the Progressive Writers' Association first conference. The INC conference voted not to ratify the Government of India Act 1935 as it did not provide for full consultation or indicate any intention to give complete sovereignty. It also left the question of Congress elected delegates to the legislature unresolved. This signalled a victory for the left and it was further strengthened by the acceptance of an amendment proposed by Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya to maintain a system of proportional representation in the election of representatives to the AICC. This ensured minority representation on this all important committee.

³⁰ P.L. Lakhanpal, *History of the Congress Socialist Party*, Lahore: National Publishers and Stationers Ltd. 1946, p. 22-23.

³¹ Lakhanpal, *History of CSP*, p. 23.

The leadership of the CSP was provided by Jayprakash Narayan, who was strongly influenced by events in the Soviet Union and his *raison d'être* was to influence and manoeuvre Congress in a progressive, left direction. Narayan had visited the Soviet Union and was impressed with its achievements. On the question of unity for progressive, socialist thinkers Narayan believed that all fellow travellers should stick together. Hence his call to those outside Congress to join it and help re-orient it towards the left.³² The constitution called for 'cooperation with other parties having similar aims, within or without the Congress.'³³ At the second session of the CSP held at Meerut in January 1936, on the recommendation of Narayan, Communist Party members were admitted to membership on an individual basis.³⁴

Another important figure at this time was Subhas Chandra Bose. He never joined the CSP but was very supportive of its efforts. Bose was elected Congress President in 1937. As war clouds loomed in 1939, Congress met at Tripuri and Bose sought another term of presidentship. However, Gandhi was opposed to it as he felt that communal harmony would be enhanced by the election of a well-established and respected Muslim candidate. Gandhi's choice was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. However, Azad backed down at the last moment and the contest was between Bose and Pattabhi Sitaramayya, who had Gandhi's support. Gandhi had made it clear to Sitaramayya that he expected him to stand if Azad refused.³⁵ Bose won the election with the support of the left and other radical currents within Congress. This too was a significant victory for the CSP. However, it did not last long as Govindh Vallabhai Pant pushed a resolution through, demanding the appointment of a Working

³² Narayan, *Why Socialism?*, p.157.

³³ Constitution of CSP, published in Narayan, *Why Socialism?*, p. 26.

³⁴ See J.P.Narayan, *Towards Struggle*, ed, Yusef Meherally, Bombay: Padma Publications Ltd. 1946, p. 170; Lakhanpal, *History of CSP*, pp. 76-77.

³⁵ B.P. Sitaramayya, *The History of the Indian National Congress*, vol. 2, Bombay: Padma Publicitons Ltd. 1947, p.105.

Committee supported by Gandhi. This was unacceptable to Bose and to many amongst the Socialists. However the resolution was passed after the CSP decided to remain neutral out of a desire to maintain unity at all costs. Consequently Bose resigned and went on to leave Congress, later forming the Indian National Army, which fought British and Allied forces in Burma.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) was formed in 1920 in Tashkent by a group of Indian students who had been influenced by the Russian revolution.³⁶ However, from its very beginnings the CPI was under scrutiny from state authorities. Communist and socialist students were under surveillance in London as were those at home,³⁷ communist literature was placed under surveillance,³⁸ and the Communist Party was a proscribed organisation for much of its history under colonial rule. In July 1934 the Government of India had prohibited the Party from legally operating under the Seditious Associations Act of 1908. In order to appreciate the difficulties Communists had it is necessary to recall the biggest legal case these activists faced. On 20th March 1929, the Government of India ordered the arrest of thirty one of its leading members and confiscated material which was later used in their trial to convict the accused. This came to be known as the Meerut Conspiracy case.³⁹ The arrested were leaders of the main labour movement, including three members of the AICC and a Bombay Provincial Secretary of the Congress.⁴⁰ The final judgement was not given until 16th January 1933, effectively consigning the accused to prison for the duration. They were charged under Section 121A of the Penal Code which stipulated the following,

³⁶ See G. D. Overstreet and M. Windmiller, *Communism in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959.

³⁷ IOR, L/PJ/12/4 File No. 1290/17.

³⁸ IOR, L/PJ/12 File 627/29.

³⁹ For full details of those arrested see R. P. Dutt, *India Today*, Calcutta: Manisha, 1940, pp. 415-417.

⁴⁰ Dutt, *India Today*, pp. 417-418.

Whoever within or without British India conspires to commit any of the offences punishable by Section 121 or to deprive the King of the sovereignty of British India or any part thereof, or conspires to overthrow, by means of criminal force, the Government of India or any local Government, shall be punished with transportation for life or any shorter term, or with imprisonment of either description which may extend to ten years.⁴¹

The seriousness of the charge and the severity of the penalty would have enormous repercussions for activists if found guilty. Nehru was President of the All-India Trade Union Congress at the time and sent letters to the British Trades Union Congress appealing for assistance. He believed this trial was an attempt by the Government of India to 'break the power of the labour and trade union movement' and therefore presented a threat much wider than just to the Communists.⁴² In his summation the High Court Judge admitted that the accused were not charged with 'having done any overt illegal act in pursuance of the alleged conspiracy.'⁴³ But in spite of little tangible evidence they were found guilty. In January 1933 the judgement saw all but four sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment. Muzaffar Ahmad was sentenced to transportation for life; S. A. Dange, S.V. Ghate, K.N. Joglekar, R.S. Nimbkar and Philip Spratt to twelve years transportation and the others to ten years, with the lightest sentence being three years.⁴⁴ On appeal the sentences were scaled down in recognition of the fact that they had already served over four years in confinement. Consequently, P.C. Joshi and Dr. Adhikari were released along with two others but it was not until the autumn of 1935 that all were released.⁴⁵ One salient fact about this trial was the composition of the legal team employed to defend the accused. It

⁴¹ Quoted in Dutt, p. 421.

⁴² See cablegram and letter from Nehru to Walter Critine, Secretary of the British Trades Union Congress General Council, 22nd June 1929, in C.H. Philips, ed, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan, 1858-1947, Select Documents*, vol. 5, London: OUP, 1965, pp. 259-260.

⁴³ Quoted in Dutt, *India Today*, p. 421.

⁴⁴ Dutt, *India Today*, p. 423.

⁴⁵ M.R. Masani, *The Communist Party of India: A Short History*, London: Derek Verschoyle Ltd, 1954, pp. 38-39.

included Nehru, Farid-ul-Huq Ansari, who was to be a leader of the Socialist Party in the early 1950s, and Kailash Nath Katju, who was to be Nehru's Home Minister in the 1950s.⁴⁶ They provided their services free of charge in the main and some suffered financial hardship personally as a result.⁴⁷ This episode demonstrates how Communists were able to work jointly with activists in the labour movement and Congress. The harnessing of this type of unity would prove to be invaluable as the 1930s progressed.

The CPI had been formed with the blessing of the Communist International and operated under its tutelage. This led to tensions within Congress Socialists on the viability of working with Communists. There had always been rival tendencies within the CSP, which can broadly be characterised as between left and right factions. The left was represented by Jayprakash Narayan, who had been influenced by Marxism and the Communist International, and the right wing current by Masani. Under Narayan's leadership the CSP opened its doors to all those who 'stood by Marxism'⁴⁸ including individual Communists. This indicates that the desire for socialist unity was greatly felt in the late 1930s.

The right faction led by Masani argued that the CPI must not be permitted 'to burrow within our ranks, to create distrust and disunion and to destroy'.⁴⁹ On the Meerut case Masani believed that legal aid from Congressmen was only possible as a result of Communists successfully exploiting the nationalist sentiments of Congress members against the British.⁵⁰ What Masani failed to recognise was the fact that

⁴⁶ Quoted in Masani, *The Communist Party of India*, p. 39.

⁴⁷ Masani, *The Communist Party of India*, p. 39.

⁴⁸ J.P. Narayan, *Socialist Unity and the Congress Socialist Party*, 1941, p. 3.

⁴⁹ M. Masani, 'A Lesson from France', *The Congress Socialist*, 1st January 1938.

⁵⁰ Masani, *The Communist Party of India*, p.39.

many progressive thinking Congress members sympathised with Communist ideology and were only too aware that this case represented a major challenge to Indians. If the colonial state could arrest, try, pronounce guilty and imprison individuals on a charge of conspiracy with little evidence, this potentially gave the state *carte blanche* to intimidate, harass, put under surveillance and detain any individual for any activity.

So for members or sympathisers of the Communist Party the space to operate and participate in activity was limited, but there was space for them to operate in Congress circles. Unlike Masani, Narayan not only welcomed Communists but symbolised the desired unity by displaying both the CSP and CPI flags at the podium of the fourth All-India CSP conference stating, ‘...there was no difference between the two flags. Their main object was to strengthen the fight for freedom...’ and in defending the socialists and communists he insisted ‘...they were fighting the battle for freedom under the Congress flag and under the Red flag they were spreading socialism’.⁵¹ Such were the circumstances propelling unity of progressive left oriented nationalists which is why the Communist, Sajjad Zaheer, was made joint secretary of the All-India CSP and Dr. Z. A. Ahmad and K. M. Ashraf were elected to the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) as members of the Communist Party but also members of the Congress Socialist Party.⁵² In this way it is apparent that the mass character of nationalism was also being influenced by the development and growth of socialist ideas that further enhanced the radicalisation of the movement for independence.

⁵¹ *The Indian Annual Register*, vol. 1, 1938, p. 388.

⁵² Masani, *The Communist Party of India*: p. 68.

If radical activists and writers had lost faith in Gandhi their new hero was Nehru, who stated that

if an indigenous government took the place of the foreign government and kept all the vested interests intact that would not even be the shadow of freedom.⁵³

And similarly in 1933,

India's immediate goal can ... only be considered in terms of ending the exploitation of her people. Politically, it must mean independence and the severance of the British connection, which means imperialist dominion; economically and socially it must mean the ending of all special class privileges and vested interests. The whole world is struggling to this end; India can do no less, and in this way the Indian struggle for freedom lines up with the world struggle.⁵⁴

It was this type of thinking that made Nehru such an attractive proposition to progressive writers. This also explains why Premchand suggested him to Sajjad Zaheer as a suitable candidate for the first AIPWA conference in Lucknow. Nehru was elected President of Congress at its Lucknow session in April 1936. His Presidential address was poignant and indicative of the direction he wanted Congress to move after Civil Disobedience. The long address painted a world divided into two sides: an 'imperialist and fascist side and a socialist and nationalist side'. He insisted that

the solution of the world's problems and of India's problems lies in socialism, and when I use this word I do not mean in a vague humanitarian way but in the scientific, economic sense. Socialism is, however, something even more than an economic doctrine; it is a philosophy of life and as such also it appeals to me. I see no way of ending poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and the subjection of the Indian people except through socialism. That involves vast and revolutionary changes in our political and social structure, the

⁵³ J. Nehru quoted in Narayan, *Why Socialism?*, p. 20.

⁵⁴ J. Nehru, *Whither India*, Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1933, p. 21.

ending of vested interests in land and industry, as well as the feudal and autocratic Indian States system.⁵⁵

The speech continued in this vein and in his comments on leadership and its relationship to ordinary people he stated that leaders had to

look more and more towards the masses and draw strength and inspiration from them. The Congress must be not only for the masses, as it claims to be, but of the masses; only then will it really be for the masses.⁵⁶

This was music to the ears of progressive writers who had been inspired by socialist and communist literature.

Another encouraging factor was that as early as 1931 the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) had passed a resolution on “Fundamental Rights” at its Karachi Session.⁵⁷ This was a very secular-minded, democratic document guaranteeing freedom of worship and equality before the law for all, universal adult suffrage and the provision of free compulsory primary education. However, it was its stipulation on labour issues that was the most promising element. Here the resolution called on the state to safeguard the interests of industrial workers by securing for them

a living wage, healthy conditions of work, limited hours of labour, suitable machinery for the settlement of disputes between employers and workmen, and protection against the economic consequences of old age, sickness and unemployment.⁵⁸

On land reform and taxation it promised to immediately reduce the rent for small peasant holdings and exempt from payment those living on economically unproductive land. It favoured the levying of death duties and a graduated income

⁵⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru, *India and the World, Presidential Address at Lucknow Congress, 1936*, p. 78.

⁵⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Presidential Address*, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Resolution 15 on “Fundamental Rights” passed at AICC, 6th-8th August 1931, Karachi, in *SWJN*, vol. 4, pp. 511-513.

⁵⁸ Resolution 15 on “Fundamental Rights”.

tax.⁵⁹ This was a clear expression of how socio-economic factors act to hinder and shackle the urban and rural poor. It pointed to how certain sections of Congress were linking the issue of political independence to questions of social and economic justice.

Following Nehru's election to the Congress Presidentship and the inclusion of the fundamental rights resolution at the Karachi Congress many radicals were encouraged to believe that a new chapter was opening in the nationalist camp. They saw an opportunity for progressives to press for a radical social programme within Congress that could be achieved with radical currents entering it. The remarks of Ashraf clearly express this sentiment:

I had a deep feeling that Jawaharlal reflected a new mood of the Indian radical youth. He had attended the anti-Imperialist conference and was talking the language of Marxism in 1936.⁶⁰

This was clearly the thinking of many young activists including progressive writers such as Zaheer, who felt that they were on the threshold of a fresh mass struggle. Along with Ashraf, he was a member of the Communist Party of India and this was public knowledge to the leaders of the Congress Socialists.⁶¹

One other factor decisive in cementing Nehru's leadership of radical, progressive elements within Congress was the Muslim Mass Contact Campaign. This was a new approach by the Congress after the 1937 elections, based on appealing to Muslims as poor peasants who had more in common with their Hindu brethren than with the leaders of Muslim League (ML). The approach was more in line with a bottom up

⁵⁹ Resolution 15 on "Fundamental Rights".

⁶⁰ Interview with Ashraf, in Krueger, *K.M Ashraf: An Indian Scholar*, pp. 412-413.

⁶¹ Interview with Ashraf, in Krueger, *K.M Ashraf: An Indian Scholar*, p 414.

strategy of making direct appeals over the heads of official leaders. As such, it was recognition that appeals of religious sentimentality and tolerance were not sufficient. In this respect Nehru's approach implied criticism of Gandhi's methods for promoting Hindu-Muslim unity through the Congress-*Khilafat* alliance. This method can be viewed as bringing religion into the centre of the political arena and relying upon elites to forge unity. This strategy had been viewed with suspicion by the Congress old guard who felt it provided Gandhi with a Muslim base. However, criticism of this was not confined to conservative sections. On the left the Communist Party had raised its own criticism of the *Khilafat* movement after its collapse. A CPI manifesto noted that the 'present debacle was a foregone conclusion of such an ill-starred movement...'⁶² Another manifesto noted that

the Congress programme had to be denuded of all sentimental trimmings... The object for which the Indian people will fight should not be looked for somewhere in the unknown region of Mesopotamia or Arabia or Constantinople, it should be found in their immediate surroundings – in their huts, on the land, in the factory. Hungry mortals cannot be expected to fight indefinitely for an abstract ideal.⁶³

These sentiments fitted the mood of the moment and so when Nehru took the initiative on the need for greater contacts with Muslims and directed Congress committees to focus on recruiting Muslims and to increase contact with the Muslim masses in rural and urban areas, his words found a receptive audience amongst left leaning progressives.⁶⁴ On 31st March 1937 Nehru issued a circular urging provincial Congress committees to

make a special effort to enrol Muslim Congress members, so that our struggle for freedom may become even more broadbased than it is, and

⁶²G. Adhikari, (ed) *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, vol. 1, 1917-1922, New Delhi: 1971, p. 345.

⁶³ Adhikari, *Documents of Communist Movement*, vol. 2, 1923-1925, p. 210.

⁶⁴ J. Nehru, *Selected Writings*, vol. 8, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976, p. 123.

the Muslim masses should take the prominent part in it which is their due. Indeed when we look at the vital problems facing the country, the problem of independence and of the removal of poverty and unemployment, there is no difference between the Muslim masses and the Hindu or Sikh or Christian masses in the country. Differences only come to the surface when we think in terms of the handful of upper class people.⁶⁵

This is strongly indicative of Nehru's appeal to radical students and progressive writers within the PWA. By linking socio-economic issues such as the impoverishment of the peasantry and urban poor with the struggle for independence Nehru's speech was echoing the social and political concerns of writers and activists influenced by socialist ideas.

In addition, Nehru stipulated that he wanted Congress notices to be distributed in Urdu throughout the country as this would facilitate communication with Muslims.⁶⁶ This type of approach led Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf to state how impressed he was by Nehru's Marxist language.⁶⁷ Ashraf was very enthusiastic about the prospect. He had joined the secretariat of the AICC by 1936 and suggested to Nehru that Congress make direct appeals to Muslims:

I was fully convinced that any honest and consistent anti-imperialist struggle led by the Congress would wean away the Muslim masses from the growing influence of Jinnah and the revived Muslim League.⁶⁸

A cell was set up under Jayprakash Narayan to organise this and Ashraf took charge to direct mass campaigns and counter anti Congress propaganda. He took the lead in orchestrating this campaign on behalf of the AICC. He toured the country and spoke out against the narrow communalist demands of the League, challenging their notion of a homogenized 'Muslim' community and advancing ideas of class division as

⁶⁵ Nehru, *Selected Writings*, vol. 8, p 123

⁶⁶ Nehru, *Selected Writings*, vol. 8, p. 123-124.

⁶⁷ Interview with Ashraf, in Krueger, *K.M. Ashraf: An Indian Scholar*, pp. 412-413.

⁶⁸ Interview with Ashraf quoted in Krueger, *K.M. Ashraf: An Indian Scholar*, p 413.

being of primary concern to ordinary Muslim peasants and workers.⁶⁹ He called on the provincial congress committees to form ward and *mohalla* associations to tackle day-to-day issues that would attract peasants, industrial workers and the unemployed to the Congress programme.⁷⁰ Ashraf referred to the mass contact campaign as a 'decisive stage' in Congress history, as the 'stage of revolutionary mass action'.⁷¹ Ashraf's efforts were fully supported by Nehru who set out to counter League propaganda that only they could represent Muslims and by pushing the Urdu newspaper *Hindustan*.⁷² The campaign met with some success as it did enrol Muslims as primary members into Congress.

The first major test for the campaign came in a by-election in July 1937 in the Jhansi-Jalaun-Hamirpur constituency of UP. Congress stood Nisar Ahmad Khan Sherwani as its candidate against the League, which stood Rafiuddin Ahmad. Nehru and Ashraf saw this as a challenge to communalist sentiment that had developed during the 1930s and the rise of the League. This was quite a high profile exercise with many Congress workers sent to campaign in the area.⁷³ Despite the enthusiasm of Congress people, some Congress workers were subjected to detention and arrest. Sajjad Zaheer was held by the police for a speech he made to a peasant meeting.⁷⁴ Nehru complained in press statements about this ill-treatment, which he held the UP government responsible for.⁷⁵ In addition the League strongly criticised this approach. In a statement on 1st July 1937, Jinnah declared the mass contact policy 'as fraught

⁶⁹ AICC papers, File No. 13/1937, p. 39

⁷⁰ AICC papers, File No. 48/1937, p. 155.

⁷¹ AICC papers, File No. 30/1937, p. 15.

⁷² Circular to Congress committees, quoted in *Selected Writings*, vol. 8. pp. 156-157 & p. 183.

⁷³ See Letter to Sherwani in AICC papers, File No. G-61/1937, p. 107.

⁷⁴ Nehru, *SWJN*, vol. 8, p. 158.

⁷⁵ Nehru, *SWJN*, vol. 8, p.158

with very serious consequences.’⁷⁶ The League had not performed well in the provincial elections held that year and so this election was also a test case for them as they had not been challenged in this manner before. In the event Sherwani lost, polling 2000 votes out of 4700 votes cast. Yet Nehru argued that ‘there is a strong band of Muslim workers all over the province who are determined to fight reaction and to support the Congress’.⁷⁷ So Nehru obviously felt vindicated by the campaign. As Mushirul Hasan states, in UP the mass contact campaign appealed to young educated Muslims in Aligarh, Allahabad, Lucknow, Budaun, Pratapgarh, Ghazipur and Shamli in Muzaffarnagar district.⁷⁸ Many young progressive writers who were drawn to the language of Marxism and national liberation fully identified with Nehru’s strategy. Their emphasis was not on lofty appeals to communal harmony but on the necessity to forge unity and solidarity between all peasants and workers against the colonial state and its collaborators. As Hasan argues, ‘the most vociferous mass contact campaigners in UP were the young and brilliant lawyers, journalists, teachers, poets and writers.’⁷⁹ This layer was mistrustful of the Congress old guard who were seen as wedded to constitutionalist and accommodationist politics. Progressive writers exercised a powerful ideological pole within the Muslim intelligentsia. Ashraf was a member of the CSP in charge of the minorities’ cell within Congress. Z.A. Ahmad, an Aligarh graduate who joined the Economic Information Department of the AICC as secretary (1936-7), was a member of the National Executive of the CSP from 1937-40. Sajjad Zaheer was also a member of the AICC national executive and younger writers such as Ali Sardar Jafri and

⁷⁶ Quoted in *SWJN*, vol. 8, p. 150.

⁷⁷ Nehru, *SWNJ*, vol. 8, p. 167.

⁷⁸ M. Hasan, *Islam in the Subcontinent: Muslims in a Plural Society*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2002, p. 235.

⁷⁹ Hasan, *Islam in the Subcontinent*, p. 237.

Khawaja Ahmad Abbas were inspired by Nehru's initiatives.⁸⁰ However, Muslim intellectuals alone could not deliver the votes of the Muslim masses. The election demonstrated that in rural areas the campaign was largely ineffective in winning Muslim peasants for the Congress. But it also showed that the League was increasingly successful in portraying itself as the main defenders of Muslim interests. In spite of this the decade ended on a note of optimism and great hope. A working unity between the Socialists and Communists had been achieved and the militancy of the freedom movement was being infused with radical ideas. Congress had committed itself to left oriented policies and was embarking on initiatives that spoke to the social and material conditions of the mass of ordinary people. Progressive writers believed that, under Nehru, Congress would move inexorably to the left and that their vision of a secular, modern, socialist independent India would materialize. They believed history was on their side. Unfortunately it was not.

Unity fractured in the freedom struggle

The unity that had been harnessed in the late 1930s was never universally accepted. Tensions had always persisted between various tendencies within the nationalist camp. The more conservative elements of Congress Socialists, such as Masani, did not embrace the ethos of united front work with Communists.⁸¹ His suspicions were based on the belief that the Communists would adhere to Soviet interests as opposed to Indian ones. Moreover, within Congress itself many old stalwarts were deeply suspicious and mistrustful of Nehru's radical posturing. This section opposed the inclusion of Communists and Socialists elements into the Congress fold, believing

⁸⁰ Ali Sardar Jafri was a student at Aligarh University and had been expelled for organising a strike in 1936. He became a leading progressive poet of the PWA and remained a life long member of the CPI. Khawaja Ahmad Abbas was a leading member of the PWA and IPTA.

⁸¹ Masani, *The Communist Party of India*, pp. 56-57.

the very notion of socialism was alien to India as it had European connotations. Gandhi himself was quite hostile to progressive leftist ideology as he felt it was anti-religious and unsuitable to Indian conditions. He also held it to be a violent creed and therefore inherently evil.⁸² In an interview given by Gandhi to some UP landlords in Cawnpore he stated that 'I shall be no party to dispossessing the propertied classes of their private property without just cause'.⁸³ Gandhi believed in social harmony between all sections of society and this applied to capital and labour too. So he stated that he regarded the combination of Hindus and Muslims for class war as an act of unholy alliance and he assured the landlords that in any forced attempt to confiscate their property 'you will find me fighting on your side'.⁸⁴ Under these circumstances the Fundamental Rights resolution did not escape some qualification. The Congress Working Committee issued a statement in 1934 repudiating 'loose talk about confiscation of private property and necessity of class war'.⁸⁵ This was a direct warning to those within the Congress Socialists not to overstep the mark but also a means of reassuring the propertied classes that Congress had no intention of threatening their interests. So although the Karachi resolution was hailed as a progressive step it also enshrined the rights to private property.⁸⁶ These political differences could be placed to one side as long as the central goal was opposition to colonialism and the demand for immediate independence. However, by the end of 1942 there were enormous strains in the left camp. The unity that Narayan, Ashraf and Nehru had prided themselves on in the 1930s had all but evaporated, with former comrades now accusing each other of treachery and dishonesty.

⁸² See Gandhi, *CWVG*, vol. 88, pp. 96-97.

⁸³ Quoted in *The Leader*, 3rd August 1934.

⁸⁴ *The Leader*, 3rd August 1934.

⁸⁵ *Congress Working Committee Papers*, Benares, 27th -30th July 1934.

⁸⁶ Resolution on "Fundamental Rights" in *SWJN*.

The one factor that had united activists was to cause a fundamental rift within progressive left circles. In the summer of 1939 the mass contact committees were disbanded. In 1938 G. B. Pant, the chief minister of UP, argued that 'it was not necessary to lay emphasis on the Muslim mass contact' and advised Nehru to stick to the old policy of Congress representing the Indian masses, regardless of caste or creed.⁸⁷ In order to counter Muslim influence, B.S. Moonje proposed to Bhai Parmanand and Raja Narendranath that all the Hindu Mahasabhas should join Congress.⁸⁸ In fact some Congress factions viewed with complete distaste the prospect of Muslim influx into Congress. They feared it would provide Nehru and his leftist allies with a solid Muslim base and that Congress would make concessions to Muslim concerns at the expense of their political base and domination. This was particularly the case in UP where the communal tensions were at their highest. Congress made an attempt to counter communal elements within their organisation. On 11-16 December, the Congress Working Committee met in Wardha and declared the Muslim League and the Mahasbha to be communal organisations and debarred elected members of Congress Committees from serving on the committees of either organisation.⁸⁹ However, Kripalani, the general secretary of Congress wrote to the secretary of the provincial congress committee in Bengal stating the following,

You must remember Article V (c) in the constitution refers not to primary members of any communal organisation but to members of elected committees. There is therefore nothing in the Congress constitution, even if the working committee named some organisations as communal, in the sense contemplated by Article V (c), to prevent ordinary primary members of such organisation from being office holders in the Congress organisation.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Quoted in Hasan, *Islam and the subcontinent*, p. 244.

⁸⁸ *Bombay Chronicle*, 9th November 1937.

⁸⁹ AICC Papers, File No. P-1/1938.

⁹⁰ Letter to Ashrafuddin Chowdhury dated 6th October 1938, AICC papers, File No. P-5/1938, p. 101.

This gave a free hand to communal organisations to operate with impunity within Congress. It only applied to Hindu chauvinist groups as those favouring Muslim separatism were gravitating towards the League. The collapse of the mass contact campaign led a very bitter Ashraf to conclude that

at no stage from 1936 to 1942 did Nehru move his little finger to carry the movement further and seize the initiative from the right wing. Even Subhash was better.⁹¹

He felt that Nehru had abandoned the mass contact campaign in favour of the possibility of acquiring power through ministries following the 1937 election. To interpret this as the failings of one individual does not help to explain either the collapse of mass contact work or the manner in which sectarian bodies such as the Mahasabha could make inroads into Congress. Mushirul Hasan has argued that the campaign collapsed due to Congress's own reluctance to pursue its policy vigorously and with total conviction.⁹² There is some truth to this assertion in that it was only ever a minority inside the AICC that seriously favoured the campaign. However, the main fissure appeared to be the concept of 'nationalism' itself. The fundamental weakness of the nationalist movement in the form of Congress was that it comprised diverse interest groups: conservative, constitutionalist, communalist as well as radical, progressive and communist. Consequently, the politics of nationalism was never a homogenous entity. As Judith Brown states, the politics of nationalism was deeply intertwined with local and regional politics and these affected decisions made at a national level.⁹³ This was particularly the case in north India and so it was no accident that it was a UP Chief Minister who cautioned Nehru against special overtures towards Muslims. As stated earlier, many conservative sections of

⁹¹ Interview with Ashraf, in Krueger, *K.M. Ashraf: An Indian Scholar*, p 413.

⁹² Hasan, *Islam in the Subcontinent*, p. 243.

⁹³ Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life*, p. 66.

Congress did not welcome the influx of socialists and communists into their fold fearing that their presence would commit Congress to a radical programme that would alienate landowners, industrialists and perhaps their own property interests. In addition a strategy oriented towards Muslims was felt to risk alienating the majority population of Hindus. The old Congress guard feared Nehru would have a Muslim base just like that enjoyed by Gandhi during the non-cooperation movement over his support for the *Khilafat*. Their opposition to this can be seen as a reluctance to have large numbers of Muslims in Congress since their power base rested on the educated middle class Hindus and, in UP in particular, the rising Hindi intelligentsia and Hindu landlords. UP was the state that had been most communalised between Hindus and Muslims since the beginning of the century and the activities of the Mahasabha and Arya Samajists were infiltrating the ranks of Congress. But most opposition came from the conservative layers of Congress. Nehru could not carry the provincial and district congress committees with him. Particularly in UP the Hindu Mahasabha had made inroads into Congress and was most resistant to mass contact work with Muslims.⁹⁴

The 'fuzziness' of nationalism was a fundamental problem in this period. There was little ideological consensus on what it was based upon. Under colonial rule all could unite as Indians against this external power. But what were the ideological moorings of nationalism after liberation? Again Brown poses a vital question that certainly exercised the minds of progressive writers. The ideological basis of the national project was contested throughout the freedom struggle. Was Indian nationalism

⁹⁴ Maulana Abul Kalam Azad has described two incidents from the 1937 election in which Congress elected to place candidates from a Hindu background as Chief Ministers in Bombay and Bihar, in spite of the fact that in Bombay a Parsee was the most prominent Congress leader and in Bihar a Muslim was both the local leader of Congress as well as a General Secretary of the AICC. For Azad this represented a failure of Congress's nationalism. See M.A.K. Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988, pp. 16-18.

formed by the notion of a modern nation or did collectivities of region, language, caste and religion play roles in the creation of national and political consciousness?⁹⁵ Groups such as the Mahasabha and those influenced by them held nationalism to be informed by religious and cultural associations. In this respect nationalism was based upon particular groups and was characterised by its exclusive membership of the said group. For Nehru and progressives nationalism was to be steeped in the cultural pluralism of Indian civilisation and therefore to be understood in political terms as opposed to the specific property of one social group. These questions remained unresolved by national leaders and would haunt nationalists right through to independence.

A further point to be considered in the lack of homogeneity of nationalism was the question of class. Nehru and other Congress leaders could understand the need for mass contact work when it came to challenging the Muslim League and Nehru could even accept that a 'bottom up' approach was preferable to constitutional and elitist methods. However, there was a limit to this populist strategy. As Guha points out, though nationalists could espouse the causes of peasants and industrial workers they could not bring themselves to include the struggle against rents in their programmes or the demands of workers for increases in wages or better conditions, when faced with losing support from Indian industrialists.⁹⁶ In this sense nationalism failed to assimilate the class interests of the mass of the population into its programme and this presented radical progressives with a problem which would not be resolved easily.

⁹⁵ Brown, *Nehru*, p. 66.

⁹⁶ R Guha, "Discipline and Mobilise" in *Subaltern Studies*, vol. 7, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 101.

Nationalism and the War

The outbreak of the Second World War would prove to be the greatest test for a progressive alliance in the nationalist movement. The crucial fault line here was the changing attitudes to this and the consequent diversion of loyalties within the nationalist camp. The outbreak of war between Britain and Germany automatically included the colonies as part of Britain's war effort. On 3rd September the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow proclaimed that India was at war and issued an ordinance providing for emergency powers. There was no consultation with Indian representatives in either the provincial or central legislatures. This was interpreted as an act of betrayal and insensitivity by the Congress and so on 14th September 1939 the Congress Working Committee issued a draft resolution on the war stipulating its 'entire disapproval of the ideology and practice of fascism and Nazism and their glorification of war.'⁹⁷ But it added that if the war 'is to defend the *status quo*, imperialist possessions, colonies, vested interests and privilege, then India can have no interest in it.'⁹⁸ This demonstrates that Congress regarded the threat of fascism with the same level of seriousness as the British and desired to see it confronted but not at the cost of their own freedom. This is why they sought an undertaking by London to guarantee negotiations on the transfer of power immediately after the resolution of war. It must be remembered that the aftermath of World War One had witnessed the introduction of the Rowlatt Act and a massacre at Jallianwala in April 1919. These were viewed as repressive measures against nationalist aspirations and as poor reward for sacrifices made by Indians to the British war effort in Europe. National leaders did not wish to see a repetition following this war. However, no

⁹⁷ Draft Resolution of Congress Working Committee 14th September 1939, quoted in *SWJN*, vol. 10, pp. 124-125.

⁹⁸ Resolution of Congress Working Committee 14th September 1939, in *SWJN*, vol. 10, p. 129..

such assurances were forthcoming so on 22nd October 1939 the CWC called on the Congress Ministers to resign, which they promptly did.⁹⁹

The CPI also stood against involvement in the war believing it to be a war of 'imperialism'. In October 1939 their Politburo declared 'the revolutionary utilisation of the war crisis for the attainment of national independence was the central task'.¹⁰⁰ This resolution asserted that the 'capture of power is an immediately realisable goal' and explicitly called for the 'transformation of imperialist war into a war of national liberation'.¹⁰¹ According to the Soviet historian, A.M Dyakov, Communists were active in anti-war and anti-imperialist conferences held in Nagpur in October 1939.¹⁰² In his study of the nationalist movement he states that up to 10,000 people demonstrated in Madras in September 1939 and in rural areas the CPI conducted their anti-war campaign through the slogan '*Na ek Pai, Na ek Bhai*'¹⁰³ (not one penny, not one brother). For a war time government this was too much agitation. On 25th March 1940, the Government of India ordered the detention of principal Communist leaders, including the PWA member Sajjad Zaheer, who was arrested on 12th March under the Defence of India (Rules) Section 26 (1) B.¹⁰⁴ The detention of Communists increased enormously during the early years of war. In a speech to the National Legislative Assembly in February 1941, Sir Reginald Maxwell stated that out of the 700 odd people being detained without trial 'about 480 persons were almost without exception Communists or else supporters of the Communist

⁹⁹ M.J. Akbar, *The Making of India*, London: Penguin Books, p. 326.

¹⁰⁰ P.C. Joshi, *Communist Reply to Congress Working Committee's Charges*, Bombay: PPH, 1945, p. 36.

¹⁰¹ Joshi, *Communist Reply to Congress Working Committee*, pp. 35-39. See also Manifesto of the CPI published in *The Communist*, March 1940 quoted in *Documents of the Communist Movement in India*, vol. 4, (1939-1943), Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997, pp. 129-136.

¹⁰² Quoted in D.N. Druhe, *Soviet Russia and Indian Communism*, New York: Bookman Associates, 1959, p. 199.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Druhe, *Soviet Russia and Indian Communism*, p. 201.

¹⁰⁴ File No. 7/10/40 Home Department, Political Section.

programme of violent mass revolution.¹⁰⁵ The arrested also included the progressive writers Mahmuduzaffar and Sohan Singh Josh. They were categorised as ‘Class 1’ security prisoners and therefore were not considered sufficiently ‘dangerous’ to be held in confinement, unlike the Communist Party leaders, B.T Ranadive, S.A. Dange and Batliwala, who were placed in isolation wards as the superintendent believed they ‘exerted a very bad influence over the other prisoners.’¹⁰⁶ These three were denied access to certain books and articles such as penknives, newspaper cuttings and writing material. Mahmuduzaffar and Josh decided to petition on behalf of these prisoners and they succeeded in obtaining 60 signatures from fellow class 1 prisoners. The copies were presented to the superintendent, who rejected them out of hand and for good measure withdrew writing material from Mahmuduzaffar and Josh as well!¹⁰⁷ It is important to note that at this stage Congress leaders were detained in their homes - only Communists and their associates were incarcerated in prisons. This is indicative of the draconian measures taken against the left of the nationalist movement. Even Sajjad Zaheer, a member of the AICC, was imprisoned at Deoli jail and repeated pleas to have him detained at home fell on deaf ears.¹⁰⁸

The situation with the war changed dramatically by the end of 1941. On 22nd June the Soviet Union entered the war, following invasion by Nazi Germany, and on 7th December the US was brought into the war, following a Japanese attack. This completely altered the balance of previous alliances. The Soviet Union had been in a pact with Nazi Germany, which had caused ideological confusion, but the notion of opposing war at all costs meant that this was accepted by activists. By 1941 the

¹⁰⁵ Government of India, *Legislative Assembly Debates*, February 1941, vol. 1, p. 121.

¹⁰⁶ File no. 43/84/41 Home Department, Political Section.

¹⁰⁷ File no. 43/84/41.

¹⁰⁸ See File no. 7/10/40 for petition by Begum Razia Sajjad Zaheer for her husband’s release.

Soviet Union was in alliance with the allies. The inclusion of the Soviet Union in the war-time alliance resulted in a shift in the characterisation of the war, which was now defined as a 'people's war'. This meant that the main enemy was fascism and that opposition to colonialism had to be accommodated to this end. This was not going to be an easy task for left wing activists who had been central to anti-war and anti-colonial battles. During this period Indian Communism has been characterised as 'turning traitor' on the independence movement as it appeared to rush with indecent haste to support the British war effort.¹⁰⁹ However, the position of the Communists did not change automatically. By the middle of July 1941 a compromise formula was reached whereby the Russian part of the war would be supported as a heroic battle of socialism against fascism but Britain's role in the war would continue to be denounced as an imperial one and Communists would continue to castigate her role in India's subjugation. A smuggled, clandestine manifesto declared:

The Communist Party declares that the only way in which the Indian people can help in the just war which the Soviet Union is waging, is by fighting all the more vigorously for their own emancipation from the imperialist yoke. Our attitude towards the British Government and the imperialist war remains what it was... We can render really effective aid to the Soviet Union, only as a free people. That is why our campaign for the demonstration of our support and solidarity with the Soviet Union must be coupled with the exposure of the imperialist hypocrisy of the Churchills and Roosevelts with the demand for the intensification of our struggle for independence.¹¹⁰

This statement seems to suggest that, apart from defending the Soviet Union, the attitude towards the war had not changed substantially in demanding and agitating for independence. At this stage the position of Communists did not vary significantly from that of Congress leaders such as Nehru, who was sympathetic to the Soviet

¹⁰⁹ See Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, pp. 176-183 and Masani, *Short History of the Communist Party*.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in A. N. Deva, *Socialism and the National Revolution*, Bombay: Padma Publications, 1946, pp. 152-153.

Union's plight but felt that the campaign of civil disobedience against the British had to be maintained. However, this peculiar anti-British, pro-Soviet position would not survive long as the Comintern had declared that the war was now a 'people's war' against the threat of fascism and so all Communists had to unite behind progressive forces against Hitler. This included supporting the allies. The following statement makes explicit what this meant for India:

The interest of the peoples of India and Ireland and of all the colonial peoples as of the all the peoples of the world, is bound up with the victory of the peoples against Fascism; that interest is absolute and unconditional, and does not depend on any measures their rulers may promise or concede.¹¹¹

By January 1942 the CPI had formally adopted the people's war stance in full. In a pamphlet entitled *National Liberation Through National Defence* P.C. Joshi, the General Secretary, called for full co-operation with air raid precautions and sent members to train in ARPs in each locality. He demanded the creation of Home Guards and a citizens' army to counteract a Japanese invasion if necessary and called for Indians to join the army as well as actively discourage industrial militancy during this period.¹¹² In explaining the new phase of the war Joshi gave the following justification,

We opposed the imperialist war for all we were worth-*we Must go into the people's war for all we are worth*. We had nothing to gain and everything to lose by supporting the imperialist war. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain by going into the people's war. We can no more fight for our freedom by opposing the war. *We have to realise our freedom by winning the war.*¹¹³

¹¹¹ Dutt, R.P. "Notes of the Month" in *Labour Monthly*, vol. 23, September 1941, p. 381

¹¹² Quoted in P.C. Joshi, *The Indian Communist Party: Its Policy and Work in the War of Liberation*, 1942, London: CPGB, pp. 22-24.

¹¹³ Joshi, *Indian Communist Party: Its Policy and Work*, p. 12.

Public statements such as these went some way to improving the standing of Communists in the eyes of colonial authorities. Sajjad Zaheer was released on 4th March 1942. The man who was considered too dangerous to be detained at his home two years earlier was now described as ‘first and foremost an “intellectual” Communist, and not too much of a practical agitator.’¹¹⁴ The correspondence between senior civil service officers, the UP provincial criminal investigation department and senior Home department secretaries is most revealing about the motives of the colonial state. One memo states that Zaheer like ‘other Muslims in the Communist ranks, can be relied upon to support the war effort for the defeat of the Axis powers.’¹¹⁵ Some in the government realised what a god-send this could be in order to divide the nationslist movement. By March 1942 the release of Communist Party members began and on 24th July 1942 the ban on the CPI had been lifted.¹¹⁶

Whilst the Communist movement was undergoing its analysis of the war Congress decided to launch its most decisive battle against the colonial state. On 8th August 1942 the AICC met in Bombay and Gandhi introduced the Quit India resolution in which he declared ‘*karengē ya marengē*’ (Do or Die).¹¹⁷ The resolution was passed, but on the same day, before the Congress leadership could act, the government issued an extraordinary Gazette Notification which declared the Congress a ‘totalitarian organisation’ and blamed its leaders for consistently impeding the growth of Indian nationalism.¹¹⁸ On the following day Gandhi was taken to Agha Khan Palace at Pune; the entire Congress Working Committee in Bombay was arrested and taken to Ahmednagar old fort and a large body of Congress leaders and members were placed

¹¹⁴ Comment by V.T. Bayley, File no. 44/7/42 Home Department, Political (Industrial) Section.

¹¹⁵ See correspondence in File no. 44/7/42.

¹¹⁶ *Indian Information*, 11, Delhi: Government of India, Bureau of Public Information, 1st September 1942, p. 197.

¹¹⁷ For full text of speech see *CWVG*, vol. 76, pp. 396-401.

¹¹⁸ *The Gazette of India Extraordinary*, 8th August 1942.

in jail. In addition the government declared the AICC, CWC and the Provincial Congress Committees unlawful associations, invoking powers under Section 16 of the Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act.¹¹⁹ These measures were insufficient to quell the movement and throughout August there was mass agitation and protest on a scale not seen before. On the 9th August in Bombay, stones and soda water bottles were thrown at buses, trains, cars and the police. Buses were burnt and post offices were attacked. According to government sources, the police opened fire sixteen times, killing eight people and injuring forty-four. Similar incidents took place in Ahmedabad and Pune, where mills and factories closed as workers went on strike.¹²⁰ On the 10th August telephone and telegraph wires were cut, municipal and government property was damaged, barricades were placed in the streets and European and government officials were molested and attacked.¹²¹ The agitation was so severe and insurrectionary in nature that Lord Linlithgow, the viceroy, described it as by far the most serious rebellion since the 1857 mutiny,¹²² stating,

mob violence remains rampant over large tracts of the countryside and I am by no means confident that we may not see in September a formidable attempt to renew the widespread sabotage on our war effort.¹²³

His fears would be confirmed as underground and semi-legal activity in the form of bombs being used to target government property soon followed. So in Bombay and its environs an estimated 275 bombs were set off between November 1942 and February 1943. These resulted in the deaths of five civil servants and 82 injured,

¹¹⁹ Government of India, *Gazette Notification*, 9th August 1942. The amendment stipulates that if the state Government is of the opinion that any association interferes or has for its object interference with the administration of the law or with the maintenance of law and order, or that it constitutes a danger to the public peace, the state Government may, by notification in the official Gazette, declare such association to be unlawful.

¹²⁰ File no. 3/15/43, Home Political.

¹²¹ File no. 3/15/43.

¹²² Linlithgow to Amery, dated 30th August 1942 in *The Transfer of Power*, vol. 2, 1942.

¹²³ Linlithgow to Amery, in *Transfer of Power*.

alongside the thirteen civilians who lost their lives and 108 seriously injured.¹²⁴ Guerrilla bands also operated in many districts and in Kolaba, Kotwal, an armed guerrilla group succeeded in sabotaging the hydro-electric system.¹²⁵ These incidents demonstrate the scale of opposition to the colonial state which perhaps even Congress could not have imagined when it demanded the British quit India. Some of the protests were spontaneous but much of the activity was orchestrated by the CSP, who had effectively taken over the leadership of the Quit India movement. J.P. Narayan had been arrested but managed to escape from Hazaribagh central jail in October 1942. He was eventually caught and imprisoned again in September 1943.¹²⁶ But whilst 'on the run' he provided a beacon to all those who wanted to fight for independence. He issued two letters to his supporters. The first one called for the 'complete overthrow of imperialism',¹²⁷ and the second, released in early September 1943, was highly critical of what he perceived to be the backtracking of Congress on the national movement. So Narayan poured scorn on Rajagopalachari, K.M. Munshi and Bhulabhai Desai for turning their back on the freedom fighters and instead 'making conciliatory gestures towards the government.'¹²⁸ The CSP had an underground radio station in Bombay from where statements and calls to action were made. This station operated for two months before being detected and closed by the authorities.¹²⁹

It is clearly evident that for the colonial state this was by far the most serious revolt they had faced. It was for this reason that the political activity and attitude of the CPI placed them at loggerheads with the nationalist movement.

¹²⁴ File no. 35/3/42, Home Political.

¹²⁵ File no. 18/1/43, Home Political.

¹²⁶ File no. 18/10/43, Home Political

¹²⁷ Quoted in Narayan, *Towards Struggle*, p. 22.

¹²⁸ See letter dated 1st September 1943 in *Towards Struggle*, pp34-35.

¹²⁹ File no. 3/44/43, Home Political

The Communists on the AICC, Zaheer, Ashraf and Sardesai, had attempted to introduce amendments that were inclusive of the people's war aims but they voted against the Quit India resolution, believing it was too premature¹³⁰ This caused the most serious rift within the nationalist movement, with the CPI, legal and free to operate, on the one side, and Nehru and Congress leaders in prison, on the other. This also made it easier to isolate Congress from other political interests. The Muslim League had opposed the Quit India movement, with Jinnah describing the Quit India resolution as creating 'a most dangerous and most serious situation in the country.'¹³¹ He accused Gandhi of wanting to 'create a Congress-Hindu dominated India and stipulated that the League would not be coerced.'¹³² The fact that in March 1940 the All-India Muslim League held its session in Lahore and passed a resolution later known as the Pakistan Resolution contributed to further widening the gulf between themselves and Congress.¹³³ In addition the League had committed itself to supporting the war effort.¹³⁴ These tensions were further exacerbated by the Cripps Mission. Stafford Cripps was a Labour minister in the war cabinet and had visited India before in December 1939. On that visit he met with some Congress socialist members and was in favour of independence immediately after the war.¹³⁵ He had formed a very unfavourable view of the League and denounced their plan for partition as 'reactionary and impracticable' because he was of the opinion that it was 'drawn entirely from the professional, landlord and industrialist classes whose

¹³⁰ *Indian Annual Register*, vol. 2, 1942, pp. 245-246.

¹³¹ *Indian Annual Register*, no. 3, vol. 2, 1942, p. 10.

¹³² File no. 18/7/42, Home Political

¹³³ *Pakistan Papers, X, India and the War (1939-1940)* quoted in C.H. Philips, ed *Evolution of India and Pakistan, Select Documents*, pp. 354-355.

¹³⁴ On 18th September 1939 the ML passed a resolution offering support on condition the Viceroy recognise it as the 'only organisation that can speak on behalf of India's Muslims'. On 22nd October the ML formally thanked the Viceroy for acceding to this request.

¹³⁵ A.K. Chaudhuri, *Socialist Movement in India: The Congress Socialist Party (1934-1947)*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1980, p. 119.

interests were fundamentally different from that of the Muslim masses'.¹³⁶ However, by 1942 when Cripps came as a representative of the British government, he stated the following:

The Muslims, of whom there are at least 80,000,000 are deeply opposed to Hindu domination as are also tens of millions of depressed classes. To have agreed to the Congress Party's or to Mr. Gandhi's demand would have meant inevitable chaos and disorder.¹³⁷

This is indicative of the measure of success that the League had achieved in obtaining acknowledgement of their notion of two nations in India.

Initially the left had denounced the League as stooges of the colonial state. They had labelled the League and its demand for Pakistan as communalist and anti-democratic, and Jinnah was dismissed as an aristocrat who had nothing but contempt for the mass of ordinary people.

By August 1942 this condemnation of the League as an unrepresentative party had given way to a declaration by Joshi that 'the Muslim League is the political organisation of the second largest community in our country'.¹³⁸ He continued, 'It would be wrong and unrealistic to dismiss the Muslim League as a "reactionary, communal organisation"'.¹³⁹ In addition an editorial in the Party paper, *People's War*, declared on 9th August (same date as the mass arrest of Congress leadership) that

nationalist opinion has been loud in its proclamation that under a free India, there will be no oppression of the minority by the majority. But a minority which distrusts the majority cannot be satisfied with such assertions. Its fears must be completely allayed. Its equal status must be

¹³⁶ S. Cripps, *Tribune*, December 1939/January 1940.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Chaudhuri, *Socialist Movement in India*, p. 140.

¹³⁸ Joshi, *Indian Communist Party*, p16.

¹³⁹ Joshi, *Indian Communist Party*, p. 27.

guaranteed in a form easily understood. It must be given the right of secession, the right to form an independent state.¹⁴⁰

The editorial continued, 'The right has to be recognised all the more unhesitatingly where, as with the Muslims, it is a question of distinct nationalities'.¹⁴¹ This suggests that the CPI had accepted the idea of India being a multi-national entity and also the identification of religion as a criterion of nationality, a position they had opposed until then.¹⁴² The League in turn lessened its hostility to Communists and Communist Party members of Muslim origin began to join the ranks of the Muslim League and some came to occupy important positions within the League structures. So Daniyal Latifi, a Punjabi Communist, was appointed as Office Secretary of the Punjab Provincial League Committee as well as Secretary of the League Assembly Party. Liaquat Ali Khan welcomed the CPI support and praised its 'ceaseless efforts to convince the Hindu masses of the justice of the demand for the rights of self-determination to Muslims'.¹⁴³

It is important to recognise that for the CPI holding India to be a multi-national state was not the same as supporting or calling for a separate Muslim state. But what is undeniable is that these new political alliances created an enormous gulf between progressive radical nationalists and the left. So people who had been former comrades now denounced each other as traitors and fifth columnists. So the CSP was condemned for its supposed support of the Japanese:

The CSP ...wants the deadlock to continue because under cover of this they hope to organise their cadres so that when the time comes for Jap

¹⁴⁰ *People's War*, 9th August 1942, p2.

¹⁴¹ *People's War*, 9th August 1942, p2.

¹⁴² See *Documents of the Communist Movement (1939-1943)*, vol. 4, pp. 828-836.

¹⁴³ Quoted in Druhe, *Soviet Russia and Indian Communism*, pp. 222-223.

invasion they may blow up the rear to help the Japs and deliver our people to Jap enslavement.¹⁴⁴

And the CSP attacked Communists for turning their back on the independence struggle.¹⁴⁵ In spite of all the differences the CPI continued to advance the cause of unity between the Congress and League by insisting Congress should recognise the right to self determination of Muslims and for the ML to campaign vigorously for the release of all Congress leaders.¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

The convergence of a progressive nationalism with strong socialist/communist commitment was a central feature of the Progressive Writers' Movement. For a short period in the mid 1930s and through to 1941 many writers and activists believed that Congress as a party could be pulled in a left direction. However, the episode also demonstrates the problems that arise when confronting an emergent nationalism in a colonial context. A brand of nationalist fervour can be an extremely satisfying and unifying pole of attraction for a people hungry for freedom after two centuries of colonial rule. However, within this ideology there were many disparate tendencies which conflicted with each other. Given their political orientation towards the socialist vision, progressive writers were predisposed to the pull of the Communist Party. This Party had played a significant role in mobilising the developing radical currents into a militant, oppositionist formation throughout the 1930s. It was for this reason that they could attract a rising intelligentsia into their fold.

In spite of the militancy of the freedom movement nationalism was very slippery and ideologically incoherent throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Congress's ability to

¹⁴⁴ *People's War*, 12th September 1943, p. 5.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Masani, *Short History of Communist Party*, p.

¹⁴⁶ See articles by S. Zaheer in *People's War*, 1942-44, Bombay,

present itself as the chief proponent of a unifying nationalism was being challenged by others from within Muslim and Hindu political formations. The most successful campaign that Congress launched for unity was its mass contact work with Muslims but by the summer of 1939 the mass contact campaign had been stopped and their committees disbanded. So within two years a campaign that had started with such enthusiasm and hope had petered out to nothing. This was not due to lack of conviction of those who prosecuted the campaign, nor the lack of Muslim interest but because of weaknesses within the Congress machine. As Hasan makes clear, it was in fact the belligerence of the rightist faction within Congress and Nehru's inability or unwillingness to counter their influence that led to the collapse of mass contact work.¹⁴⁷ The failure of this campaign to make serious inroads into Muslim constituencies allowed the conservative elements of Congress to gain the upper hand. But also the inability of a national project to base the campaign for independence on a serious orientation on the interests of the mass of ordinary people as peasants, workers, the poor and destitute could allow more conservative and reactionary ideas to develop, including those that people could only be appealed to on the basis of religion.

The weakness of nationalist ideology was further exposed with the onset of war. Within the nationalist camps there was a great deal of sympathy for the British in opposing Nazi Germany. But the divergent interests of Congress and the League became prominent during the war as Jinnah moved to give support for the war effort and Congress eventually launched the Quit India movement. In this situation the role of the left was crucial. The CSP was able to take the lead of the freedom movement following the arrest of Congress leaders. Narayan was organising virtual guerrilla

¹⁴⁷ Hasan, *Islam in the Subcontinent*, pp.244-247.

activity and Socialists took the lead in organising strikes, demonstrations and public meetings. In terms of the freedom movement this would be their finest hour as Socialists put into practice Gandhi's 'Do or Die' call. The CPI's original, very hostile opposition to the war effort was to change as the war-time alliances changed. The readiness of the CPI to give support to the war effort, as well as to yield to the idea of 'two nations', placed it in opposition to the progressive elements within Congress. Former comrades now perceived each other as enemies and the unity of the previous period had all but dissipated, as nationalism and socialism seemed permanently adrift. These tensions would find expression within the ranks of the PWA movement and the next chapter will examine how writers attempted to grapple with such difficulties.

CHAPTER 4 THE PWA DURING THE WAR

Introduction

The strains within the nationalist camp and the war had an impact on the PWA movement. As a progressive writers' movement they had been drawn to the most left wing elements within the nationalist faction. Many leading members of the PWA had joined the CPI during the 1930s and early 1940s. As stated before it has often been assumed that the PWA was a mere cultural front for the Communists and the war is cited as perhaps the most visible example of this as the assumption has been that progressive writers were forced to articulate the CPI policy of a people's war and consequently they did not give whole hearted support to the freedom movement. This chapter will begin by looking at the two national conferences of the AIPWA during the war years in order to see what policies they adopted. This will explain, formally at least, what their priorities and position were. It will also consider some of the literary output from this period in order to ascertain how the politics of war and nationalism were interpreted by writers.

Though the nationalist movement was split, this period is marked by a flourishing of PWA activity as active branches operated in Bengal, Andhra, Maharashtra, and Bihar, but also from the viewpoint of this study Hindi and Urdu writers took a lead in organising theatre and literary activity in north India. This chapter will examine the branch records of Hindi and Urdu PWA units and focus on their literary and theatre activity to determine their priorities and concerns during the war. The aim will be to show how progressive writers attempted to deal with some of the problems arising from tensions within nationalism but also to demonstrate how they succeeded in broadening their associations.

The 1940s witnessed a horrific crisis in Bengal with a famine that left some three million dead. The plight of Bengal became a central rallying point for PWA activists as they moved to incorporate other cultural forms into their repertoire. This was the period in which progressive writers began to utilise the medium of theatre as a means of conveying ideas on social and political themes of the day. In the early 1940s the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was launched by associates of the AIPWA. This extended and deepened the all-Indian character of a new cultural tradition that faced fresh challenges as the war progressed and the battle for independence threatened the very foundations of colonial rule for the first time since the Indian Rebellion of 1857. This situation presented both an exciting period and a difficult terrain for writers as they attempted to project their vision of freedom into the movement. The chapter will end by documenting the development of IPTA and its activities to assess how progressive writers were able to continue operating within a progressive nationalism imbued with socialist ideology.

The AIPWA in the War

Leading proponents of the progressive movement were inside the CSP and members of the CPI as well as working in senior positions within Congress bodies. Sajjad Zaheer along with K.M Ashraf had played a leading role in the mass contact campaigns. When war broke out and India was committed without consultation the progressive response was swift. So Ali Sardar Jafri wrote the following poem,

Lightning has struck in every place!
It had to ! Lightning – a dagger moulded by the
Very hand it now cuts.
The inevitable moment has come;
One cannot cut one's anchor;
The throne is shaking and the crown is about to drop;
Capitalism is quaking on every side;
It is good for us, the free, to sing;
The song of young rebels is good.
Let us infuse happiness into dejected hearts;
Let us dance beneath the bloody flag.¹

This poem is very specific in its condemnation of war and linking it to a capitalist system, which for individuals influenced by Marxism was not unusual. It calls forth the Indian masses to intensify their struggle for independence. On 31st March 1940, a British official asked Indians to gather in their temples, mosques and churches to pray for Britain's war effort.² The great progressive Urdu poet Kaifi Azmi retorted with the following,

Your Lordship how is it possible
For us to repay you for your gift to us?
How can we, the broken hearted, cry?
Our lips are sewn shut; how can we beseech?
Today is the day of prayer, but how can we pray?

Do something, O tyrant, before the colourful heaven
Is swallowed up by the fire of hell.
How can we extinguish these flames?
Today is the day of prayer, but how can we pray?

We have already become fodder for your cañon;
We have already been ruined for the prosperity of your London;
But how can we help in the calamity hovering over distant London?
Today is the day of prayer, but how can we pray?

The heavy stones of despair fall upon us
Like bombs spitting fire;
Our hearts are in ruin now, just as Buckingham Palace
How are we to celebrate the ceremony of love and sympathy for these
ruins?
Today is the day of prayer, but how can we pray?³

¹ Quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 212.

² Quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 212.

³ Quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 213. Kaifi Azmi (1918-2002) became a leading exponent of Urdu poetry during the war. He was born in Majwa, Azamgar district of UP, to a family of landlords.

The deep sarcasm is particularly poignant in this poem. Britain's 'gift' to India refers to colonial domination and, in Azmi's words, to 'slavery'. Hence Azmi's constant refrain, how can a people in bondage possibly be free to pray for anything?

A final example to illustrate this is the famous poem penned by Makhdum Mohiuddin, "Sipai" (Soldier). This poem was written in 1940 and expresses a deep felt resentment at the colonial order.

Ask the departing soldier
Where he is going.
Who is this distraught woman singing
To console her hungry children?
The smell of burning corpses;
Life shrieks.

Ask the departing soldier
Where he is going.
How frightend the landscape!
How the stars move in fear!
How youth is being murdered!
The edges of the sari are dipped in red.

Ask the departing soldier
Where he is going.
The tent of darkness is falling;
My love, dawn is near!
O you are leaving your country,
The banner of revolution has been unfurled!

Ask the departing soldier
Where he is going.⁴

This poem clearly expressed the writer's consternation that Indians were taken to war for a foreign power whilst their own country needed them to struggle for freedom from that power. With poems such as these it was not surprising that the state would monitor PWA activists and their association. It has already been stated how the police arrested and detained CPI activists and organisers from the PWA such as

He left his studies in Persian and Urdu to join the Quit India Movement in 1942 and became a member of the CPI in 1943. Azmi is famous for his compositions of songs and *ghazals*, particularly for Bollywood films.

⁴ Quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 214. Makhdum was a major progressive poet in Hyderabad. He was a member of the CPI and played a leading role in the peasant uprisings post independence.

Sajjad Zaheer, Mahmuduzaffar and Sohan Singh Josh but they also targeted individual writers for their literary activity. According to Coppola, a collection of poems dealing with the theme of freedom by Sibtey Hasan entitled “Azadi ki Nazmen” (Poems of Freedom) was suppressed by the government.⁵ In addition Ansari notes how many writers had their homes searched and the offices of *Naya Adab* (New Literature), in Bombay were raided with much of the literature censored from 1940 onwards.⁶ Sudhi Pradhan, a member of the Communist Party in Bengal, who attended the second AIPWA conference in Calcutta in 1938, states that from 1939 to mid 1942 there was no AIPWA conference held.⁷ The lack of national activity in these years clearly corresponds to the first half of the war years when progressive identified themselves with the most militant sections of the nationalist movement. Consequently, their activities were subject to surveillance and bans. In this period the position of the CPI and of Indian nationalists were identical on the war being prosecuted without the consent of Indians so it was essential in the first instance to oppose the British and the activity of progressive writers clearly reflected this.

By the time the AIPWA was able to organise its third national conference, the situation with the war had already altered with the inclusion of the Soviet Union as an ally of Britain and France. Within the Progressives there was already some agreement about the nature of the war. At this All-India conference held in May 1942 in Delhi a joint statement was issued by Josh Malihabadi and Saghar Nizami stating,

⁵ Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 211.

⁶ Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought*, pp178-181.

⁷ Pradhan, S. ed, *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*, pxii.

‘Our objective is full independence for India and a socialist order of government’.⁸

The statement then continues,

India is especially at this time surrounded by extremely great dangers. Foreign barbarians, who have taken civilisation-destroying tyrannies in China to their farthest extent, want to attack us in order to ravage our country. In such a situation, it is the duty of every Indian to defend his country.⁹

This statement reiterated the original commitment of progressive writers to total freedom and therefore did not appear to be at odds with nationalist aspirations.

However, the changed characterisation of the war had already been accepted within the CPI and the latter part of the PWA statement was recognition of the threat posed by Japan in Asia and seems to formally accept a position of people’s war. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Sajjad Zaheer had been released from jail in March 1942 and as a member of the AICC he had argued, unsuccessfully, for the incorporation of this aspect of the war within CWC’s resolution. By the time of the fourth AIPWA meeting, the earlier position of their Delhi conference was to be revised considerably. This conference, held in Bombay May 1943, would see the ‘people’s war’ position articulated most coherently. The opening address here was given by S.A.Dange, a leading progressive Marathi writer and prominent trade unionist in the mill industry. In his address to delegates he stated:

...if you believe that the victory of the nations led by the Soviet Union is no concern of yours, you are not paving the way for freedom from your colonial enslaver, you are aiding a worse slavery to take his place, *you are aiding not only your annihilation, but the annihilation of all peoples, all culture.*¹⁰

⁸ 3rd AIPWA conference, May 1942, Delhi, quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 218.

⁹ 3rd AIPWA conference, in Coppola, p. 218.

¹⁰ Dange, S.A. ‘Literature and People’, Address to Fourth All-India Progressive Writer’s Conference, 22nd May 1943, Bombay: People’s Publishing House, 1943, p.3. Shripat Amrit Dange (1899-1991)

The speech does not leave any room for ambiguities or confusion on the central issue of the war. This conference was seen as the most significant in terms of turning the AIPWA completely towards the people's war stance. This was reflected in the progressive poetry of the time. So we have an offering from Makhdum entitled *Jang-i-Azadi* (War of freedom),

This is a war of freedom
Under the banner of freedom
Of us inhabitants of India,
Of the condemned and helpless,
Of those drunk with freedom,
Of the peasant and worker;

This war is a war of freedom
Under the banner of freedom
The whole world is ours,
East, west, north and south;
We Europeans, we Americans,
We Chinese, risking our life for our country,
We Red soldiers destroying tyranny
With bodies of steel;

The war is a war of freedom
Under the banner of freedom¹¹

The poem continues in this vein to exhort Indians to side with the allies against the axis powers. Similarly, Ali Sardar Jafri called upon his fellow Indians to participate in the international fight against fascism and imperialism,

The sound of the trumpet is heard
And our war has begun;
The foundations of this reign are shaking;
Why should we beg from the government?
We have been in the house of the poor
And brought up in the lap of misery;
But the cannon, the gun, the sword and the spear
Have all been moulded by our hands.

was a founding member of the CPI and leading member in Bombay of the Marathi PWA. In the late 1940s the main centre of activity was in the Bombay trade unions.

¹¹ Quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, pp. 220-221.

Come let us overthrow the wall of this prison of slavery
With these weak hands;
No more distinctions between a Russian and a Negro;
Let us unite the boundaries of India and China.¹²

What is striking in both poems is that two leading Communists who, two years earlier were condemning the war and Britain in the most vitriolic manner, were now espousing the cause of the war effort.

This shift in attitudes to the war was also marked on the question of nationalities in India. So K.M. Ashraf, the man who had led Nehru's mass contact work with Muslims, in June 1940 noted that a fascination with the Pakistan slogan 'grows and develops among the Muslim masses.'¹³ He went on to berate the Congress leadership for having conceived the Indian self-government in terms of 'reactionary Hindu principles rather than in terms of progressive social ideals'¹⁴ At the fourth AIPWA conference in 1943, Dange gave an address in which he outlined the basis of national unity for writers, which was not an

*imposed Akhand-Hindustan but a voluntary united Hindustan of autonomous nationalities which must be the true home and ideal of the peoples' artist.*¹⁵

This speech signalled an acceptance of India as a multi-national state and could be considered as providing credence to the rising demands of the ML over Pakistan and separate representation. It certainly corresponded to the shifts in policy within the CPI and this alongside the changes in attitudes towards the war would seem to support the notion that the progressive movement was very much a creature of the

¹² Quoted in Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 222.

¹³ Quoted in K.M. Ashraf, *Pakistan*, Delhi: Adabistan, 1950, p. ii.

¹⁴ See Ashraf, *Pakistan*, pp. iii.

¹⁵ Dange, Address, p. 3.

Communist Party and therefore did not dissent from its policies. However, not all is as it seems.

Although there were disagreements at high levels within the left nationalist camp, for many progressive writers there was no conflict between opposition to the war and to the colonial state. So the same Ali Sardar Jafri who within two years could compose poetry both against and for the war, later penned a short play entitled *Paikar* (Family Struggle), which was published in 1944. This play is based on family tensions that rise during a fictitious famine crisis in north India. This world is dominated by black marketeers, hoarders and corrupt officials making millions whilst the majority starve. Within this family individuals take different positions on the situation. So the father, a businessman, takes advantage of government fixed pricing and scarcity by hoarding local grain and selling it on the black market; his son wants his father to be honest but is ineffective at forcing him to change his ways. The daughter joins a leftist group at college and exposes her father's dealings. After much heartache and recriminations the students storm the father's house and take the grain to distribute to the poor.¹⁶ Through the daughter, the play makes political points about the threat of fascism and how imperative it is to defeat this, as well as the necessity of ordinary people to act together as a collective to bring about change. In the preface to this play, Sajjad Zaheer welcomed the themes present in this work and he used the space to condemn the colonial government for 'imprisoning Congress leaders, so denying them the right to talk to the leaders of the League and yet they permitted black marketeers, hoarders and corruption^{to} run wild.'¹⁷ A joint statement by Hindi and Urdu writers was published in September 1942 calling on the ML to campaign for the

¹⁶ See A.S. Jafri, *Paikar*, Bombay: PPH, 1994.

¹⁷ See Preface to *Paikar*, p. 2.

release of Congress leaders and insisting that Congress recognise the aspirations of the League.¹⁸ A central concern of progressive writers had been the unity of the nationalist movement, particularly during the war. They were sensitive to the tensions created over questions of the nature of the war and the Quit India resolution. The PWA was keen to promote reconciliation between the Congress and League as a means of forging Hindu-Muslim unity and a united front in the face of war and fascism. This was the core theme and rationale for Jafri writing his play. Jafri (1913-2000) joined the PWA at its second conference in Calcutta, had been active in the Muslim Mass contact campaign and was a member of the CPI throughout his life and had always described himself as a freedom fighter.¹⁹

Similarly, Ismat Chughtai (1911-1994) wrote a novel, *The Crooked Line*, published in 1944 in Urdu. The protagonist in this is Shamman a young Muslim girl growing up in 1930s India. At university she encounters the progressives and Communist Party members. She joins the progressives, is influenced by the radicalism of Nehru but her sympathies are with the CPI, though she never joins them. As a student activist she is involved in protests against colonial rule. When she starts working as a teacher she grows distant from the political movement. Her main contacts are with the character Iftikhar, an underground CP member who appeals to her for money for the Party which she readily gives. Shamman is totally convinced of the need to oppose the colonial power. But when Hitler invades Russia she states to herself that 'June 22nd will live in history as a memorable date'.²⁰ She attends a meeting with Communists and progressives to discuss what attitude should be taken on the war now. The meeting is described as riotous where 'no one knew which viewpoint to

¹⁸ See *People's War*, 20th September 1942, p. 1.

¹⁹ Interview with Javed Akhtar, Bombay, 16th January 2004.

²⁰ I. Chughtai, *The Crooked Line*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1995, p. 249.

endorse and which to oppose...'²¹ However, the character of Shamman is convinced that opposition to the colonial presence could not be compromised by only talking of the fascist threat. Later on in the novel she confronts her best friend Alma, also a progressive and communist sympathiser, who is begging her to subscribe to the new Communist position.²²

This attempt by Chughtai to historicize a debate amongst progressives over the war is some indication that she like others was aware of dissident voices during this period. Chughtai never joined the CPI but she was very close politically and artistically to many Communists, particularly Rashid Jahan, who had been her inspiration as a student. The key point about these two works of fiction is that they demonstrate how sensitive writers were to these debates within the nationalist movement and also how they attempted to hold on to an ideological position that combined opposition to the British and a call for immediate independence with support for a war against fascism. This position did not imply political support for their colonial masters, nor did it entail an abandonment of their sympathy for the Soviet Union.

A further point that needs to be acknowledged is that the question of fascism was not some distant threat in Europe. In Bengal a committee was established to organise the anti-fascist Writers' and Artists' Union at the end of 1942.²³ This impetus for this was the murder of a young Bengali writer, Somen Chanda in Dakha, in March 1942. He was murdered by Indian admirers of Germany and Japan, who took revenge on him as an organiser of the Friends of the Soviet Union.²⁴ For Sajjad Zaheer and

²¹ Chughtai, *The Crooked Line*, p. 250.

²² Chughtai, *The Crooked Line*, pp. 272-277.

²³ This association was formed in December 1942 and its organising committee was presided over by Ramananda Chatterjee, the doyen of Indian journalism.

²⁴ Report in *People's War*, 15th November 1942, p. 8.

Mulk Raj Anand this would have brought back the grim stories they had heard in Europe of writers being attacked in the early 1930s. India certainly was not Nazi-occupied Europe but this incident brought home the real threat that fascism posed to progressive writers in a way that nothing else had.

Additionally, a few progressive writers had visited Europe during the war. One such individual was Balraj Sahni (1913-1973) who would go on to play a leading role in IPTA and films. In his autobiography he describes some of his experience in London about the nature of war, colonial authority and fascist aggression. Sahni enjoyed watching films and he became an avid fan of Soviet cinema whilst in London. One film he went to see several times over was "Circus", based on the story of a white American girl who is pregnant by her black boyfriend and her only chance of happiness is to flee to the Soviet Union. On one return visit to the cinema, Sahni finds himself in a hall full of Black American soldiers,

Looking at the expression on their faces, I felt a sense of kinship with them. Both of us being 'black' men, our lot in our respective countries was alike.²⁵

This experience reminded him of the inequities of colonial rule at home and the injustices perpetrated towards other people. It was for this reason he gravitated towards Marxism and sympathy for the Soviet Union. He explained that he was fully aware that this film was propaganda but he concluded that there could be such a thing as honest and good 'propaganda'.²⁶ The experience of London being bombed convinced him unequivocally of the need to oppose the axis powers and this propelled him to join the CPI some time in 1944 and to subscribe to the Party

²⁵ B. Sahni, *An Autobiography*, Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1979, pp. 41-42.

²⁶ Sahni, *An Autobiography*, p. 42.

position on war. So the picture that emerges of the PWA is not necessarily one of subervience to a Party machine. It is a quite complex story of writers and their experience of war. The only way to fully appreciate it is to begin with an understanding of the motivations of the writers and not to view them or their organisation as a prisoner of a Party 'line'.

PWA Branch organisation during the war

The tensions created by the war paradoxically created space for a greater flourishing of progressive cultural activity. As Russell states, the arrest of the Congress leadership and the almost exclusive preoccupation of the League with 'Muslim' interests, left the field open for the left and the progressive movement took full advantage of this.²⁷ During the war years the PWA continued to operate and its activities can be assessed from a report by Sajjad Zaheer. He had been the first general secretary of the AIPWA from 1936-38 and was elected so again from 1943-49. To assess how effective the association was in terms of its activities it is necessary to note his comments. In a report published in June 1947 Zaheer singled out folk songs and other forms of folk literature as the most outstanding feature of the movement.²⁸ He identified the peasant poets of the PWA as the chief proponents of this development. These folk forms included the *burrakatha* from Andhra, the *Pawada* of Maharashtra, the *Kabigan* of Bengal and the *Alha* and *Masnavi* of UP.²⁹ The fact that this cultural form was being utilised is indicative of the necessity progressive writers felt about taking their message to the rural areas and into the industrial heartlands of cities. There was a place for literature but if the project was to be effective in garnering support during the war then the use of public

²⁷ R. Russell, "Leadership in the All-India PWA" in Pandey, ed, *Leadership in South Asia*, p. 116.

²⁸ Report of Activities of AIPWA in *50 Years of PWA*, p 63.

²⁹ Report of Activities of AIPWA p 63.

performance was essential. Zaheer also identified two major shortcomings of the association. Firstly, there had been no All-India body functioning during 1943-47. This resulted in the lack of a national PWA bulletin being published in these years.³⁰ This period had witnessed some tremendous changes in policy and practice, as noted above, and the fact that the national structure was unable to function could seriously have disabled the association. The second failing to be identified by Zaheer was the fact that the national executive committee had also failed to meet in this period. This meant that the office holders were not able to perform their duties and also that there was little assessment of the activities of the association or planning of future ones.³¹ The lack of national cohesion in terms of structure and meetings of officers perhaps reflects the very nature of the period. Progressive writers found themselves in an unenviable position of operating legally during the years of this report but desiring to square the nationalist aspiration of freedom with their Communist commitment to ensuring an allied victory over fascism. Whatever the reason for lack of systematic meetings, the PWA could easily have disintegrated into disparate local units.

In order to assess the character of the association we can gauge a better understanding by focusing on the local activities of branches. In these branches writers were encouraged to present their essays, stories and poems for feedback and discussion. It was here that writers discussed problems confronting them over issues such as the war, the freedom movement, art and propaganda and what attitude writers should take to India's literary heritage. Sudhi Pradhan has collected reports from this period which he has compiled in his collection of documents of the movement. If we examine the Hindi and Urdu branches in UP and Bombay, it is possible to get some

³⁰ Report of Activities of AIPWA p 63.

³¹ Report of Activities of AIPWA p 63.

feel for the type of discussions and debates that took place in the years before partition/independence.

In the report of the Bombay branch from 1947 the General Secretary, Ramesh C. Sinha, commended the branch for its uniqueness in that it was truly cosmopolitan in terms of representing the many linguistic groups of the city. So the famous playwright Mama Warekar and the worker-poet Anna Bhau Sathe represented Marathi; Bakoolesh Swapnasth and Bhogilal Gandhi were Gujarati writers; Hindi writers included Narendra Sharma, Upendra Nath Ashk, Amritlal Nagar, Balraj Sahni, Nemichand Jain, Rajeeva Saxena and Dr. Joshi; Urdu was represented by Josh Malihabadi, Krishan Chander, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Sajjad Zaheer, Sahir, Ali Sardar Jafri and Kaifi Azmi; and Mulk Raj Anand and Anil De Silva for English.³²

The multi-lingual character of this branch meant that when papers were read out and discussion took place, there would be résumés or translations provided. These were usually in English or Hindustani.³³ However, separate language groups also met from time to time to discuss issues that were of importance to them. According to this report, the branch had four main types of activities: regular meetings to discuss literature and present their works; special functions were organised to commemorate events such as Premchand, Tagore and Iqbal Days, as well as celebrating Russian Revolution day; outside speakers were invited to read their works, so E.M. Forster attended one branch meeting; they also organised special meetings on current issues that required urgent attention such as famine relief for Bengal and communal riots.³⁴ When riots took place in Bombay progressive writers wrote pamphlets which were

³² Report of Bombay PWA 1947, in Pradhan, ed, *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents*, Vol. 1, Calcutta: Santi Pradhan, 1985, p 355.

³³ Report of Bombay PWA in Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movements*, vol. 1, p. 355.

³⁴ Report of Bombay PWA in Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movements*, pp. 355-356.

distributed throughout the city. These were in many languages and writers used these to condemn the activities of communal groups who were whipping up religious hatred. This is when Upendra Nath Ashk wrote his play, *Toofan se Pahle* (Before the Storm). According to the report this play was performed right across Bombay by members of a fraternal theatre group.³⁵

The report from the Urdu section of the Bombay PWA records a conference of the All-India Urdu PWA held in Hyderabad in 1945. At this session Sajjad Zaheer presented a paper on the question of Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani (which will be discussed in the next chapter) and Ali Sardar Jafri and Kaifi Azmi presented their political *masnavis* (narrative poem).³⁶ A traditional *masnavi* was composed for royalty and other elites. The central focus of this political form placed ordinary people at the heart of the narrative as heroes. Jafri composed *Jamhoor* (The People) with its theme as the wealth and beauty of India and the immortality of its people. Azmi's offering was *Election Nama* (Election Manifesto), which dealt with the political programmes of the Congress, League and the Communist Party.³⁷ This demonstrates that progressive writers were making use of a variety of cultural forms, particularly theatre and public recitals. It also shows that they focused on topical issues such as the famine, communal violence and aspects of the war.

There is also a report from the Hindi UP section. This lists five branches of the Hindi PWA in Agra, Allahabad and Benares, Cawnpore and Lucknow and then a further one started in Aligarh.³⁸ These units continued with the literary gatherings of presentations of imaginative literary works but they also organised fund raising

³⁵ Report of Bombay PWA, in Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movements*, vol. 1, p 357.

³⁶ Report of Urdu section of Bombay PWA in Pradhan, vol. 1, pp. 360-361.

³⁷ Report of Urdu section of Bombay PWA in Pradhan, p. 361.

³⁸ Report of Hindi Section of the UP PWA, in Pradhan, vol. 1, p. 363.

activity for the Bengal famine through the writing of plays and skits to be performed by IPTA troupes. The Aligarh branch was composed of several folk-poets who were also leaders of their local peasant trade unions and their collections of verse were based on the struggles of peasant families.³⁹ The Cawnpore branch reported having difficulties as they encountered opposition from established writers. But they managed to overcome these through work with local workers' groups including organising opposition to the local Hindu Mahasabhas at a local festival. They achieved success and recognition when the most respected Hindi writer of the area, Sri Kausikji, became president of their branch.⁴⁰ The other branches were quite well established. At Allahabad Prakash Chandra Gupta presided over a branch that met every fortnight with poetry readings, sketches and articles for discussion. In Lucknow the branch was led by Yashpal and Ehtisham Husain was also a member. They successfully invited 'outside' writers who were happy to work with the progressives on common concerns such as the Bengal famine. The Agra branch was led by the great Hindi writer and critic Ram Bilas Sharma. This branch organised writing campaigns against pro-fascist sympathies. Finally the Benares branch was organised by Amrit Rai, Premchand's son. Each of these branches organised literary activity but they also pursued a political agenda of extending the network of progressive writers from the Hindi literary establishment as well as attracting new and young writers to its fold. Here it is worth recalling the apparent reluctance of Hindi writers in the early period to involve themselves in the progressive project as discussed in chapter 2. But by the late 1940s Hindi writers were one of the main stalwarts of the movement, particularly in UP state. This report demonstrates how Hindi progressive writers had come into their own during this period.

³⁹ Report of Hindi Section in Pradhan, p. 363.

⁴⁰ Report of Hindi Section, in Pradhan, p. 364.

In Pradhan's collection there are reports from other branches which illustrate the extent and breadth of the PWA movement throughout this period. The Bengal region reported a membership of over 1000 over 14 branches, with 500 of these in Calcutta. Other branches were in Dakha, Chittagong, Murishabad and Howrah.⁴¹ These branches organised weekly meetings on *Amader Lekha* (New Writing) and *Purano Lekha* (Old Writing), where writers would read out new or classical works and then have forthright discussions on the merits, relevance and interpretation of these.⁴² As the membership was so large the PWA here was able to organise separate sessions on poetry, novels, short stories and drama. They also had a library which was jointly established with the support of the Friends of the Soviet Union in memory of Somen Chandra, the young writer assassinated by local fascist supporters.⁴³ The writers associated with this association included Dhiren Sen, Narayan Ganguly, Parimal Goswami, Vivekananda Mukherjee, Nanda Gopal Sen Gupta and Bimal Ghose.⁴⁴

The Andhra region reported their third annual conference in December 1945, which was opened by Sri Srirangam Srinivasa Rao, a local revolutionary poet.⁴⁵ This conference was characterised by an Arts Exhibition which had about 50 pieces of art drawn by young artists. This exhibition was opened by a lecturer from Presidency College, Madras, and over 80 writers attended.⁴⁶ This region had a membership of some 900 in 16 branches spread over, Hyderabad, Secunderabad, Madras, Telengana, Vizianagram, Masulipatam and Bezwada. Their activities ranged from poetry and

⁴¹ Report of Bengal PWA in Pradhan, p. 348.

⁴² These would include the works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Dinabandhu as well as wider aspects of the Bengal Renaissance and the role of Muslims in the Swadeshi Movement.

⁴³ Report of Bengal PWA in Pradhan, pp. 349-350.

⁴⁴ Report of Bengal PWA in Pradhan, p. 348.

⁴⁵ Report of Andhra PWA in Pradhan, p. 350.

⁴⁶ Report of Andhra PWA in Pradhan, p. 350.

short story recitals, the performance of one-act plays the development of fine arts and all the branches brought out monthly manuscript magazines to report on their work.⁴⁷

The Bihar region had active branches in Patna, Bhagalpur, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Dhabhanga, Chapra and Ranchi, with 250 members. They organised relief work for the Bengal famine and their key activity was in the rural areas where they were able to draw many folk poets and playwrights. In this songs were composed in traditional forms and dances were performed in villages throughout Bihar to attract support for famine victims.⁴⁸ Karnataka also had an active PWA movement based in Mangalore, Hubli and Bangalore. Their work ranged from symposiums, discussion groups and meetings to commemorate Tagore, Premchand and Romain Rolland anniversaries, encouraging folk literature on local themes as well as international events, such as the war, and raising funds for famine victims.⁴⁹ The Punjab had had PWA branches in Lahore and Amritsar since 1936 but its report from 1946 states that the branches had quite a chequered history, with activity petering out at various stages.⁵⁰ This may have been due to the fact that the PWA here organised on the basis of Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi writers. Though this was an obvious strength of the region, the local branches would have suffered if Hindi and Urdu writers had moved into the UP, Bombay and Bihar units. According to this report one major aspect of this area's work was with the local *Kisan* (peasant) organisations, which incorporated public recitals and drama.⁵¹ What these reports demonstrate is the long reach of the PWA tradition, which was extending itself nationally, deepening its roots in existing areas and establishing networks in rural communities. A recurring theme of these branch

⁴⁷ The Andhra region succeeded in attracting key intellectuals to their branches and they encouraged members to study classics as well as contemporary works for discussion.

⁴⁸ Report of Bihar PWA in Pradhan, pp. 366-367.

⁴⁹ Report of Bihar PWA in Pradhan, p. 369.

⁵⁰ Report of Punjab PWA in Pradhan, p. 370.

⁵¹ Report of Punjab PWA in Pradhan, p. 370.

activities was the use of public performance in the form of plays, song, and dance and poetry recitals in addition to literature. The content of these productions remained political and social topics that affected people's lives, such as poverty, but also took account of the wider picture, with the impact of war, dangers of fascism and the release of nationalist leaders. The revival of folk forms of literature, poetry, and drama is indicative of the desire to reach audiences in villages, small towns and the industrial heartlands of cities. It was for this reason that theatre became a dominant feature of the progressive movement.

Birth of IPTA

The establishment of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), launched in May 1943 in Bombay, would see some of the biggest strides made in the unity of struggle within progressive left circles. At this founding conference a resolution was adopted stipulating that the main function of IPTA was to

...portray vividly and memorably through the medium of the stage and other traditional arts the human details of these important facts of our people's rights and enlighten them about their rights and the nature and solution of the problems facing them.⁵²

The resolution went on to make a resounding call to

...make of our arts the expression and the organiser of our people's struggles for freedom, economic justice and democratic culture...to quicken their awareness of unity and their passion for creating a better and just world order.⁵³

⁵² Resolution passed at IPTA's first national conference 27th May 1943, quoted in Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movements*, vol. 1, p. 151.

⁵³ 1st IPTA bulletin, July 1943, in *Pradhan*, p. 150.

This statement is strongly evocative of Premchand's inaugural speech at the AIPWA conference seven years earlier. It carries the same sense of urgency for artists to link their work with ordinary people.

The immediate impetus for this was the Bengal Famine that saw three million people starve to death. In 1944 Bijon Bhattacharya, one of the founding members of IPTA in Calcutta, wrote a play, *Nabanna*, which dramatised the exploitation of peasants by landowners, their gradual pauperisation and their death by starvation. The play was conventional in style but consciously broke with the artificial literary style of the Bengali middle class theatre and eliminated the romantic sets and histrionic pyrotechnics of urban theatre. With its vivid portrayal of events, its genuine emotion and sympathy for the poor and its use of the language of rural people the play was enormously successful. This sought to challenge the media perception of the Bengal famine as a natural, man-made disaster. Instead it highlighted the exploitative nature of the disaster by attempting to critique colonialism and the role of middlemen – in this way it exposed the intimate nexus between colonialism and capitalism.

Progressive writers had always worked to make their art accessible to ordinary people. The use of theatre was a key component for this. It became a powerful tool for the spread of nationalist and socialist ideals. IPTA troupes were established in all regions and took their theatre to the masses. In this they consciously encouraged workers and peasants to join the movement and perform in the plays, as well as write and direct. Yet the IPTA was mostly successful in urban areas and only really made inroads into rural areas when it was associated with the peasant organisations of the *Kisan Sabha* movements. So the PWA organized *mushairas* (poetry gatherings), broke with traditional convention and, instead of a few select poets performing to the

great and the good in opulent surroundings, PWA organised events were attended by thousands of industrial workers in the cities and peasants in their villages. In Bombay in November 1942 an *Inqilab Mushaira* (revolutionary poetry gathering) was organized and, according to Zaheer, attended by ten thousand workers from Bombay and Ahmedabad. Zaheer was thrilled by this response and commented:

The revolutionary significance of this assembly consists in this: it is the Muslim proletariat which has come out as the leader of the most significant and vital trend of modern Urdu literature...the proletariat has snatched the *mushara* [sic] away from the decadent feudal and effete bourgeoisie. It has shown how our cultural heritage can be preserved, how it can be used as one of the most potent weapons to unite the people and strengthen and fortify their morale.⁵⁴

During the mass contact campaign the first Village Poets' conference was held in Faridabad, then a small urban dwelling outside Delhi, in May 1938. This was under the auspices of the PWA and Sajjad Zaheer and Ahmed Ali, along with three other members of the CSP, attended. In his conference report Ahmed Ali explained how the conference was organized by one Syed Abdul Muttalabi, who was a socialist worker of the Congress and a poet in both Urdu and his village dialect. The President of the conference was a Pandit Satoki Sharma, who was a landless peasant.⁵⁵ In Muttalabi's speech to the convention he argued that the British could be defeated, 'We are thirty-five crores...the English one lakh and if we all just urinate they would all be washed away'.⁵⁶ The type of language used here is noteworthy for its directness, use of colloquial speech and folk wisdom that would have readily been familiar to the inhabitants of the area. This demonstrates what the potential was in terms of unity between ordinary Hindus and Muslims during the contact campaign.

⁵⁴ S. Zaheer, *People's War*, 22nd November 1942, p.

⁵⁵ Ali, A. "The Village Poets and Indian Revolution", in *New Age*, 1938.

⁵⁶ Ali, A. "The Village Poets",

All this indicates how important the use of public performance was becoming for writers.

Theatre activists used themes of protest in their work. In this they were not unusual. Throughout the 20th century radicalism had inspired writers to utilise theatre and performance for a much wider purpose than mere entertainment. In the Soviet Union the contribution of Mayakovsky (1893-1930) in the development of proletarian culture and theatre was immensely influential. His plays, *Bedbug* (1929) and *Bathhouse* (1930), were sharply critical of the values of the petty bourgeoisie and the Communist bureaucracy.⁵⁷ In France Romain Rolland (1866-1944) influenced working class theatre. For him theatre was

an art explicitly meant for people who worked with their hands and who normally did not attend big theatre. They would try to create an expensive, and easily accessible dramatic art form specifically designed for the labouring poor in the cities and for the artisan and peasant communities in the provinces.⁵⁸

Radical or people's theatre has always been characterised by its populism. Popular theatre denotes a theatre 'of the people, by the people, for the people'. One of the most influential figures on radical theatre was Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956).⁵⁹ In the inter-war years and throughout the 1930s and 1940s Brecht committed his ideas to paper. He believed that a theatre 'which makes no contact with the public is a

⁵⁷ Mayakovsky was born in Bagdadi, Georgia to Cossack parents. He developed a passion for Marxist literature and participated in numerous activities against the Tsarist state. He joined the Russian Democratic Labour Party and then the Bolsheviks. Whilst in prison in 1908 he began writing poetry. He witnessed the Russian revolution from Smolny, Petrograd and began reciting revolutionary poems to sailors in naval theatres. He was a member of the Left Art Front from 1922-28 and defined his work as 'communist futurism'.

⁵⁸ D.J. Fisher, "Romain Rolland and the French People's Theatre", in *The Drama Review*, T., 73, March 1977, p. 76.

⁵⁹ Brecht was an influential communist, dramatist and stage director. Born in Bavaria, he studied medicine and worked briefly as an orderly in a Munich hospital during WW1. In the 1920s he co-found a writing collective which pioneered the 'teaching plays'. Brecht's politics and theatre were anathema to the Nazis, who banned his works in the 1930s, and later he would experience similar censorship in the MacCarthyism of the US.

nonsense.’⁶⁰ For him ‘oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market, all became subjects for theatrical representation’. ⁶¹ He contrasted the classical Aristotelian play with the ‘learning’ play. According to Brecht the former was static and its purpose was to show the world as it is, with its neat social layers and individuals allotted their respective roles within this hierarchy whereas the ‘learning play’ was ‘essentially dynamic, its task to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)’. ⁶² Brecht’s work entailed placing on stage the lives of ordinary people, with their mundane concerns, as well as the great issues of his time and how they impacted on people. As with many other artists of this era theatre for Brecht was not merely an aesthetic divorced from the convulsions in society, it was a legitimate arena in which to portray and discuss how the political, social and economic impressed itself on individual lives. Brecht had been inspired by the the social and cultural changes underway in 1920s Russia and he gravitated towards the Communist Party in Germany partly as a result of this but also by the fear induced through the rise of the Nazis. This is why he insisted that

*...the radical transformation of the theatre can’t be the result of some artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time.*⁶³

The politics and mentality of Europe was being transformed and theatre activists had a role to play in advancing a progressive cause. In India progressive writers combined with artists to use theatre as a means of dramatising the detail of human experience but also to give expression to the national desire for freedom and a future of economic and social justice. The message of IPTA productions was clearly

⁶⁰ Quoted in *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. and notes by John Willett, London: Methuen, 1964, p. 7.

⁶¹ Quoted in Willett, ed, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 71.

⁶² Brecht, “The German Drama: pre-Hitler” in *Left Review*, vol. 2, no. 10, London: July 1936, p. 507.

⁶³ Quoted in Willett, ed, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 23.

directed at ordinary people and its artists took up issues and themes that affected and in some cases blighted the lives of ordinary folk. So K.A. Abbas's play *Zubeida* was based on a true story of a cholera epidemic. It is set in UP, as this was what Abbas knew best, and depicts a young girl in purdah who throws off her veil to do relief work amongst her fellow villagers. This play was staged in Bombay in the winter of 1944 and it was Balraj Sahni who directed it. Sahni had moved to Bombay in 1944 and for the next decade he would be pivotal to IPTA's development. According to Abbas, Sahni was so enthusiastic about the story that he rehearsed the play daily for two months.⁶⁴ It was staged at the Cowasji Jehangir Hall 'like a pageant, with audience participation.'⁶⁵ The explanation for Sahni's energy was something his brother Bhisham clearly understood. In recalling the rehearsals for *Zubeida*, Bhisham Sahni stated that

IPTA was to play a very powerful and significant role in the social and cultural life of our country. Linking itself closely with the life of the people, and drawing largely on folk forms of dance, song and drama, the IPTA was soon to become a powerful centre for the revival and development of social drama.⁶⁶

The revival of folk forms and the blending of these with new techniques was a trait that epitomised the life of Balraj Sahni in IPTA. Bombay, then as now, is a very cosmopolitan city but the majority of its urban workers are Marathi speakers. Balraj did not speak or understand Marathi and this language barrier was originally an impediment for him. According to Puran Chandra Joshi, Balraj began to learn Marathi and spent many hours talking with workers in order to learn about working

⁶⁴ Abbas, *I am not an Island*, p. 251.

⁶⁵ Abbas, *I am not an Island*, p. 251.

⁶⁶ Bhisham Sahni, *Balraj: My Brother*, New Delhi: national Book Trust, 1981, p. 84.

class cultural forms and working class life in that city.⁶⁷ In Bombay Balraj met Anna Bhau Sathe, a composer and performer of *Tamasha*, a traditional folk form of Maharashtra. Sathe was of *Harijan* origin and also semi-literate. He had a group of performers who put on plays for workers outside their factories and mills.⁶⁸ Through his relationship with Balraj Sahni, Sathe began to use the *Tamasha* for depicting national and international themes. Balraj also succeeded in introducing techniques from modern stage craft to the *Tamasha*. But according to Joshi this was not at the expense of sacrificing the folk spirit of the *Tamasha*⁶⁹. Another folk form used by IPTA was the *Powada*, (Marathi ballad). In May 1944, Anna Sathe had composed ballads for the defence of Madrid and of Stalingrad for fellow textile workers in the Bombay mills. His audience was full of appreciation and admiration for the struggles of Spanish and Russian workers⁷⁰

The question of realism and popularity is central to any discussion of a people's theatre. For Brecht they were natural companions. Realism denoted that theatre

...is in the interest of the people, the broad working masses, that literature should give them truthful representations of life; and truthful representations of life are in fact only of use to the broad working masses, the people; so that they have to be suggestive and intelligible to them, ie, popular.⁷¹

He went on to conclude that 'popular' means

taking over their own forms of expression and enriching them / adopting and consolidating their standpoint / representing the most progressive section of the people in such a way that it can take over the leadership: thus intelligible to other sections too / linking with tradition and carrying

⁶⁷ P.C. Joshi, ed, *Balraj Sahni: An Intimate Portrait*, Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT Ltd, 1974, p. 60.

⁶⁸ Joshi, ed, *Balraj Sahni: An Intimate Portrait*, pp. 60-61.

⁶⁹ Joshi, *Balraj Sahni: An Intimate Portrait*, p. 61.

⁷⁰ Reported in *People's War*, 6th June 1944.

⁷¹ Quoted in Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 107.

it further / handing on the achievements of the section now leading to the section of the people that is struggling for the lead.⁷²

So theatre has to speak to the issues and concerns of ordinary people, it has to give expression to their hopes, miseries and aspirations; and it has to speak in their language, their words, their expressions. It was for this reason that Balraj Sahni was prepared to observe and learn about the characters he played or directed. In fact IPTA's hallmark was its ability to relate to the lives of ordinary people and give expression to their anguish, hopes and desires. The famine in Bengal had been key to this. In 1944 the Bengal Cultural Squad were invited to Bombay to collect money for famine relief. They were led by Benoy Roy and was supported by Prithviraj Kapoor, Abbas and Mulk Raj Anand.⁷³ They performed Bijon Bhattacharya's one-act play on the famine, *Jaban-bandi*. Shambhu Mitra played the old peasant 'dying on the footpaths of Calcutta dreaming of the golden paddy crop in his own fields.'⁷⁴ According to Joshi present in the audience were the women from the Tatas and Wadia industrial families as well as workers. So moved were they by the performance that the Bengal troupe succeeded in collecting its biggest funds for famine victims.⁷⁵

At the IPTA's first conference on 25th May, held at the Marwari Vidyalaya Hall in Bombay, a committee was elected to oversee its work. N.M Joshi (general secretary of the All-India Trade Union Congress) was elected President and Anil de Silva its general secretary. They also elected provincial committees to encourage progressive theatre across the country.⁷⁶ To have some assessment of the IPTA's work it is

⁷² Quoted in Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 108.

⁷³ Joshi, *Balraj Sahni: An Intimate Portrait*, p. 63.

⁷⁴ Joshi, *Balraj Sahni: An Intimate Portrait*, p. 63.

⁷⁵ Joshi, *Balraj Sahni: An Intimate Portrait*, p. 64.

⁷⁶ Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement*, pp. 152-153.

necessary to look at some of its provincial activity. The Bombay branch report declared that its theatre 'was not impartial. We are with the people in their struggle against the classes who rule and exploit them.'⁷⁷ This referred to both the colonial power and the indigenous elites. They had their first major performance on May Day 1944. Tickets had been issued to trade unions in the city. The centre piece of the performance was a play entitled *Dada* (Brother), which was penned by a local factory worker. It depicts the day to day life of a mill worker and his family. The response of the audience was appreciative but they had one criticism, which was that they felt the jobber (mill foreman) was depicted as too much of a comic figure and not 'the villain he is to us in real life.' The workers who saw the play were more interested in the characters, the story and whether its tale was truly reflective of what it aimed to depict. Another play commissioned was ^{by} Ali Sardar Jafri called *Yeh Kis Ka Khoon hai?* (Whose Blood is this?). It was set in Chittagong and based loosely on the events surrounding the killing of a worker and an armed rising of peasants against this. The play's analogy is of an India caught between an alien power governing it and another alien power seeking to invade. Indians join the fight against an invasion but also demand a right to fight for their own freedom against those governing them. A performance was given before a group of women Beedi workers. The play ends with the words,

Woh Jang Hai Jange Azadi... Woh jang hi Kia, woh ham hi kia, dushman Taraj na ho. Who duniya, duniya kia hogi, jis dunya main Swaraj na ho. Who aazadi kia, jis main mazdoor ko raj na ho. (This is a war of freedom...what is this war, what are we, enemies vanquishedWhat kind of world will it be without freedom? What kind of freedom will it be without the workers running things.)⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Provincial Report of Bombay IPTA in Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement*, p. 160.

⁷⁸ Report of Bombay IPTA, in Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement*, p. 163.

To which the beedi workers rise up, sing and applaud. What is significant is how ordinary people expected plays to be as close to real life as possible and give expression to their aspirations.

In Delhi the IPTA was started in October 1943 and its first performance was a pantomime on the Bengal famine in front of total audiences of 8000 throughout the month of November.⁷⁹ They also performed this during Diwali and Eid celebrations in order to promote communal unity. The Delhi branch had a Hindustani section that included Jainendra Kumar, the musicians Abani Khastagir and R.R. Chaudhury. Their supporters and members included Congress, Muslim League, Muslim majlis and communists and socialists.⁸⁰ In fact Nehru sent a message of support to the IPTA project, stating 'I am greatly interested in the development of a People's Theatre in India...I am glad to notice from your circular that you are laying stress on this people's approach.'⁸¹ Progressive writers were able to use the medium of theatre and performance to transmit their ideas to greater numbers of people. Theatre placed ordinary people at the heart of their project as performers, composers and audience. They were able to unify themes of revolt against the British with support for a war effort that opposed fascism and espoused their vision of a future society devoid of exploitation. The experience of the IPTA allowed progressive writers to operate during the war and up to independence through synthesising their progressive nationalism with socialist conviction.

It is difficult to determine whether there was a conscious transference of Brecht's ideas to the Indian context. Brecht's reputation was legendary whilst he was still

⁷⁹ Report of Delhi IPTA in Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement*, p. 301.

⁸⁰ Report of Delhi IPTA in Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement*, p. 304-305.

⁸¹ Quoted in Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Movement*, p. 161.

alive. The fact that articles by him were carried in the British journal *Left Review*, as quoted above, means that Indian writers certainly would have come across his ideas. What remains undeniable is the fact that progressive writers and artists turned to the use of stage performance as a means of implementing their notion of a “people’s” theatre. In this respect they were grappling with forms of experimentation and techniques utilised by radical artists in Europe.

The key importance of the IPTA was that its emphasis was popular politics organised outside Congress and independent of it during the war years. Thus it was contesting the colonial order in terms raising nationalist demands but also demonstrating its opposition to fascism by depicting its horrors in theatre and attempting to set a different agenda for the post-independence era. This was the basis on which it brought together intellectuals, litterateurs and artists who were politically committed. Writing on the Bengal experience of the IPTA, Aishwarj Kumar states that between the establishment of the AIPWA in 1936 and the IPTA in 1943 there seems to have been one continuous movement.⁸² He claims that what limited this movement in its early stages was its base amongst western educated people. He believes the initial membership of the IPTA amongst artists and intellectuals comprised people from less privileged backgrounds, mostly from middle and lower middle class backgrounds. However, through this period an alternative cultural tradition was being created: one of protest and one that looked at traditions in India in a critical manner rather than posing an ‘authentic’ India opposed to the ‘alien’ west.⁸³

⁸² Kumar, A. “Visions of Cultural Transformation: The IPTA in Bengal, 1940-44” in *Turbulent Times: India 1940-44*, ed., Biswamoy Pati, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1998, p. 168.

⁸³ Kumar, “Visions of Cultural Transformation” pp. 168-169.

Conclusion

The failure of nationalist politics to come to terms with these conflicting tendencies within nationalism, particularly as espoused through Congress and the League, resulted in many problems for progressive writers who wanted to remain wedded to the struggle for complete independence as well play a role in facilitating the defeat of fascism. The PWA agenda of attempting to shape the nationalist project through the infusion of populist ideas and a popular base amongst the masses was severely tested during the war. The formal resolutions adopted at their third and fourth conferences placed them in the same camp as the CPI, which was legalised and allowed to operate whilst the mainstream nationalist leaders were incarcerated. In this situation it would have been quite easy for the PWA to suffer a loss of support from activists within the writers' community as well as from political leaders. However, it is too simplistic to label those writers and activists who were associated with the Communist Party tradition as anti-national during the war. As Sumit Sarkar has stated this 'robs 1942 of all its most significant nuance, conflict and anguish.'⁸⁴ And it does not explain how a progressive cultural tradition could develop and mushroom throughout the war.

The experience of the IPTA demonstrates that as the Progressive Writers' Association branched out to incorporate theatre and *mushairas* as well as literature, they appeared to continue carrying the banner of a radical nationalism underpinned with socialist conviction. The success of the IPTA was the key component that allowed the left to gain credibility during this period. The famine provided the core theme with which to rally people and public performances were used to revive folk forms in a modern arena with a modern message. For writers there was no distinction

⁸⁴ S.Sarkar, "The Communists and 1942" in *Turbulent Times*, p. 222.

between opposition to fascism and fighting for independence against the British.

Balraj Sahni in identifying IPTA's success argued that it was due to 'the very

correct policy of the CPI. They were nationalists, true patriots and true

internationalists.'⁸⁵ And Joshi in explaining the importance of Sahni to IPTA stated

that he understood that the

difference between fascist imperialism and British imperialism was material for the moment but not essentially different, as both were imperialist powers and selfish to the core.⁸⁶

But that Sahni understood 'fascism had to be resisted right now but British

imperialism not spared when the right chance came.'⁸⁷ This point is fundamental to

understanding the motivations of writers during the war period. It was not a question

of either Quit India or people's war but an attempt to integrate these movements into

their project. In this endeavour progressive writers seemed to succeed in unifying the

vision of progressive nationalism wedded to socialist principles. In this way they

continued to use the arts as a means of giving shape to a new type of society.

However, the way independence was conceded in 1947 presented a further challenge

to their project of using literature and theatre to create a deep popular cultural

identification with their notion of progressive nationalism. The partition of South

Asia dealt a severe blow to their goal of resisting the bifurcation between Hindi and

Urdu. The PWA had included the promotion of Hindustani as a unified demotic

language in their original manifesto. The next chapter will examine how the years

following partition would see this cherished goal undermined.

⁸⁵ B. Sahni, *Autobiography*, p. 113.

⁸⁶ Joshi, *Balraj Sahni, An Intimate Portrait*, p. 54.

⁸⁷ Joshi, *Balraj Sahni, An Intimate Portrait*, p. 54.

CHAPTER 5 THE FATE OF HINDUSTANI

Introduction

An integral component of the progressive agenda in creating a new literature and cultural movement was the promotion and development of a language that was both unifying and popular. In articulating the notion of a popular based nation with a unifying identity, progressive writers, as in many other parts of the world, faced a central problem, that of language. There were three issues here: firstly, the range of languages spoken in India meant that linguistically speaking India had never been a homogenous nation. Secondly, the most popular single spoken language was Hindustani, literally meaning the language of the people of Hind. Hindustani was the demotic lingua franca spoken by the majority of people across north India and accessible to significant numbers in Bengal, western and south India.¹ This colloquial speech could be written in two scripts, Devanagari or Persian. Under the impact of British rule it could also be written in the Roman alphabet, though attempts at this had failed by and large in the 19th century. The final and most pressing difficulty that stemmed from the two literary styles was that elite versions of Hindustani existed in both the Devanagari and Persian scripts. So some in the Hindi intelligentsia claimed that pure Hindi was separate from Hindustani and Urdu as it was rooted in Sanskrit. This tendency was mirrored by those in the Urdu intelligentsia who claimed that as a classical language Urdu owed its allegiance to Persian and Arabic. Amongst a section of the literary classes attempts were made to exclude popular vocabulary and phrases by inserting words from Persian and Arabic into Urdu and Sanskritic vocabulary into Hindi. This was not an abstract question. For the literate middle classes the question of what would be the national language of

¹ See Shackle, C. and R. Snell, *Hindi and Urdu since 1800: a common reader*, London: SOAS, 1990.

India after independence would determine who had access to jobs within the state bureaucracy. This was further complicated as the question of which script was to be used became associated with the religious affiliation or origin of the writer. So Urdu in the Perso-Arabic script was deemed to be the language of Muslims and Hindi rooted in Sanskrit was deemed to be the language of Hindus. This evolved into arguments about whether there had always been two separate languages, Hindi and Urdu, which had degenerated into a popular idiom, and therefore the very existence of Hindustani was questioned. A further issue that impacted on the language controversy was that by the beginning of the twentieth century Hindi had been given equal status in schools to Urdu and this would have further fuelled the idea that these were two distinct languages. Many scholars have dealt in detail with the vexed relationship between Hindi and Urdu, particularly in the latter third of the nineteenth century and it^{is} not necessary to rehearse these arguments here.² It suffices to note that the polarisation of Hindi/Urdu resulted in the rejection of Hindustani as the popular vernacular and accelerated the process of communalisation of language and community. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how a secular, radical literary movement attempted to arrest the bifurcation between elite literary styles and promote a popular syncretic language during the tumultuous period of rising nationalism.

The significance of language in India could not be underestimated. As the 1930s and 1940s progressed the British authorities had to deal with the reality of independence and this entailed which language of government would replace English. The upper

² See F.Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Literature and Language in the Age of Nationalism*, New Delhi: OUP, 2002; Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*, New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 2001; C. King, *One Language, Two Scripts: the Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*, Bombay: OUP, 1994; Amrit Rai *A House Divided: The Origin and Development of Hindi-Hindavi*, Delhi: OUP, 1984.

echelons of Indian society were educated in and spoke English as their first language. With independence this could not be seen to remain. The nationalist movement injected a sense of pride and self-respect in Indians for their own traditions, including language. The early nationalist leader, B.G. Tilak, stated that ‘if you want to draw a nation together, there is no force more powerful than a common language for all’.³ And he continued, ‘...a common script is part and parcel of a national movement’.⁴ The nationalist battle cry was “one nation, one language”. Progressive nationalists did not have a problem with this slogan. Their understanding of this was a unifying national language that was inclusive of and reflected the cultural synthesis of the best popular traditions of India. It was for this reason they rejected the purist Sanskritic Hindi in the Devanagari script as advocated by the early nationalists such as Tilak and Dayanand Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj and advocate of Hindu revivalism.⁵ They also rejected the ornate, chaste Urdu of an earlier literary tradition. In advancing the cause of Hindustani the chief concern of progressive writers was the goal of developing a literary form of the demotic language that could be written in either script. In their endeavours they had to confront the arguments of linguistic chauvinists that had been plaguing India for several decades. This was a problem not only for progressive writers but for the nationalist movement as a whole as leaders grappled with the language controversy. Debates became acrimonious as independence loomed and partition became a reality by mid 1947. The debate went to the heart of the progressive creed and challenged their secularist vision of a popular unifying language. This chapter will focus on the early discussions within the PWA on the question of language and script. It will document the arguments for

³ Speech by B.G. Tilak to conference of Nagari Pracharini Sabha, Benares, December 1905, quoted in R. Gopal, *Linguistic Affairs of India*, London: Asia Publishing House, 1966, p. 175.

⁴ Speech by Tilak, in Gopal, *Linguistic Affairs of India*, p. 175.

⁵ The Arya Samaj promoted Hindi in Devanagari characters as part of their assertion of a “Hindu” identity.

the promotion of Hindustani by progressive writers pre-partition and by non-sectarian elements of the nationalist movement, who also championed Hindustani.

The chapter will then focus on the post-partition period and examine how the debates within the constituent assembly that finally settled the question of language in India impacted on the PWA and wider progressive circles. It will consider the damage inflicted on a secular, radical, socialist-oriented writers' tradition and seek to answer the question of whether the defeat of Hindustani represents a failure of the progressive project.

Progressive writers and Hindustani pre-partition

The All-India Progressive Writers' Association had declared in its opening manifesto in 1936 that the function of the association was to foster and help develop Hindustani. The first draft of the manifesto published in 1935 stipulated the following resolution: 'To strive for the acceptance of a common language (Hindustani) and a common script (Indi-Roman) for India'.⁶ That this was incorporated as part of the five point manifesto of this organisation shows the prominence given to the language issue. It is also indicative of the highly sensitive nature of the language question for progressive writers.

The *Linguistic Survey of India* provided this definition of Hindustani:

Hindustani is primarily the language of the Northern Doab and is also the lingua franca of India, capable of being written both in the Persian and the Nagri characters and, without purism, avoiding alike the excessive use of either Persian or Sanskrit words when employed in literature. The name 'Urdu' can then be confined to that special variety of Hindustani in which Persian words are of frequent occurrence, and which therefore can only be written with ease in the Persian character; and similarly 'Hindi' can be confined to the form of Hindustani in which Sanskrit words

⁶ See Manifesto of the PWA quoted in *Left Review*, Vol. II, 1936-37, London: p. 240.

abound and which therefore is legible only when written in the Nagri characters.⁷

As this definition is taken from a colonial source it may appear as if Hindustani was the invention of the colonial mind. However, the term Hindustani had also been shaped by Indian scholars. So Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji, writing in the 1940s, offered the following definition:

The Hindus of the Western districts and elsewhere were familiar with Khari Boli, and when they took to writing in it they maintained the original learning of the language for its native Hindi and Sanskrit words and employed the native Indian Nagari script and in their hands this Hindu form of Khari Boli took shape as high Hindi, or Nagari Hindi, during the second half of the 18th century. The old name Hindi or Hindwi, latterly only Hindi, came to be restricted to this Hindu form of the language. Another name came to be used for the Khari Boli in its neutral form at the close of the 17th century – Hindustani or Hindostani, i.e. the speech of Hindustan or the north Indian plains, as contrasted with Dakni of the Deccan... Outside of these two written styles High-Hindi and Urdu, Khari Boli or Hindustani has continued to be used as a spoken language by both Hindus and Muslims, but as it deals mainly with the simpler affairs of daily life, its words steer a middle course between too much Sanskritization by cultured Hindus, and too much Persianization by cultured Muslims... many Indian nationalists now seek to use the word Hindustani to mean the Khari Boli, basis of both, which is to help in bridging the ever-widening gulf between the two.⁸

In both these definitions there was an understanding that a common vernacular had developed over many centuries that was shared by ordinary Indians irrespective of background. Although there were two styles of writing this, at the spoken level it was a lingua franca that relied upon simple, straightforward vocabulary. Within the wider nationalist movement Gandhi had also played a significant role in both shaping and

⁷G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. 1, Part 1. 1927, p. 167. It is interesting to note that Grierson believed 'Hindi' and 'Urdu' can *only* be written with ease in Nagari or Persian scripts respectively. In fact after partition, the works of Faiz were transliterated into the Nagari script for non-Urdu Indian audiences and there have been debates in India about writing Urdu using simplified nagari characters.

⁸S.K. Chatterji, *Languages and the Linguistic Problem*, Bombay: OUP, 1943, Oxford Pamphlet on Indian Affairs, No. 11, p. 18.

popularising this demotic language. His advocacy of Hindustani can be traced back to his writings in *Young India*. In one article he stated,

I have attended all the Congress sessions, but one, since 1915. I have studied them specially in order to study the utility of Hindustani compared to English for the conduct of its proceedings. I have spoken to hundreds of delegates and thousands of visitors and I have perhaps covered a larger area and seen a much larger number of people, literate and illiterate, than any public man, excluding Mrs Besant and Lokamanya Tilak, and I have come to the deliberate conclusion that no language except Hindustani – a resultant of Hindi and Urdu - can possibly become a national medium for exchange of ideas or for the conduct of national proceedings.⁹

Gandhi had adopted the term Hindustani by the early 1920s. Before that he had used Hindi but in the same sense as his understanding of Hindustani and he defined Hindustani as ‘a resultant of Hindi and Urdu, neither highly Sanskritized nor highly Persianized or Arabianized.’¹⁰ As early as 1918 Gandhi had defended the notion of a neutral language employing both scripts. In his address to the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan at Allahabad, he explained his vision of a national language:

Hindi is that language which is spoken in the north by both Hindus and Muslims and which is written either in the Nagari or the Persian script. This Hindi is neither too Sanskritized nor too Persianized... The distinction made between Hindus and Muslims is unreal. The same unreality is found in the distinction between Hindi and Urdu. It is unnecessary for Hindus to reject Persian words and for Muslims to reject Sanskrit words from their speech.¹¹

And on the question of script he stated his firm conviction that

there is no doubt or difficulty in regard to script. As things are, Muslims will patronise the Arabic script while Hindus will mostly use the Nagari

⁹ M.K. Gandhi, 21st January 1920, *Young India*, (1919-1922), Allahabad: Navajivan Press, 1924, p. 445.

¹⁰ M.K. Gandhi, 27th August 1925, *Young India*, (1924-1926), p.

¹¹ Quoted in R. Gopal, *Linguistic Affairs of India*, pp. 186-187.

script. Both scripts will therefore have to be accorded their due place. Officials must know both scripts.¹²

It is interesting to note that at this stage Gandhi is using the term Hindi but the meaning his words convey is unmistakably that of the popular Hindustani. In *Hind Swaraj*, he again reiterated his position that the national language should be Hindi, ‘with the option of writing it in Persian or Nagari characters’¹³. And he insisted that in order to bring Muslims and Hindus closer together they should learn both scripts.¹⁴ So Gandhi’s insistence was not only on one composite language but also that Hindus and Muslims should be literate and fluent in each script.

This was the terrain that progressive writers entered as they sought to advance the cause of Hindustani. They understood that languages are not static; they are a dynamic, living entity. Grammar, script and vocabulary are essential features of all languages but they are not mere products of these alone. Languages are forged in the process of human activity and as such are both the artefacts and the instruments of human cultures. Within India a popular, common idiom had been evolving for some time which incorporated the various cultural, linguistic and regional traditions of the people. As a radical literary association the PWA aimed to produce literature that both reflected and expressed the language of the common people. This was the reason they eschewed chaste, classical Urdu and pure Sanskritic Hindi. Standing in a progressive, leftist tradition based on secular values they understood that a popular unifying language had to be championed and their role as writers was to develop and promote a literary form of this.

¹² Quoted in Gopal, *Linguistic Affairs*, p. 187.

¹³ M.K. Gandhi, *M. Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1984, p. 146.

¹⁴ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, p. 146.

Here it is worth considering the discussion that the Italian Marxist Gramsci had about language in Italy. He made a distinction between elite and popular language. He outlined how Latin was the language used in intellectual circles for literature in the late middle ages. This was the highly ornate language that was the preserve of a very thin stratum of Italian society made up of a priestly class, religious scholars and intellectuals.¹⁵ Gramsci identified two types of Latin that were current in this period: a literary Latin and vulgar Latin and it was the vulgar Latin which was informed by various dialects throughout Rome-dominated Europe. In the 13th century Dante started writing in the form of Italian that was the popular lingua franca around Florence and this was accessible to a wider circle of Italians than anything produced in Latin. This Italian was influenced by the vulgarised Latin as well as popular dialects around Tuscany.¹⁶ But in the Renaissance period that followed, Latin became predominant among the intellectuals, thus isolating them from the mass of ordinary people. It also prevented them from drawing the mass of local dialects together into a single popular and literary language as had happened in Holland, Germany and France. Although Gramsci's writings on this topic were related to Italy, the relevance and power of his analysis can be equally applied to India. The essential point that Gramsci grasped here is the distinction between an elite language that is highly stylised and remote from the mass of ordinary people and popular vernaculars that were moulded and used by people in their every day life. So he argued that the radical lay wing of the Italian intelligentsia of the 19th and early 20th Centuries had been unable to create a 'national popular' consciousness of the masses because

¹⁵ A. Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, trs. by William Boelhower, ed., David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985, pp. 167-171.

¹⁶ A. Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, p. 168

they have not known how to elaborate a modern 'humanism' able to reach right to the simplest and most uneducated classes, as was necessary from the national point of view, and because they have been tied to an antiquated world, narrow, abstract, too individualistic or caste-like.¹⁷

This was the fundamental principle that progressive writers were attempting to advance. Their project was to develop a literary form of the national language that was based on the popular vernacular known as Hindustani, which had been developing by absorbing influences from many dialects and linguistic traditions and eschewing the ornate, antiquated, elitist traditions of the classical Sanskrit and Persian. It could be called Hindi/Hindavi/Urdu but the reason for using the name Hindustani was that this is what the language was called by the majority of people. So there were practical considerations for this terminology. Moreover, the use of the term Hindustani was also a political choice as it signified that mixed, shared cultural intermingling that had been evolving across north India for many centuries. This explains why Gandhi adopted the use of Hindustani, as opposed to Hindi, as stated earlier.

The PWA manifesto also called for the romanisation of Hindustani. This clause proved to be quite contentious and it did not survive long in the manifesto, being dropped before the final version was submitted in Lucknow. When the manifesto was sent to India in 1935, writers there were probably surprised at its inclusion and decided that this was not a viable option. In a largely illiterate society the notion that the Roman script could be popularised was perhaps ambitious. But the central reason was that the script was that of the colonial power and as such was unlikely to be endorsed by the nationalist movement. However, for progressive writers, their motives in this were completely sincere. For those writers who had been in London,

¹⁷ Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, p. 211.

the adoption of the Roman script had the merit of avoiding disputes between the Persianised and Devanagari scripts. There was another advantage. As part of a radical movement, their socialist ideals stood for progress and change. This included a break with the old feudal order based on privilege, wealth and rank, which was held responsible for India's backwardness. Backwardness in language and script also had to be challenged through an embrace of scientific methods and modernity. A common script was viewed as a step in facilitating the process of national integration and avoidance of communal tensions. After all Kemal, Attaturk had succeeded in romanising the Turkish script, so why could India not follow suit?

Although some may have regarded, and many still do, the advocacy of the Roman script as sheer lunacy in the Indian context, the adoption of the Roman script had been raised prior to the PWA. Thus Suniti Kumar Chatterji, in an article published in 1935, advanced the case for the Romanisation of all the Indian scripts.¹⁸ He argued for this as a basis of national unity and more importantly, for safeguarding the unity of India that 'finds expression in its diversity'.¹⁹ He presented his paper to the progressive writers group in London that year where they all earnestly embraced its recommendations.²⁰ In recalling this event Sajjad Zaheer stated: 'We believed in the Roman script ourselves and his scientific lecture convinced us so thoroughly that we became strong supporters of this reform'.²¹ What Zaheer meant by 'scientific lecture' was the comprehensive analysis given to the way a specifically Indianised Roman script could be fostered not only for Hindustani but for all the main regional languages of India. In an extremely detailed and well researched paper Chatterji

¹⁸See S.K. Chatterji, "A Roman Alphabet for India", in *Journal of the Department of Letters*, Vol. XXVII, Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1935.

¹⁹ Chatterji, "A Roman Alphabet", p. 1

²⁰ S. Zaheer, "Reminiscences", 1940, p. 51.

²¹ Zaheer, "Reminiscences", p. 51.

outlined how the scientific structure of Hindustani in the Devanagari characters would be maintained but he also proposed a step by step guide as to how the Devanagari and Urdu characters could be translated into their romanised form as well as how the roman characters could be adapted to reflect the specific sounds of all the characters of both scripts.²² In this paper Chatterji provided examples for 16 Indian languages to demonstrate how passages from each script would be written utilising the Indian romanised script.²³ He also believed the roman script would be simpler for printing and typing purposes than either Devanagari or Persian based characters. Zaheer stated that, away from the heated communalised debates in India, all writers in London, irrespective of language or religious background, completely agreed with the Romanisation of the script. In addition, in London he felt Indian writers forged a common bond because they were 'outsiders' and, because of their experience of racism.²⁴ This is the reason the Roman script came to be incorporated into the PWA draft manifesto. Suniti Kumar Chatterji recognised that the central problem in India was over the script:

Hindi (Hindustani) suffers from a great handicap of being broken up into two mutually opposed literary languages differing in script and high vocabulary, and its grammar is somewhat complicated. High-Hindi and Urdu make it a house divided.²⁵

He stated that the grammar and basic vocabulary are the same but that differences in literary style and script were producing a 'most harassing reduplication', which was 'wasting the time, money, energy and temper of the people'.²⁶ His exasperation at the intensity of linguistic chauvinism is clearly evident. It was for this reason that he

²² Chatterji, "A Roman Alphabet for India, pp. 27-29.

²³ Chatterji, "A Roman Script for India", pp. 30-51.

²⁴ Zaheer, "Reminiscences", p. 39.

²⁵ S.K. Chatterji, *Languages and the Linguistic Problem*, p. 24.

²⁶ Chatterji, *Languages and the Linguistic Problem*, p. 24.

advocated the Roman script. He rejected the idea of the Perso-Arabic script as it was considered too cumbersome for non-Arab languages. In spite of the aesthetic quality of its calligraphy, there would be difficulty in denoting vowel sounds in pure stylised Urdu which would make it a difficult script to learn for most people.²⁷ However, he also had issues with the Devanagari characters. Although the script is very scientific in its arrangement of letters on a phonetic basis and it has a full alphabet for all vowels and consonants, it is syllabic in its application. So a word can be made up of a whole syllable denoting a consonant or consonants combined with a vowel and *not* a single sound. So although the Devanagari script has 50 letters, Chatterji maintained that it would require ligatures that fragmented consonants and this would complicate the script and therefore render it challenging to master.²⁸ The popular Hindustani that existed Chatterji referred to as *bazari Hindi*, based on Khari-Boli grammar with borrowings from Persian, Arabic and simplified Sanskrit, as well as other dialects.²⁹ In spite of these arguments the clause on romanisation was dropped. There is no evidence suggesting which individual or individuals proposed this but not one writer at that time opposed its exclusion. Romanisation may have been shunned but the cause of Hindustani was still advanced.

The PWA organised its association on the basis of linguistic and regional branches. Curiously, there was never a Hindustani branch, so within UP province there was a 'Hindi and Urdu' branch from the 1940s onwards. Similarly, in Bombay, in addition to a Marathi unit, there was an Urdu branch but again not a Hindustani one. From the very beginning there was a fundamental weakness within the PWA in a failure to attract Hindi writers to their cause. Although the PWA had its antecedents in an Urdu

²⁷ Chatterji, *Languages and the Linguistic Problem*, pp. 25-27.

²⁸ Chatterji, *Languages*, pp. 26-28.

²⁹ Chatterji, *Languages*, pp. 20, 30-31.

publication, *Angare*, by the time of its first conference concerted efforts had been made to attract writers from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds. So, in London in 1935, Mulk Raj Anand writing in English, the Bengali scholar, Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji, and the Hindi writers, Jyoti Ghosh and Promode Sengupta, had all attended and joined the PWA. As has already been stated in December 1935 a conference had been organised in Allahabad of Hindi and Urdu writers where Dr. Tara Chand, the then secretary of the Hindustani Akademi, spoke in praise of the PWA venture and gave his full support to it.³⁰ At the first conference not only did Premchand, a Hindu and eminent in both Hindi and Urdu, deliver the inaugural address, but Nehru gave his blessing to the project from the platform of the AICC at its Lucknow session and Jayprakash Narayan, the CSP leader, attended the PWA conference.³¹ By the time of the second conference in Calcutta the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore, who was due to attend but prevented by ill-health, sent a message of support.³² This should have been proof that the progressive movement was much wider than an Urdu literary association. However, this was not sufficient to attract a body of Hindi writers. Of the twenty five delegates from UP for the first conference, not one was a Hindi writer.³³ Only Jainendra Kumar from Delhi attended as a Hindi writer.³⁴ Leading Hindi writers, such as Babu Maithili Sharan Gupta, Pandit Banarsi Das Chaturvedi, Sumitra Nandan Pant, Subhadra Kumari Chouhan and Pandit Bal Krishan Sharma, did acknowledge the movement and sent messages of support, but they did not attend. There was an element of parochialism that characterised some Hindi establishments. In late 1933 or early 1934 Nehru was invited to give a speech at a small Hindi Literary Society in Benares. In his address

³⁰ S. Zaheer, *Roshnai*, Karachi: Maktaba-i-Danyal, 1976, pp. 34-35.

³¹ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 86.

³² Message by Tagore quoted in *50 Years of PWA*, p. 58.

³³ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 107.

³⁴ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 106.

he criticised the 'intricate' and 'ornate' language that seemed to symbolise Hindi writing with 'difficult Sanskrit words, artificial, and clinging to ancient forms'.³⁵

When he suggested that they should renounce this courtly obsession he was severely criticised in the Hindi papers. But for Nehru this was indicative of the 'narrow focus, intolerance, and inferiority complex of Hindi intellectuals in literary circles'.³⁶

Perhaps this is why Zaheer concluded that 'a good many of them were reluctant to enter into any cooperative endeavour with Urdu writers'.³⁷ After the conference Premchand wrote to Zaheer that, 'they [Hindi writers] were weighed down by feelings of inferiority...and perhaps looked upon the new literary movement as a device to trap them'.³⁸ From this it is clear that many Hindi writers were suspicious of this association and although they lent formal support to it, in reality they kept their distance for the first few years as they saw it as a vehicle for Urdu writers. What remains clear is that from the very beginning there were tensions present between Hindi and Urdu writers.

In the early stages the UP units of Hindi and Urdu operated very much as sister branches with writers organising joint activities on literary forums and common themes.³⁹ However, this complementary coexistence did not survive long as the controversy over a national language continued to gain momentum. In 1937 an article appeared in *The Leader*, entitled "The Bubble of Hindustani". This was written by Professor Amaranatha Jha, Vice-Chancellor of Allahabad University. Jha scorned the idea of Hindustani claiming it to be "nothing more than pure Urdu".⁴⁰

Three years later a symposium was organised on the national language, with papers

³⁵ J Nehru, *An Autobiography*, London: John Lane, 1936, p. 456.

³⁶ Nehru, *An Autobiography*, p. 457.

³⁷ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, Karachi: Maktaba-i-Danyal, 1976, p. 107.

³⁸ Letter from Premchand to Sajjad Zaheer, quoted in Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 149.

³⁹ Zaheer, *Roshnai*, p. 152.

⁴⁰ A. Jha, "The Bubble of Hindustani", *The Leader*, Allahabad, 1937.

presented by Gandhi, Nehru, Tara Chand, Purushottom Tandon and many others. All the contributions were on the Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani debate.⁴¹ Professor Jha presented a paper in which he stated that at Allahabad University hundreds of Hindu students took Urdu for their BA course and a significant number for the MA but not a single Muslim student took a class in Hindi at any level.⁴² This for him was indicative of the fact that it was the Muslim intelligentsia who sought to make Urdu their preserve and consequently to oppose the development of Hindi. In this paper he cited several examples of what was referred to as Hindi, Urdu, Hindustani from diverse sources, such as a pamphlet from Jamia Millia in Delhi, the magazine, *Nausherwan*, a Bihar Government news sheet printed for villagers in both the Devanagari and Urdu scripts and the official organ of the Delhi Anjuman Taraqqi-i-Urdu.⁴³ In all the cases he pointed out, the type of language used was quite stylised and replete with Persianised and Arabic vocabulary. It was this that led him to conclude that ‘the entire atmosphere and genius of Urdu is foreign and not Indian’.⁴⁴ For him only a language based on Sanskrit could be the official, national language.

In addition, Dharendra Varma, Head of the Hindi Department at Allahabad, argued that Hindustani had no future as it was an artificial language. ‘A few easy articles or stories may be written in such an artificial language or it may be used for light conversation or for primers in the lower classes – but there the bifurcation roads begin.’⁴⁵ In his argument he advocated the cause of Hindi as it is ‘the ‘national language of the Hindus’.⁴⁶ So for Muslims to adopt this as their national language is

⁴¹ Z.A. Ahmad, *National Language for India (A Symposium)*, Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1941.

⁴² A. Jha, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, p. 188.

⁴³ A. Jha, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, pp. 189-191, 194-197. Jha uses the Roman alphabet to quote from these sources.

⁴⁴ Jha, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, p. 187.

⁴⁵ D. Varma, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, p. 265

⁴⁶ Varma, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language of India*, p. 266.

part of being a national people. He did not propagate the renunciation of Urdu or the Persian script but insisted that for national purposes Hindi in the Devanagari script had to be the national language.⁴⁷

Meanwhile the votaries of Urdu proved to be just as intransigent. So the Editor of *Humayun*, Mian Bashir Ahmad, argued that ‘modern Hindi is mostly an artificial language’.⁴⁸ Dr. Maulvi Abdul Haq, the then General-Secretary of the Anjuman-i-Taraqqi-i-Urdu, asserted the view that ‘Urdu is the developed form of Hindi, that is to say, modern Hindi as distinct from Urdu, has no *raison d’etre*. Hindu communalism is responsible for its birth and growth’.⁴⁹ It was this linguistic chauvinism that prompted Sajjad Zaheer to write his article on the language issue, “The Problem of Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani”. This article was published in 1945 and appeared in the Urdu journal, *Naya Adab*, the Hindi journal, *Naya Sahitya* and in English in the Communist Party publication *Marxist Miscellany*.⁵⁰ Much of the article is devoted to giving an historical account of how Hindi and Urdu evolved, which Zaheer probably felt was necessary, given the linguistic bifurcation that he was witnessing. Zaheer was equally contemptuous of those supporters of Hindi who demanded that ‘Hindi alone can be the *Rashtrabhasha* of India’ and the promoters of Urdu who proclaimed that ‘Urdu alone deserves to be the *Qaumi Zaban*’.⁵¹ He argued that both protagonists ignored the composite culture that had given birth to *khari-boli*, which is the basis of modern Hindustani.⁵² He insisted that this language was real as it was the language of political leaders in the nationalist movement and

⁴⁷ Varma, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, pp.266-267.

⁴⁸ Quoted in S. Zaheer, “The Problem of Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani”, 1945, p. 1

⁴⁹ Quoted in Zaheer, “The Problem of Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani”, 1945, p. 1

⁵⁰ Zaheer, “The Problem of Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani”, in *Naya Adab*, no 3. Bombay, 1946, pp. 1-31; *Naya Sahitya*, Allahabad, 1946; *Marxist Miscellany*, vol. 4, Bombay: PPH, October 1945, pp. 91-125. (All references are taken from the English publication.)

⁵¹ Zaheer, “The Problem of Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani”, p. 92.

⁵² Zaheer, “The Problem”, pp. 113-118.

the film industry. The grammatical structure of both literary Hindi and Urdu was the same, so the duty of writers was to facilitate the development of a common linguistic area and call that Hindustani.⁵³ In the Urdu publication of this article, Zaheer added that when he presented this paper, the promoters of chaste Urdu commented ‘You are trying to please both’. To which Zaheer replied, ‘What is wrong with that?’⁵⁴

In a similar vein, Dr. Abdul Aleem wrote an article in 1939 in the PWA publication *New Indian Literature*, where he championed the project for romanisation of all Indian scripts as advocated by Chatterji.⁵⁵ Aleem vehemently believed that Hindustani could only develop and truly be a language of the people if it looked for inspiration to Brij Bhasha, Awadhi and Bihari rather than the classical languages of Persian or Sanskrit as they were not popular vernaculars. When it comes to using technical and scientific terms he felt again that rather than looking to these classical ornate languages why should Indians not adopt the English words? They were simpler and easier to pronounce. In this article it is clear Aleem is laying down a marker for what the PWA should stand for on language and script; the challenge facing an organisation that is literary but also has a duty to the nation and people in opposing in the strongest possible manner the dangers of communalism.

Within the nationalist movement the championing of Hindustani was pivotal if the progressive project was to have any sign of success. The AICC had adopted this language at Gandhi’s insistence for all its proceedings from 1921. As mentioned before, Gandhi had already established his credentials as promoter of Hindustani in the early 1920s. By the 1940s he was acutely aware of the hard-line positions being

⁵³ Zaheer, “The Problem”, p. 122.

⁵⁴ Zaheer, “The Problem”, *Naya Adab*, p. 31.

⁵⁵ A. Aleem, “The Problem of Hindustani”, *New Indian Literature*, No. 1, 1939.

adopted by some within the Hindi and Urdu intelligentsia. In his address to the symposium in 1940, Gandhi stipulated six principles that he believed formed the basis of a common language: the first four have been outlined before – the name of language to be Hindustani; both Devanagari and Arabic scripts to be considered current and officially sanctioned; in the choice of vocabulary no preference to be given to either Sanskrit or Persian and that all words in current use by Hindu writers of Urdu and Muslim writers of Hindi to be deemed current.⁵⁶ The last two points included the rejection of a ‘foreign’ or ‘indigenous’ test relating to vocabulary since he believed the only test should be currency and that Hindustani should ‘not be considered to have any peculiar association with the religious traditions of any community’.⁵⁷ This last point was important as by the 1940s many Hindi intellectuals had come to link Hindustani as a form of Urdu associated with Muslim culture and Urdu scholars had increasingly tried to claim Hindustani for their cause. For Gandhi, Urdu was the only language not confined to a province or religious community and he argued that ‘it has been spoken by Mussalmans all over India, and in the North the number of Hindus speaking it has been larger than the number of Mussalmans’.⁵⁸ So no language could be the preserve of one community, least of all Hindustani as the popular vernacular across north India.

Gandhi had supported the aims of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan in Allahabad, initially because this body propagated Hindi as opposed to English. At their Indore conference Gandhi had persuaded the Sammelan to accept his definition of Hindustani. Similarly, the Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad had also accepted the definition and referred to the common language of inter-provincial intercourse as

⁵⁶ Gandhi, M quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, pp. 34-35.

⁵⁷ Gandhi, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, pp. 34-35.

⁵⁸ Gandhi, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, p. 32.

Hindi or Hindustani. For these two literary organisations to accept this was an immensely positive step in the promotion of a popular *lingua franca*.

In a forward to the Rashtrabhasha Visha Vihar Gandhi stated that Hindustani, 'a happy amalgam of Hindi and Urdu', was 'the perfect national language'.⁵⁹ Because of his allegiance to this project, in 1945 Gandhi broke with the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan as he felt their activities diverged from the principles he had laid out five years earlier. This will be discussed in the following section but Gandhi's resignation from this body on 25th July 1945 signalled a dogged commitment to the syncretic language of Hindustani. In a letter to Purushottamdas Tandon, the then President of the Sammelan, he stipulated that in leaving the Sammelan 'he intended to serve it better'.⁶⁰ This was a clear indication that he believed linguistic bifurcation between Hindi and Urdu to be detrimental to both.

Nehru was the other prominent champion of Hindustani. As a Kashmiri Brahmin Nehru's mother tongue was Urdu. In his paper to the symposium on national language he attacked those in the Hindi intelligentsia who argued that Urdu was alien to India, 'Urdu, except for its script, is the very soil of India and has no place outside India. It is even today the home language of large numbers of Hindus in the North'.⁶¹ He favoured the keeping of two scripts but in this paper his fundamental concern was with the development of a literary language that mirrored the new India he believed was emerging. So, though the gulf between the literary languages had grown, it was nevertheless seen as a sign of growth after long periods of stagnation. 'They [Hindi and Urdu] are struggling to give expression to new ideas, and leaving the old ruts for

⁵⁹ Gandhi, 1st May 1945

⁶⁰ Letter from Gandhi to Tandon 13th July 1945.

⁶¹ Nehru, paper given by Nehru, quoted in *National Language for India*, p, 53.

new forms of literary expression'.⁶² He held both literary Urdu and Hindi to be lacking in advanced vocabulary as far as new ideas were concerned and therefore argued that both had to look to Persian and Sanskrit but not exclusively. In the same paper he argued:

We want our language to be as rich as possible and this will not happen if we try to suppress either Hindi words or Urdu words because we feel that they do not fit in with our own particular backgrounds. We want both and we must accept both. We must realise that the growth of Hindi means the growth of Urdu and *vice versa*. The two will powerfully influence each other and the vocabulary and ideas of each will grow. But each must keep its doors and windows wide open for these words and ideas. Indeed I would like Hindi and Urdu to welcome and absorb words and ideas from foreign languages and make them their own. It is absurd to coin new words from the Sanskrit or Persian for well known and commonly used words in English or French or other foreign languages.⁶³

In this it is clear that the development of a national language was also about making it reflect the spoken vernacular as well as developing a literary style that expressed the new age and new ideas. This was the project that progressive writers were attempting to build. Nehru's advocacy of Hindustani was slightly different from Gandhi's. Whilst Gandhi's championing of a popular Hindustani was based on it being the demotic and indigenous language, for Nehru indigeneity was an important criterion but not the sole one. Nehru was acutely aware that a new movement had arisen in literature with the PWA and he appealed to writers to think in terms of a mass audience and to produce literature directed at and for them. In this way he believed that language would automatically become simplified and so would the script.⁶⁴ He was highly critical of the literary styles of classic Hindi and Urdu as he held them to be artificial and isolated from the common person. In a contribution that

⁶² Nehru quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, pp. 56-57.

⁶³ Nehru, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, pp. 57-58.

⁶⁴ Nehru, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, pp. 59-60.

has a strong resonance of Premchand's first address to the PWA in 1936, Nehru scorns the Hindi and Urdu writer who

thinks much more of the literary coteries in which he moves, and writes for them in the language that they have come to appreciate... We have not yet fully recovered from the notion that culture and literary attainments are the products and accomplishments of courtly circles. ..Culture today must have a wider mass basis, and language, which is one of the embodiments of that culture, must also have that basis... Language which is to make appeal to the masses must deal with the problems of those masses, with their joys and sorrows, their hopes and aspirations. It must represent and mirror the life of the people as a whole and not that of a small group at the top. Then only will it have its roots in the soil and find sustenance from it.⁶⁵

This is the tradition that the PWA attempted to build on. With Gandhi and Nehru advocating this position and a national literary and cultural association founded on this syncretic, neutral, demotic language, it seemed as if the future looked bright for Hindustani to be adopted as the national language of independent India. However, nothing is so straightforward in the subcontinent.

Post Partition – Debates inside the Constituent Assembly

The question of language and the attendant issue of script proved to be so contentious and divisive that when India was partitioned on 14th August 1947, Pakistan declared Urdu, in the Persian script, to be its national language. As a state created for Muslims this choice may be explicable for West Pakistan, as with partition it appeared as if the language debate had been settled along religious lines. But this was not appropriate for East Pakistan, where the majority spoke Bengali. However, the situation in India was quite different. India emerged from the ravages of partition as an independent, democratic and *secular* state, the homeland of all its citizens irrespective of religion, caste or linguistic background. The Constituent

⁶⁵ Nehru, quoted in Ahmad, *National Language for India*, pp. 59-60.

Assembly had shelved the decision on language in 1948 but by the autumn of 1949 it had become far too politicised to ignore or postpone. The debate on language lasted three days but the outcome of the assembly discussion went to the heart of India's secular credentials and would have enormous repercussions for the progressive notion of a popular, demotic language.

On 12th September 1949, a motion was introduced into the constituent assembly by N. Gopalaswami Ayyangar and K.M. Munshi which was referred to as the Munshi-Ayyangar formula after its sponsors.⁶⁶ This formula stipulated that Hindi in the Devanagari script would be the official language of the Union. The states of the Union would continue to have their regional language and English would continue to be used for legislative purposes, in the supreme and high courts and for interregional communication. The use of English as the language of government was envisaged to continue for at least fifteen years until Hindi had developed sufficiently to become the language of the nation.⁶⁷ One important feature of this draft was the very correct decision to include Urdu in the list of Indian languages but alas not Hindustani. The draft also insisted that for Hindi to develop it should be encouraged to look to all the linguistic traditions of India, including Hindustani, but that the inspiration should primarily come from Sanskrit.⁶⁸ Another central point to note is that, with one or two exceptions, the entire debate was conducted in English. This formula had been arrived at within the Congress leadership in the hope that it would command universal support. The Congress policy of adopting Hindustani in both scripts had existed for thirty years until 1946 when agitation by Congress supporters in UP was

⁶⁶ *Constituent Assembly Debates, (CAD)* Vol. IX, Delhi: pp. 1314-1491. (All references are from this volume)

⁶⁷ *CAD*, p. 1325.

⁶⁸ *CAD*, p. 1325

actively promoting Hindi in the Devanagari characters. Hence this formula before the assembly was seen as compromise position.

There were voices in the assembly who advocated the cause of the popular Hindustani espoused by the PWA. So Mohammed Hifzur Rahman, a Congressman from UP, speaking in Hindustani, defined it as "...the language which is spoken from Bihar right up to Frontier".⁶⁹ For him this was the only national language understood by Hindus and Muslims and should be written in either script. Rahman went on to cite the example in UP where Hindi had already been adopted as the official language and where a deliberate policy of removing certain vocabulary in favour of Sanskrit was taking place.⁷⁰ He regarded this as a pernicious trend and it was for this reason that he spoke in favour of the Gandhian notion of Hindustani as opposed to giving his support to the motion.

Nehru's contribution to the debate appears to have been designed to please everyone. So he praised English whilst admitting that it was a foreign language to India; he invoked India's heritage as a rich and diverse tradition that must be respected but at the same time insisted that modernity had to be embraced.⁷¹ Nehru generally supported the Munshi-Ayyangar formula not out of conviction but because it seemed to offer the *least* path of resistance. Although he accepted that Hindi was to be the name of the national language, he insisted that it should be popular, 'the language should be more or less a language of the people, not a language of a learned coterie...'⁷² He argued that for Hindi to develop in a healthy manner it had to

⁶⁹ CAD, p. 1344.

⁷⁰ CAD, pp. 1342-1343.

⁷¹ CAD, pp. 1411-1414.

⁷² CAD, p. 1412.

...include in it all the language elements in India which have gone to build up with a streak of Urdu or a mixture of Hindustani – not by statute, remember, but by allowing it to grow normally as it should grow and if, secondly, it is not, if I may say so, forced down upon an unwilling people, I have no doubt it will grow and become a very great language.⁷³

The reference to “force” and “unwilling people” was directed at a section of Hindi protagonists within Congress whom Nehru believed wanted a purist, “ethnically cleansed” Hindi to be enforced upon Muslims and non-Hindi speaking people of the South. During the debate Nehru had asked M. Satyanarayan, a member of the drafting committee, to draw up a list of the major regional languages and he came up with twelve languages. When Nehru saw the list he added a thirteenth, Urdu, before it went to the Drafting Committee.⁷⁴ Satyanarayan, looking puzzled, enquired as to whose language Urdu was. In anger and impatience Nehru responded, ‘this is my language, the language of my ancestors!’ Satyanarayan retorted, ‘Aren’t you ashamed of being a Brahmin, to claim Urdu as your language?’⁷⁵ This demonstrates the extent to which the linguistic issue had been penetrated by the poison of communalism.

However, the majority of the Congress delegates from UP were adamantly opposed to Hindustani and Urdu in any shape or form. Thus, Seth Govind Das queried the association of secularism with diverse cultural traditions and instead defined it as meaning one culture, one language. He conceded that India was comprised of several religious communities and that all religions should be treated equally. But for him India and secularism did not mean the acceptance of ‘heterogeneous cultures.’⁷⁶

⁷³ CAD, p. 1416.

⁷⁴ Although Urdu is not a regional language, Nehru’s insistence on its inclusion in the list is indicative of how for him, this was one final attempt to keep Urdu/Hindustani as part of the Indian constitution.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*, New Delhi: OUP, p. 113.

⁷⁶ CAD, p. 1327.

Das's opposition to Urdu and Hindustani was based on his belief that Urdu writers had not produced works on what he presumed to be 'Indian' themes, confining their work instead to "Muslim" themes. In his speech he contrasted the use of *Bulbul* by Urdu intellectuals as opposed to *Koyal* (Cuckoo) by Hindi writers. He stated that in the works of Urdu writers there many references to *Koh Kaf* but not the Himalayans and instead of hymns to Bhima and Arjuna there is Rustom, all of which, he insisted, was alien to Indians.⁷⁷ This, he argued, proved that Urdu looked for its inspiration outside of India.

R.V. Dhulekar, also a Congress delegate from UP, declared, '...I belong to Indian nation, the Hindi Nation, the Hindu Nation, the Hindustani Nation.'⁷⁸ His propagation of Hindi as the national language was based on the view that this was the 'consummation of a historic process...that has been going on for centuries.'⁷⁹

Dhulekar was scathing in his denunciation of the English speaking elite. To appreciate the full force of his contribution to this debate it is necessary to quote at some length his speech. To the defenders of English he had this to say,

...we are wedded to poverty; we are wedded to the freedom of our country, to the freedom of our country from bondage and from the bondage of a foreign language. But here you say, postpone the change for fifteen years. Then I ask, when are you going to read the Vedas and the Upanishads? When are you going, to read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and when are you going to read your Lilavati and other mathematical works? When are you going to read your Tantras? After fifteen years?...Hindi will be the language of this land and the Devanagri script and numerals will be the script and numerals for this country. My request is to leave it to Parliament to decide the question. May I ask my friends one question? Are they afraid of democracy? Are they afraid of

⁷⁷ CAD, p. 1330.

⁷⁸ CAD, p. 1350

⁷⁹ CAD, p. 1349

Parliament? Are they afraid of their own sons and grandsons who will be the members of our future Parliaments?⁸⁰

It is interesting to note that the texts quoted by Dhulekar are all taken from Hindu scriptures, thus confirming his understanding of nation with Hindu custom, ritual, religion and language.

About the defenders of Urdu and Hindustani he was equally disparaging. In a response to Hifzur Rahman's earlier speech, Dhulekar offered the following advice,

Today if you speak for Hindustani, it will not be heard. You will be misrepresented, you will be misunderstood...wait for two or three years and he [Rahman] will find that he will have his Urdu language, he will have his Persian script; but today let him not try to oppose this, because our nation, the nation which has undergone so many sufferings is not in the mood to hear him.⁸¹

And in his final rebuke to Rahman, Dhulekar stated, 'I am going to give him a national interpretation of history. The bulk of the Muslims, barring our friends like Maulana Azad and Kidwai....'⁸² at this point he was interrupted by Nehru, enquiring whether this is relevant. Dhulekar was prevented from finishing his sentence but we can with some confidence surmise that his concluding remarks were in all probability along the lines of, "that the bulk of Muslims are appeasers or traitors!"

From this speech it is evident that in conflating the ideas of freedom, language and religion with nationhood Hindi protagonists were creating a powerful image of what patriotism meant. So anyone who questioned this risked being deemed unpatriotic. As Alok Rai has stated this rests on a misunderstanding of democracy. They could claim to speak for the "little people", the "silent majority", but they could not

⁸⁰ *CAD*, pp. 1351-1352.

⁸¹ *CAD*, p. 1353.

⁸² *CAD*, p1353.

distinguish between democracy and simple majoritarianism.⁸³ This could accurately be described as “Hindi imperialism”.

The tone of the debate had succeeded in creating a climate of mistrust, antagonism and bigotry which some delegates from the non-Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani speaking areas found intolerable. So Shankarrao Deo from Bombay made clear his annoyance at the haste in which the pro-Hindi lobby assumed that to accept “Hindi” amounted to the acceptance of the slogan, “one culture” and “one language”. For Deo, the real essence of Hindi in Devanagiri characters was that it was a composite language and that though India is one nation it is composed of ‘several cultural dimensions and linguistic traditions that have to be incorporated within what should be a national language.’⁸⁴ He was scornful of pro-Hindi lobbyists from UP who think that they alone have monopoly on Hindi.⁸⁵ Dr. P Subbarayan from Madras favoured Hindustani in the way Gandhi conceived of it but he wanted this in the Roman script as a way of making India modern and placing India in global context.⁸⁶

Another delegate, Sardar Hukam Singh, originally supported Hindi in Devanagiri script but after listening to the speeches of the pro-Hindi lobby he withdrew this support stating that what they really desired was a ‘deeply Sanskritic classical Hindi that will be unintelligible to the common people’.⁸⁷ Instead he argued not only for the adoption of Hindustani but for this to be in the Roman script as it would be much easier for people of the North and the South to learn Hindustani and because it would

⁸³ Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*, pp. 111-112.

⁸⁴ *CAD*, p. 1436.

⁸⁵ *CAD*, p. 1434

⁸⁶ *CAD*, p. 1403.

⁸⁷ *CAD*, p. 1438.

remove the antagonism on this issue.⁸⁸ Even in UP there were voices demanding the Roman script. Frank Anthony tabled an amendment for the adoption of the Roman script for Hindi as the national language.⁸⁹ Not disguising his derision for the Hindi lobby, he taunted the UP Hindi brigade for denigrating other linguistic influences in Hindi.

...what fear do they [Hindi advocates] have of other influences...Do they assume most Indians will forget their past and heritage unless they are directed to learn an imposed language with an imposed script that is heavily Sanskritised which most people do not understand and cannot pronounce.⁹⁰

He cited an example from his home town of Jubbulpore in UP, where Hindu boys were suddenly in an inferior position because they could not speak or write in the Hindi that has been introduced.⁹¹ It is clear that some delegates both inside and outside UP felt alienated by the forcefulness of the arguments of Hindi protagonists.⁹²

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad expressed regret at the way Hindustani had been rejected because of its association with Urdu and how a majority inside Congress had shifted to accept the position of Hindi in the Devanagari script. But he was clearly angered at the debate and the communal connotations of the Hindi wallahs, whom he labelled “narrow-minded”:

⁸⁸ *CAD*, p. 1439.

⁸⁹ *CAD*, p. 1364.

⁹⁰ *CAD*, pp. 1362-1363.

⁹¹ *CAD*, p. 1366.

⁹² It is interesting how the cause of Hindustani gained support from delegates in South India. The proponents of Hindi in UP had their localised dispute with Urdu/Hindustani but the repercussions of Hindi as the official state language would also raise many difficult questions for other regions of India. In Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, Telegu and Bengali areas there was much resistance to the imposition of Hindi, as the state language in these regions was the official medium of education and civil service. There was particular concern over employment prospects if Hindi became the required language. In these areas, as is apparent from the assembly discussion, people would have preferred English or Hindustani in the Roman script.

Narrow-mindedness means pettiness and density of mind and refusal to accept higher, nobler and purer thoughts. I would like to tell you that with such small minds we cannot aspire to be a great nation in the world.⁹³

In spite of these protestations, the Munshi-Ayyangar formula was passed on 14th September 1949. In the vote on amendment No. 65, in clause (1), 301-A which referred to the word Hindi being dropped in favour of Hindustani, only fourteen votes were cast in favour! An amendment in the same clause inserting the word Urdu as well as Devanagari could only muster twelve votes. The eighth Schedule of languages of the Union, read as: Assamese, Bengali, Kannada, Gujarati, Hindi, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu.⁹⁴ Though both Hindi and Urdu were included, Hindustani was omitted. Though Hindi was meant to draw on all the elements of the composite culture, its primary source was to be Sanskrit.

Ayyangar, in getting to the final stages of debate, referred to this as a 'happy mood'⁹⁵ and the assembly closed its session in the belief that the earlier rift would heal and a new unity would triumph in a country still reeling from the agony of partition. However, it is evident that this debate was conducted in such an atmosphere of animosity and intolerance that Ayyangar's remarks signified hope rather than conviction. What is undeniable is that this marks the historic juncture at which India lost the right to call her language Hindustani and this would impact sharply on a literary body that had championed its cause.

⁹³ CAD, p. 1459

⁹⁴ CAD, p. 1491.

⁹⁵ CAD, p. 1491.

Debate inside the PWA

In the immediate aftermath of partition the following statement was issued by leading Urdu progressive writers,

We, the progressive writers of Hindi and Urdu, believe in national and cultural unity and cannot separate Hindi and Urdu like Hindustan and Pakistan. We cannot 'partition' our culture, our language and our literature even though our land has been temporarily geographically partitioned. We know that a cultural partition would be even more disastrous than political division and would inflict a fatal injury to the great and common culture and life of the Indian people.⁹⁶

This was addressed to the Hindi Progressive Writers' conference, held at Allahabad in September 1947 and the signatories were Krishan Chander, Ismat Chughtai, Kaifi Azmi, Ali Sardar Jafri, Josh Mahilabadi, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and Majaz. This was a significant statement of intent and designed to thwart the worst repercussions of partition that writers feared. However, this proved to be illusory and a debate that proved to be just as divisive and harmful as the one in the constituent assembly ensued within the organs of the PWA. Just as in the Constituent Assembly, the heart of the dispute centred on UP province between Urdu and Hindi writers. Here the issue was whether Urdu should be accorded status as a regional or state language alongside Hindi and/or whether writers should continue to insist on the term Hindustani. The fraught nature of the discussion was heralded by the following contribution by Rahul Sanskritayan, who became President of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan in December 1947. At its annual session in Bombay that year Sanskritayan offered this as his maiden speech to the debate:

What is Urdu after all? Is it not the Indian pillar of victory of the Arab *jehadis*? Was not filling the language with Arabic words in place of

⁹⁶ Statement of Urdu Progressive Writers, September 1947, quoted in *Indian Literature*, vol. 1, Bombay: PPH, 1953, p. 25.

national vocabulary the sowing of the seeds of *durrastriyata* (anti-national)? We accept that this was nothing new for them in Bharat. Whatever Islam might have said, the Mussalmans have ever refused to be part of the country's stream of life....It would be beneficial to nationalise Islam. If the outlook of Maulana Azad persists in Indian Muslims, their loyalty and sympathy will always remain with Pakistan in comparison to Bharat. This feeling will end by turning India Muslims into hidden fifth-columnists....⁹⁷

Sanskritayan had replaced the UP Congressman and Hindi protagonist, Puroshttatam Tandon, as President of the Sammelan. He had also campaigned for the Communist Party in UP and was therefore seen as moderate and sympathetic to the progressive cause. He was also a member of the PWA. Needless to say, the speech and its tone came as a tremendous shock to progressive writers. It demonstrated how even amongst "liberal" opinion Urdu had become identified as a "Muslim" language and was viewed as external to Indian civilisation. The Hindi Sahitya Sammelan had itself been moving in this direction for some time. So in 1941 it had passed a resolution that left no doubt as to where sections of the Hindi intelligentsia stood:

Really speaking, Urdu is also a form of Hindi, mixed with Arabic and Persian words; historically, Urdu is covered by the word 'Hindi'. However, the literary Urdu style...has become so different from Hindi that the Sammelan recognises its separate existence and considers it as different from the Hindi style. The word 'Hindusthani' or 'Hindustani' is used to express simultaneously and in one word both the styles together – Hindi which predominated by indigenous words and Urdu which is predominated by Arabic and Persian words. Some use this term to express a language which is compound of the two styles, Hindi and Urdu. The terms 'Urdu' and 'Hindustani' are used to convey this definite meaning. The Sammelan has no objection to it. But the Sammelan, both from literary and national points of view, uses and propagates the Hindi style and the term 'Hindi' for its work and that of its committees.⁹⁸

Both these declarations demonstrate how far the Sammelan had moved away from the position of Gandhi on Hindustani. They are also indicative of how deep the

⁹⁷ R. Sanskritayan, December 1947, Bombay, quoted in *Indian Literature*, vol. 1, p. 25.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Gopal, *Linguistic Affairs of India*, p. 190.

bifurcation between Hindi and Urdu, not just in literary form but as constituting different vernaculars, had developed.

The PWA had its own discussion on Hindustani in the aftermath of the Constituent Assembly decision.⁹⁹ A Cultural Commission was set up in late 1952 by the Communist Party of India. This was designed to tackle the arguments and questions that had arisen since the Constituent Assembly decision and to challenge the rift between Hindi and Urdu writers. It was designed particularly for discussion amongst members of the Communist Party who were within the PWA but the debate included writers of the Association who were not Communists. This Commission prepared a draft paper on Hindustani which was circulated for discussion to Hindi and Urdu writers in the Hindustani speaking areas of North India. On 24th August 1953 a conference of the UP PWA convened in Allahabad to discuss the draft paper, the contributions by Hindi and Urdu writers and to finally arrive at a position.¹⁰⁰ At the conference the paper was introduced by Ali Sardar Jafri. As the title suggests, “The Formation of the Hindustani Nationality and the Problems of its National Language” the focus of the speech was on the foundation of a Hindustani region in North India. This paper dealt mostly with a historic overview of Indian civilisation but his central argument was that by the 17th century a popular *lingua franca* had developed which

the aristocracy, particularly the Iranian section of it, looked down upon as it was a vulgar tongue. Even in the days of Macaulay, the learned Pundits

⁹⁹ Throughout the period 1943-47, there do not appear to be major discussions on Hindustani in either the Hindi or Urdu units of the PWA. However, this does not imply that this was not an issue. Where there is reference to language in the reports of these units it is simply to state that literary works were being translated and published in each others’ journals. Hindi branches in UP did work with other writers beyond their group and were able to draw in wider layers of writers such as the Hindi poet Nirala. They were probably working on joint ventures such as relief work for the Bengal famine with individuals associated with the Hindi Sahitya Sammelam but there is no evidence to suggest that Hindi progressive writers absorbed its particular stance.

¹⁰⁰ A.S Jafri, “On the Formation of the Hindustani Nationality and the Problems of its National Language”, *Indian Literature*, vol. 1, Bombay: People’s Publishing House Ltd., 1953, pp. 1-46.

and Maulvis put forth the claims of the classical languages in opposition to English but not those of the national language.¹⁰¹

This popular-based language had evolved from *Khari Boli* but borrowed freely from many linguistic traditions, including literary expressions of Braj Bhasha and Avadhi and Bihari but also from Persian and Sanskrit. This, then, was the “vulgar” idiom that elite classes eschewed in favour of chaste Persian or Sanskrit. The fundamental aspect of Jafri’s thesis was that a popular nation was in the making, and one that was not based on Sanskritic and Persian literary elites. This nationality had its own language that had evolved from diverse cultural traditions and called itself Hindi/Hindavi and later Hindustani.¹⁰²

Commenting on the problem at hand, Jafri, by way of responding to Sanskritayan’s earlier statement, countered that

it cannot be denied that such propaganda did succeed in misleading a good many writers in Hindi. With the aid of such propagandists, the Congress governments, particularly in UP, were able to present their policy of suppressing Urdu as a policy of upholding national culture.¹⁰³

And he reminded his audience that the best Hindi and Urdu writers, such as Premchand and Padma Singh Sharma, had never accepted that Hindi and Urdu ‘should become exclusively the property of Hindus and Mussalmans’.¹⁰⁴ If a truly national culture was to develop it had to be based on ‘a unified literary language serving the people.’¹⁰⁵ This is why he favoured Hindustani as opposed to Hindi.

¹⁰¹ Jafri, “Formation of Hindustani Nationality”, p. 15.

¹⁰² Jafri, “Formation of Hindustani Nationality”, p. 15.

¹⁰³ Jafri, “Formation of the Hindustani Nationality”, pp. 25-26.

¹⁰⁴ Jafri, “Formation of the Hindustani Nationality”, p. 23.

¹⁰⁵ Jafri, “Formation of the Hindustani Nationality”, p. 26.

In the discussion that followed some Hindi writers spoke in defence of the paper. Thus Prakash Chandra Gupta rejected the idea of one script being imposed. He favoured a simple vocabulary and argued that the works of the best writers should be transcribed into the Devanagari and Urdu scripts, which would aid the unification process.¹⁰⁶ Despite this, several leading Hindi writers opted for the position “no Urdu and no Hindustani under any circumstances”. For them the question of Urdu had been settled with the establishment of Pakistan. Jafri had denounced Sanskritayan for his speech to the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan as a “servant” of the Tandon wing of Congress. But undeterred Rahul Sanskritayan defended himself and boldly insisted that only Hindi could be the national language as it was understood by the bulk of people and because it contained a majority of words taken from the provincial languages, and particularly from Sanskrit.¹⁰⁷ In his contribution to the debate he used the phrase “Hindi area” denoting Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Madhya Bharat Rajasthan, Vindhya Pradesh, Punjab-PEPSU, Himachal Pradesh, Ajmer and Bhopal.¹⁰⁸ His point 8 states ‘In this age of democracy you cannot ignore for long the language of the people. Ultimately we must yield.’¹⁰⁹ He seemed quite generous to Urdu when he argued that in any area where Urdu is the mother tongue of the *majority* of people then they should have education in that language.¹¹⁰ But this does not apply in the linguistic zone classified as the ‘Hindi Area’. So to propagate Urdu here would be to foster communal division as it would be ‘against the wishes of the

¹⁰⁶ Gupta, P.C. quoted in “Discussion on the Draft”, in *Indian Literature*, vol. 3, Bombay: PPH, 1953.

¹⁰⁷ Sanskritayan, R. quoted in “Discussion on the Draft”.

¹⁰⁸ Sanskritayan, quoted in “Discussion on the Draft”.

¹⁰⁹ R. Sanskritayan, quoted in “Discussion on the Draft”.

¹¹⁰ One fundamental concern in north India was the medium of instruction in schools and that required for employment in the government. If Hindi in the Devanagari script became the national language many middle class Muslims would be excluded from the civil service and it would have repercussions for Urdu-medium schools and colleges. In this respect the debate was foregrounded in material conditions as much as issues relating to national identity and patriotism.

majority of the people to recognise Urdu as state language.’¹¹¹ It is clear that, just as in the Constituent Assembly, notions of the *majority*, ‘*Hindi*’ area and *democracy* are conflated into the idea of a single nation. He ends his remarks with the following advice to Urdu protagonists:

They should get over their fascination for the Arabic script and accept Nagri so that the maximum number of people can read that language. In medieval times, the rulers’ policy of cultural separatism gave birth to Urdu (Hindi mixed with Arabic and Persian). Today, not separatism but cultural synthesis is the accepted goal in our country and other countries. By accepting the Nagri script, we take one step in that direction.¹¹²

So cultural synthesis here is interpreted as all influences barring Mughal ones! This indicates that the debate here is as much about the history of India under “Muslim” rule as it is about language and script

In an article in the Hindi journal *Naya Path* (New Path), the Hindi prose writer Yashpal wrote a piece on the language debate. Yashpal (1903-1976) was brought up in the Kangara Hills. He was initially influenced by Gandhi but then became disillusioned with his non-cooperation tactics. Impatient for change he moved to more radical positions and joined the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army. This organisation was engaged in terrorist activities in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Yashpal was imprisoned on several occasions but came to join the PWA in the late 1940s. He became a leading writer of the Hindi progressive movement.¹¹³ This article contains his contribution to the debate inside the PWA. Here Yashpal declared that historically the language of the land was Hindi/Hindavi and on this, for him, there was no debate. ‘It is true that Persian and Arabic words influenced Urdu and

¹¹¹ Sanskritayan, quoted in “Discussion on the Draft”.

¹¹² Sanskritayan, quoted in “Discussion on the Draft”.

¹¹³ See *Yashpal Looks Back: selection from an autobiography*, ed. and trans. with an introduction by Corrine Friend, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT Ltd, 1981.

Hindi but the basic language is Hindi'.¹¹⁴ He countered those who claimed a fusion of Hindi and Farsi (Persian) had produced a third language or that the synthesis of Hindu and Muslim culture had produced Urdu and believed 'no new language took root in UP under the Mughals'.¹¹⁵ Instead he advanced the argument that the existing culture of UP accepted other influences and even if we were to accept that two languages came into contact with one another and influenced each other, 'this does not produce a third language, as the proponents of Hindustani maintain'.¹¹⁶

Yashpal took issue with Jafri's historical account of Hindustani developing as a popular idiom of the nation. He argued that for Jafri to claim that there is only a difference of script between Hindi and Urdu was a fallacy as 'language cannot be defined by script alone. English, French and German all have one script but they are separate languages.'¹¹⁷ This is undoubtedly the case. His challenge to Jafri continued as he asserted that 'many nations can have one language but one nation cannot have several languages.'¹¹⁸ This is most definitely not the case. Switzerland has four national languages and Belgium has two and India is comprised of several linguistic traditions!

However, Yashpal's comments were directed more at the activities of the Anjuman-i-Taraqqi-i-Urdu in UP. This association was attempting to use the proviso 3.45 within the constitution, which stipulated that if significant numbers of people demand a language in a region then they can appeal for it. So under the slogan, "we the people hereby state that Urdu is our language, we are very large numbers within

¹¹⁴ Yashpal, "The Hindi-Urdu Problem: A Marxist Perspective" *Naya Path*, 1953, p. 67.

¹¹⁵ Yashpal, "The Hindi-Urdu Problem: A Marxist Perspective" p. 67.

¹¹⁶ Yashpal, "The Hindi-Urdu Problem: A Marxist Perspective" p. 67.

¹¹⁷ Yashpal, "The Hindi-Urdu Problem", p. 70.

¹¹⁸ Yashpal, "The Hindi-Urdu Problem", p. 69.

this state who are Urdu speakers and we want to be so in the future as well”, this association lobbied for the recognition of Urdu as the second official language of UP state. Yashpal viewed this demand as both spurious and dangerous,

...the Communist Party advances the cause of one language...the PWA claims to stand for one unified, popular language...but the Anjuman advocates a separate language – Urdu, with its own script – Persian, which has nothing to do with India.¹¹⁹

So for Yashpal this demand was dangerous as it polarised Hindi and Urdu into two distinct languages with two distinct alphabets, vocabularies and communities. If Urdu was accorded official status in UP, this would foster internal tensions and hinder the process of national unity. This was why for him the PWA had a duty to oppose their demand for UP.

Yashpal was vehement in his opposition to Hindustani, particularly in UP as for him no such language existed. It could only be Hindi. As he held the Persian script to be alien to India, only the Devanagari script was acceptable, as it would facilitate national cohesion. It is clear that for Yashpal conceding to Urdu, for this is what the demand of pro-Hindustani people amounted to, was tantamount to creating communal tensions in UP. Yashpal ridiculed the supporters of the Anjuman by insisting that ‘in UP there were many cultural and linguistic influences, which people have internalised and today we have that one unified culture which the Anjuman is attempting to separate’.¹²⁰ He cited the apparent 200,000 signatures that the Anjuman had collected for its defence of Urdu in UP and claimed it was based on a narrow sectarian basis of appealing to a notion of Muslim identity. The question he posed was how could a largely illiterate population read the petition? His answer was

¹¹⁹ Yashpal, “The Hindi-Urdu Problem: A Marxist Perspective” pp. 71-72.

¹²⁰ Yashpal, “The Hindi-Urdu Problem: A Marxist Perspective” *Naya Path*, 1953, p. 72.

that its rationale was explained to people on the basis of whether there should be a language for Muslims!¹²¹ It is significant that whilst in earlier discussions Hindi protagonists were vilified for desiring separatism and communalism, in Yashpal's defence of Hindi in the Devanagari script it was advocates of Urdu who were held responsible for separatism and communal tensions. For Yashpal his chief concern was to promote a language that would facilitate cohesion and foster unity in an already communally charged region.

Not all contributions by Hindi writers were as controversial. In his address Upendranath Ashk argued that if Urdu was to have a future in India then it had to accept the Nagari script. If Urdu was transcribed into the Nagari script, then Urdu could still be enjoyed by Urdu speakers and more importantly, by the majority of Indians who did not read the Urdu script.¹²² This would facilitate the formation of one language which would be a truly national one.¹²³ For him the demand for a separate script as a national demand was a regressive step as Hindi/Urdu is one language and if the script problem was solved then there was less chance of the language becoming overtly Sanskritised or Persianised. A separate script would further cause a rift between Hindi and Urdu that is unnecessary.¹²⁴

Amrit Rai was a leading member of the Hindi PWA. As Premchand's son his attitude was quite pivotal in this debate. He argued against the draft because he felt it did not address the fundamental question of Hindi as a national language of national integration:

¹²¹ Yashpal, "The Hindi-Urdu Problem", p. 71.

¹²² U. Ashk, quoted in *Naya Sahitya*, Allahabad, n.d. p.20

¹²³ Ashk, quoted in *Naya Sahitya*, Allahabad, n.d. p.20.

¹²⁴ Ashk, quoted in *Naya Sahitya*, Allahabad, n.d. p. 21

Our attitude on the language question has already isolated us a great deal from the mass of democratic Hindi writers and if we allow this kind of an attitude to persist any longer then we are only digging the grave of the Hindi PWA as the forum of the democratic literary movement in Hindi.¹²⁵

He defended the statements of Rahul Sanskritayan stating that they were 'in essence the outlook of the average democratic Hindi writer with all the points of strengths and weaknesses and should be accepted as such'.¹²⁶ On this point Rai was probably correct as the drive for Hindi had received a huge impetus from the decision of the Constituent Assembly as well as the increasing activities of the Hindi publishing world in UP. He insisted that progressive writers had to adopt a 'patriotic democratic line on the question, in line with the desire of the masses'.¹²⁷ And to him the demand to defend the Hindustani nation and the Hindustani language looked like a separatist slogan designed to promote conflict. It was for this reason that Rai favoured the name of Hindi and the Devanagari script as the state language of UP and also the language of the Union. So he had this advice to any protagonist of Urdu: 'the moorings of his language are nowhere but in the soil and the people of India and that he has to break away from those elements that separate him from the native Indian tradition.'¹²⁸ Amrit Rai, like his father, was well versed and fluent in Urdu as well as Hindi. He had an impeccable pedigree as far as support for a common demotic language was concerned. Yet even he felt compelled to oppose Urdu/Hindustani by name and by script in defence of the national project.

What united these Hindi writers was the belief that they were acting as true patriots. For them the correct nationalist position was to support Hindi in the Devanagari

¹²⁵ Amrit Rai, quoted in "Discussion of the Draft".

¹²⁶ Rai, quoted in "Discussion of the Draft".

¹²⁷ Rai, quoted in "Discussion of the Draft".

¹²⁸ Rai, "Discussion on the Draft".

script as this was in the national interest and therefore the only viable option to promote national integration. Conversely, Urdu writers felt marginalised as a consequence of partition and feared that without Hindustani there could not be an inclusive, popular language. Nevertheless, the debate inside the PWA was concluded by the adoption of Jafri's commission document and the association adopted the position of Hindustani in either script. Though the decision was passed overwhelmingly at the 1953 UP PWA conference, it did not heal the rift that had developed. In UP state the Hindi PWA operated as a separate unit from Urdu and promoted itself as such in distinction from Urdu. The discussions of the PWA resulted in much confusion, disorientation and hostility. Although the notion of a unified demotic language had been accepted after partition, the debate within its organisation demonstrates the extent to which damage had already been inflicted by the impact of partition and the subsequent discussion within the wider nationalist framework.

Debate inside Pakistan PWA

In Pakistan progressive writers also had to respond to tensions created over language. They were facing a very different but not entirely dissimilar situation. The Pakistan nation was composed of five regional provinces each with their own language: Baluchi, Bengali, Punjabi, Pushto and Sindhi. However, the new state had declared Urdu to be its official and national language in the Persian script. The imposition of this presented a challenge to those progressive writers on this side of the border as well.

Just as their counterparts in India, progressive writers attempted to counter linguistic chauvinism which presented itself in the guise of patriotism and in the national interest. Immediately after partition, the Urdu journal *Severa* carried an article on this

controversy, stating quite unambiguously that to separate Hindi and Urdu was a mistake 'as many Hindu families are acquainted with the Koran and the hadiths and the *Vedas* and the *Mahabharata* are read by Muslims too'.¹²⁹ This was in response to the jingoism created over Hindi in India and over the attempt to bifurcate a shared cultural tradition in Pakistan. This issue was delayed by five months because of the events of August 1947 so the editorial reflects a sense of loss, anger and shock at the partition of India: 'In these five months we have gone back centuries... What were we writing for? For whom? Were we writing for separatism?... *Severa* has to answer this question. *Severa* wants to save our common tradition.'¹³⁰ It called for both India and Pakistan to adopt Hindi and Urdu as official languages in both scripts.¹³¹

On the question of Urdu as the official and national language of Pakistan a later issue of *Severa* stated that 'the medium of instruction should be Bengali, Pashtu, Baluchi, Sindhi and Panjabi in their regions. They should be accorded the status of official and state languages alongside Urdu.'¹³² In another Urdu journal, *Naqoosh*, also published from Lahore, Tufal Ahmad Khan argued that if Urdu was given hegemony over other languages, such as Panjabi, then they would be both be damaged, and this is why he argued for 'the free development of both in Pakistan.'¹³³ A contribution from an Indian writer in the same issue, Sayid Ehtisham Husain, argued that Urdu could never be the national language if it was imposed on Bengali speakers and he favoured Bengalis deciding for themselves. But in West Pakistan he felt the situation was quite different. He claimed that Panjabi has always had a mixture of Urdu words and that the roots of Urdu were quite deep in Punjab as a

¹²⁹ "Future of Literature and Civilisation" *Severa*, 3, Lahore 1948, p. 85.

¹³⁰ See editorial of *Severa*, 3, pp 4-5.

¹³¹ "Future of Literature and Civilisation", p. 87.

¹³² Report of Pakistan PWA conference held in Lahore, November 1949, *Severa*, 7-8, 1950, p. 245.

¹³³ T.A. Khan, "The Problem of Language in Pakistan", *Naqoosh*, 5, Lahore: 1948, p.23.

result of Sufi influence. In the Punjab Hindus and Sikhs as well as Muslims had accepted Urdu as their language historically and with the millions of refugees coming into Pakistan from India, who had an Urdu tradition, there was some ground for believing that Urdu and Punjabi had much in common, unlike the North-West Frontier and Baluchistan where Urdu had never had any roots.¹³⁴ This, however, did not mean he favoured the imposition of Urdu,

...we should accept the status and development of regional languages... few would suggest that Urdu is the only language of Pakistan... We need a democratic struggle to develop each and every language according to the will of the people...¹³⁵

These were quite brave positions to hold and espouse in the early years of Pakistan. As a new state it was desperately searching to define its independent identity and religion and language were the two crucial ingredients of this. The Pakistan authorities did not look favourably upon such views being uttered in public and eventually the PWA paid a heavy price for its principles. This will be discussed in the next chapter but what is pertinent to our discussion on language is how, even in the difficult circumstances that the PWA found itself in in Pakistan, writers still attempted to carry the notion of some sort of syncretic language that was evocative of their earlier roots in Hindustani.

One further point needs to be addressed in Pakistan. These statements indicate that for progressive writers in Pakistan the key issue was still the debates that were taking place in India between Hindi and Urdu. In the new state writers obviously confronted the question of the dominance of Urdu over the regional languages and one fundamental issue here was over Bengali in East Pakistan. This had galvanised

¹³⁴ S.E. Husain, "What is the status of Urdu in Pakistan", *Sang-e-Neel*, 4, Peshawar: 1949, pp. 28-34.

¹³⁵ Hussain, "What is the status of Urdu in Pakistan", p. 33.

popular protest in the East wing of the country but is not reflected in the journals of the PWA from 1948-1951. This is probably due to other events that impacted on the PWA here which will be discussed in the next chapter. But it also perhaps reflects the fact that the people involved in establishing the Pakistan movement were from India, and particularly north India, where the Hindi/Urdu debate had been so fierce and the fact that in its initial stages the movement was predominantly composed of writers from north India. This is why the journal articles and coverage of conferences dwell on the Hindi/Urdu controversy.

Conclusion

The PWA project of promoting a demotic, popular language was nurtured within the surge of a rising nationalism that sought to unite and give shape to a popular notion of the nation. This nation was to be based on the myriad cultural and linguistic traditions that India was home to. This is why progressive writers espoused the cause of Hindustani. In this the PWA understood that languages are a dynamic, living entity. They cannot be prescribed in some artificial manner.

Abdul Aleem had argued that as it was evolving Hindustani should have looked for its inspiration in local dialects and languages such as Braj Bhasha, Bihari and Awadhi instead of the elite languages of Persian and Sanskrit. If this had been pursued then perhaps a popular literary form of Hindustani might have developed. If the PWA had organised branches as Hindustani units then perhaps the bifurcation that had already resulted between Hindi and Urdu writers might have been challenged. Moreover, if some sections of the nationalist movement had not chosen political expediency over the principle of a demotic language then maybe Hindustani could have enjoyed official patronage. What remains undeniable is that in the mid

1930s a small window of opportunity had opened for the possible development of a new literary form of the popular vernacular. This was espoused by academics and intellectuals, independent of the PWA, but the project was championed by this literary organisation. Writers had been drawn to the romanisation of the script as a means of facilitating unity between the various scripts of India. When they realised this was an unrealistic proposition progressive writers insisted that the popular lingua franca should be written in either the Devanagari or Persian scripts, which should have equal status. In this they attempted to promote the development of neutral vocabulary that freely borrowed from any linguistic source, including English.

However, the future of language was not solely in the hands of the PWA. The position of Congress made things worse as they steadily shifted away from their position of Hindustani in both scripts and moved towards a more ideological position of supporting Hindi in the Devanagari script. Congress and many others did this in the name of national unity and some quarters of the PWA also came to this position. This allowed the position of the UP Congressmen, who had been most vitriolic and intolerant on the question of Hindustani, to seem 'normal'. They too could claim that their policy was one of defending national culture. The fact that Hindi and Urdu are listed as two *separate* languages in the Indian constitution represents a victory for the set of interests that propagated the advance of a particular form of Hindi -- one that has its roots within Sanskrit and therefore is completely divorced from any Urdu influence.

Partition had raised the question of language in Pakistan also. Here Urdu had been declared the official and national language of both wings of the new state. In contrast to some of their comrades in UP, the Pakistani progressive writers' movement did

not support the adoption of Urdu as a national language if that meant it would be imposed, and they refused to accept the conflation of religion, language and script with nationalism.

Although the PWA was part of the largest cultural movement in Indian history, the force of history was against them. Partition destroyed their hopes for a unified independent India and with that a literary form of the demotic language became a casualty. With South Asia divided it is impossible to conceive how Hindustani could not have been damaged. Does this represent a failure of the progressive project? At the level of literature this project seems to have failed. No literary form of Hindustani took root. With the partition of India the bifurcation between literary Urdu and Hindi appears to have been a *fait accompli*. The tendency for both scripts to continue developing elite literary styles and formalised, elite public language was undoubtedly strengthened. However, this development does not find expression in the most popular art medium – film. The Bombay film industry is dominated by the demotic lingua franca of north India, Hindustani. This language is neither too Sanskritic nor overtly Persianised Urdu. Its vocabulary is neutral and inclusive of the diversity of India that Chatterji wrote about over sixty years ago. In this the film industry expresses the language of the masses as it is spoken, understood and used throughout not only India but Pakistan too. Hindustani never received official patronage but it is striking that after nearly sixty years since independence and partition it commands the greatest popularity of all as the de facto language of communication. The medium of cinema from Bombay encourages the continued use of a natural and honest mixture of linguistic registers, thereby sustaining and strengthening the centuries-old status quo of an eclectic Hindustani. The ‘Hindi’ film industry owes as much to Urdu as it does to Hindi in its dialogue. It is here and in the spoken language

of most South Asians today that we find this popular vernacular that is Hindustani as opposed to the higher registers of either modern Hindi or modern Urdu.

Alok Rai has argued that Hindustani could only have succeeded if it was '*part of an alternative, transformative politics*.'¹³⁶ It was precisely this alternative, transformative political agenda that the progressive writer's movement had been championing. What the constituent assembly members could not and would not accept – the reality of a syncretic cultural form of language that could be developed and fostered – the progressive writers were able to grapple with relatively successfully within the confines of their organisation. A truly transformative political agenda was absent in South Asia. In China and Turkey where a uniform national language with one script emerged there was strong direction provided by the state to institute such a language. The PWA did not succeed in building a literary tradition that was based on the demotic language but they were part of and did influence an evolving film tradition based on the popular vernacular, Hindustani. This does not represent a failure of the progressive project so much as the shortcomings of a truncated nationalism that bowed before linguistic chauvinism.

¹³⁶ Rai, Alok. *Hindi Nationalism*, p. 114.

CHAPTER 6 WRITERS AND NATIONALISM IN THE AGE OF INDEPENDENCE

Introduction

The post-war era witnessed the death of fascism and the beginning of the end of the colonial project. India achieved freedom but at a heavy cost. The dream of independence had been soured by the reality of partition. The bifurcation of South Asia cast a dark shadow on the progressive ideal and yet it was an actuality that had to be contended with. Partition challenged every aspect of the progressive concept: communal tensions appeared to have been so strong as to divide the country; the opportunity of developing a popular demotic language based on a syncretic heritage was doomed as language became a casualty of division; the literary tradition itself was divided as Hindi and Urdu writers were forced to choose between India and Pakistan. In short, for all intents and purposes it appeared as if the progressive vision was destroyed on the embers of communal violence. Yet surprisingly, the PWA survived the ravages of 1947 and continued to organise in the post independence era. Writers' association meetings were held in Pakistan and India, along with the publication of their journals and literature. However, progressive writers confronted new political realities which seriously impinged upon their ability to function in a literary and political capacity. One fundamental reality was the independent states themselves with their own indigenous ruling elites. These political leaders had been brought to power at the behest of the freedom struggle and yet the type of societies they presided over did not correspond to the progressive vision of intellectuals. The sorrow at partition was to give way to a sense of betrayal that many activists and intellectuals felt. The publication of Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poem "Dawn of Freedom" expressed most starkly this sense of disillusionment felt by writers in Pakistan for their new state. The poem was written in the summer of 1951 and published a year

later whilst Faiz was imprisoned in the central jail in Hyderabad, Pakistan. It is a heartfelt response to the events of August 1947. The 14th August is described as,

This leprous daylight, dawns night's fangs have mangled, -

This is not that long-looked-for break of day,...

But now, word goes, the birth of day from darkness

Is finished, wandering feet stand at their goal"¹

This was not the progressive dawn many writers had fought for or desired. These words expressed anger and betrayal at a freedom that was perceived as monstrously hideous for destroying the unity of culturally diverse but historically united peoples. Both India and Pakistan emerged as disfigured caricatures of a nationalist movement that had fractured and Faiz's words would be pivotal in paving the way for progressive writers in this immediate post 1947 period.

By 1949 a new slogan was invented of *azadi jute* (false freedom) to give expression to the sense of treachery and anguish that was widespread amongst sections of the intelligentsia at how they felt ordinary people had been cheated out of freedom.² This slogan was adopted by the Communist Parties of India and Pakistan to characterise the period of post independence and consequently to demand the continuation of the struggle for real freedom and revolution against the Congress government of Nehru and the first Muslim League government after Jinnah's death, of Liaquat Ali Khan.

¹ F.A. Faiz, "Freedom's Dawn" (August 1947), in *Poems by Faiz Ahmad Faiz*, selected and trans. by Victor Kiernan, New Delhi: OUP, 2000, pp. 123-125.

² Resolution passed by the CPI at its December 1947 conference stipulated 'the real freedom of both the countries was yet to be achieved and the present so-called freedom was the outcome of an unholy alliance between the Congress and the Muslim League, insisting that a 'central government manned by leaders of the National Congress cannot be the instrument of further advance'. See *Documents of the Communist Movement in India (1944-1948)*, vol. 5, Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997, pp. 536-563.

The adoption of this slogan by the PWA movements in India and Pakistan resulted in activity that placed progressive writers at loggerheads with the young independent regimes. The notion of false freedom was used to justify insurrectionary activities and consequently progressive organisations were labelled anti-national and in some cases treacherous. The new states were eventually to proscribe the PWA as organisations in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In focusing on the fate of the movement in the post-independent era this chapter will outline the ways in which the writers' movements emerged from the shock of partition to reconstitute themselves. It will chart the development of the PWA on both sides of the border and consider their chief concerns through an examination of some of their policies, manifesto commitments and activity as reported in their journals. This will include an assessment of international considerations in the post-war era that impinged upon this radical intellectual tradition. The practical implications of the position of false freedom will be explored, with a focus on the problems of state censorship for writers. This will include an examination of how the activities of the PWA were monitored and repressed and of the different dynamics at work in the operations of the Pakistan and Indian states.

In spite of state repression progressive writers did find space for creative activity and political content through the medium of film, particularly in India. The chapter will end by looking at the role and contribution of progressive writers to the early post-independence era films in the popular Bombay talkies in order to see how they attempted to continue with their project.

The PWA in Pakistan

There had always been a 'progressive' presence in the cities of what became Pakistan. So there were PWA units in the cities of Karachi, Multan, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Peshawar. Lahore had been one of the main centres of PWA activity pre-independence with a lively branch comprising the Urdu writers Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Abdullah Malik and Zaheer Kashmiri.³ However, Lahore had also been left traumatised by partition and was the site of refugees and relief work during the summer and autumn of 1947. If the progressive movement was to have a future in this new state it was imperative for Lahore to be at the forefront of PWA life. This was facilitated by the presence of Faiz Ahmad Faiz in that city and the fact that two leading radical newspapers, the English *Times of Pakistan* and the Urdu *Imroze*, were located there.⁴ Following partition a few progressive writers with a Muslim background migrated to Pakistan from Bombay and UP. So Hamid Akhtar, Sibtey Hasan and Sajjad Zaheer moved to Pakistan to support the progressive movements. All three were members of the CPI and the AIPWA and so had ample experience and training in how to organise a writers' movement. Although the majority of Hindus had left Pakistan for India, in Karachi a handful of political activists, with a Hindu background, remained. One, Sobho Gianchandani, was a young student who had been radicalised by the nationalist movement and had been active in the 1942 Quit India campaign in Karachi. Like many activists at the time he was arrested and only released in 1945. Unrepentant, he joined the Communist Party of India but was horrified as he witnessed the tragedy of partition. Unlike most Hindu families he remained in his native Sindh and went on to be a founder member of the Sindhi

³ Interview with Hasan Abidi at Karachi Press Club, 5th May 2004. Hasan was born in Zafarabad, Jaunpur district UP and moved to Pakistan in 1948. He was a member of the PWA and a fellow traveller of the Communist movement in Pakistan. As a journalist, he worked on the weekly *Lail-o-Nihar*, when it was edited by Faiz and later Sibte Hasan. Later he joined *Dawn*, and was President of the Karachi Press Club.

⁴ Faiz was editor of both these papers from 1947 until his arrest in 1951.

PWA. The new state of Pakistan did not look too kindly upon this atheistic Hindu and after Jinnah's death Gianchandani was arrested in late 1948. He was "advised" to leave for India or be prepared to die in jail. He did neither and was eventually released in 1952, only to be arrested and jailed again in 1954 for one year. He has always referred to himself as the "three-headed monster", denoting the fact that he was a Sindhi, a Communist and a Hindu, each of which was and is anathema to the Pakistani state.⁵ Another activist who would become a leading figure in IPTA post partition was Avtar Kishen Hangal. Today he is known as the gentle avuncular character of mainstream Bollywood films but sixty years ago he was a committed activist of the left.⁶ He had been a Congress volunteer during the war and in 1946 was secretary of the Karachi CP. In Karachi the Pakistan government had five leading Communist Party members arrested, including Hangal and Gianchandani. They were processed as 'category C,' prisoners which meant they were in the same section as petty criminals. Hangal recalls how, unlike other prisoners, they were not provided with blankets or containers and so had no means of holding their one ounce of oil when rations were distributed.⁷ 'When we complained about this, we were beaten up by the warden.'⁸ After partition, India and Pakistan exchanged refugees on the basis of religious community. This practice continued for many years post 1947. According to Hangal, in mid 1949 whilst still in prison in Karachi, news reached them that the two countries were to exchange prisoners along communal lines. Hangal, Gianchandani and the other three CP members who just happened to have Hindu names, were to be exchanged for Muslim prisoners. All five refused to go. 'We had obligations to our supporters, responsibilities to our fellow trade unionists

⁵ Interview with Sobho Gianchandani, in Karachi Civil Hospital, 6th May 2004.

⁶ Avtar is still as active a champion of progressive causes and radical literature and theatre.

⁷ A.K. Hangal, *Life and Times of A.K. Hangal*, New Delhi: Sterling Paperbacks, 1999, p. 47.

⁸ Interview with Avtar Kishen Hangal in Bombay, 10th March 2004.

and other activists... Karachi was my home; even in prison I was a native of this city'.⁹ To the state authorities the mere fact that these prisoners were Hindu and Communist was tantamount to treason but they could not force them to leave. They had formed the bedrock of the PWA movement in that city and as atheists they did not subscribe to a religious interpretation of Pakistan. It is important to understand that at its foundation the nature of the Pakistani state was not religious. Though the Muslim League had fought for it on the basis of providing a home for India's Muslims, it is important to note that for Jinnah this was never to be a communal, exclusive state. In 1947, in his inaugural address as President, Jinnah stated the following as his future aspiration for the new state,

... Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State.¹⁰

This has led the Pakistani historian Hamza Alavi to characterise the state that emerged as one that was dominated by a salariat. This concept describes that section of the middle classes that arose under a colonial bureaucracy, whose objective was state employment. It is this layer that comprised the ruling bureaucracy of Pakistan at its inception. It was one dominated by highly skilled and educated civil servants, military chiefs and traditional landlords.¹¹ Sections from this class would come to exercise some influence inside the Pakistan PWA.

The All-Pakistan Progressive Writers' Association (APPWA) had a very short and chequered history. Its official existence spanned a mere eight years and during this

⁹ Interview with A.K. Hangal in Bombay.

¹⁰ *Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Debates*, vol. 1, No. 2, 11th August 1947, p. 20.

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of the nature of the Pakistan state see H. Alavi, "Pakistan and Islam: Ethnicity and Ideology" in H. Alavi and Fred Halliday (eds.) *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988.

time there were only three national conferences. The first conference took place in Lahore at the YMCA hall on 5th December 1947. It came in the immediate aftermath of partition which gives us a sense of the priorities of this conference and also a hint of the notion of false independence and the need to continue the struggle for real emancipation. In an address on the problems of progressive literature in the post partition era, Abdul Majeed Salih argued that it was not worthwhile to argue about ‘what is a progressive writer’ – whether one is a communist or atheist. For him the most important requisite of progressivism was that ‘literature should be about life and the struggle to improve social life’.¹² He referred to the role of progressive writers in the Bengal Famine and the Punjab riots during partition, citing the innumerable works of fiction on these subjects, but also referred to the writers’ support and relief work for the victims of these tragedies. This he believed was in marked contrast to the callous policies of

...the British and the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh upper classes that formed an unholy alliance which resulted in the enormous tragedy of East and West Punjab... This is no longer an imperialist or communal battle – the battle ahead is a class one against our elites who will stop at nothing to use religion to divide us.¹³

This final point is striking as it demonstrates that straight after partition progressive writers felt the people had been cheated in the independence that resulted. This address also places the blame for partition and the accompanying violence on the colonial authority and the social elites of all communities. In addition, Salih’s address is indicative of the future battle lines that were to be drawn between the indigenous ruling elite and the mass of ordinary people. This first conference passed a range of resolutions that included fraternal greetings to their Indian comrades and

¹² Report on 1st Pakistan PWA conference as reported in “New Problems in Progressive Literature”, *Severa*, 3, January 1948, Lahore, p. 81.

¹³ “New Problems in Progressive Literature”, *Severa*, 3, p. 83.

called for continued cultural links. It also criticised feudal practices and called for the defence of peace, freedom and democracy.¹⁴

It has been commonly assumed that state repression against sections of the left and allied organisations only began in 1949 with a conspiracy trial (to be discussed below). However, recollections from writers reveal a very different picture. Hamid Akhtar has stated that Sajjad Zaheer could only enter Pakistan in 1948 in disguise as warrants for his detention had already been issued by the state authorities.¹⁵ Tahira Mazhar Ali, a young volunteer activist of the period, recalls how PWA meetings in Lahore had to take place in her home due to police harassment. 'The authorities would pressure managers of community halls, restaurants and other individuals not to let their premises be used for PWA activities.'¹⁶ In her home the association meetings were open to all as writers would meet to read out their poems, short stories and discuss literary and political topics.

Many stories reflected the popular desire for Indo-Pak friendship and the demand for open borders. The difficulty was that this was taken as actions against your government and writers were deemed to be anti-patriotic. The CID officers had been told to monitor and document the proceedings of progressive writers but many of them were slow at writing or could not write so I would write for them! After all they were open meetings, we had nothing to hide.¹⁷

Further proof of this is to be gleaned from the records of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Punjab. This state body monitored and recorded activities

¹⁴ See *Severa*, 3, p. 237.

¹⁵ Interview with Hamid Akhtar in Lahore, 12th May 2004. Hamid was a PWA member in Bombay before partition. He had been in north India at the time of communal riots and moved to Lahore in 1947.

¹⁶ Interview with Tahira Mazhar Ali in Lahore, 15th May 2004. Tahira was a young Communist Party activist who organised the Pakistan Democratic Association of Women. Her husband, Mazhar Ali Khan was editor of *The Pakistan Times*. He had been the assistant editor and took over from Faiz after his arrest. Mazhar himself resigned when the first military government of Ayub Khan took office in 1958. Before partition he had been a student at Government College Lahore and was an active member of the All-India Student Federation.

¹⁷ Interview with Tahira Mazhar Ali.

and confiscated material from the PWA from 1947 onwards until the association was banned on 25th July 1954. This culminated in a report entitled, '*The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*'.¹⁸ This secret document was compiled by Mian Anwer Ali, the Deputy Inspector-General of Police and printed in 1952. The two volume report documents the activities of the Party as well as the meetings, correspondence and reports of the Pakistan PWA that were confiscated from the various raids and arrests that were made before the Party was banned. In the preface to the report, Ali describes what he perceived to be the threat posed by this Party and its adherents:

After the partition, the Communist Party in Pakistan lost all its veteran workers and was left without financial resources; yet within three years a powerful party machine has been built up. The budget of the party is perhaps only next to that of the Muslim League. It employs more paid workers than any other political party. New links have been forged and work organised amongst students, factory workers, other labourers, Kisans and writers, including journalists. Innumerable strikes, processions and demonstrations have been organised. Class consciousness, which was unknown in these parts, has been developed and a distrust of the British created.¹⁹

And on the PWA he had this to report:

The Progressive Writers' Association had been in existence before the partition. In fact Sajjad Zaheer came to Lahore in 1947 ostensibly for addressing the Progressive Writers. The Association had built for itself some reputation. Several well-known writers called themselves progressive. The public does not realise perhaps even to this day that the P.W.A. is not quite so innocuous and that it is in reality a front for the Communist party. That is why meetings of the P.W.A. are often attended by persons who ordinarily despise communism.²⁰

This demonstrates that the Pakistani state was obsessive about communism and its assumed pernicious influence on an unsuspecting intelligentsia. In fact the whole

¹⁸ M.A. Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, Lahore: 1952. Volumes 1&2.

¹⁹ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan*, vol. 1, p. 1.

²⁰ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan*, vol. 2, p. 411.

report is based in the supposition that many of the organisations formed in Pakistan were Communist controlled; so the *Kisan Sabah*, Student Federation, Trade Union Congress, Democratic Women's Committee, as well as the PWA, were all deemed to be simple CP fronts. The assumption is explicable if we consider the fact that in undivided India the CPI played a significant role in the organisation of these bodies.²¹ In recording the first visit by Sajjad Zaheer to Pakistan, Ali states that 'he did spade work for the Second Congress of the Communist Party of India' and made an extensive tour of the country to meet with Party workers. Ali claims it was as a result of Zaheer's initial visit that the first APPWA conference was convened.²² In all probability Zaheer was sent by the CPI on a reconnaissance visit to Pakistan. As a leading member of the Party, there was not anything unusual in this. But to insist that all writers associated with the PWA were mere Communist stooges does not seem to do justice to either the intelligence services of Pakistan or to the writers. The CID report itself lists the APPWA membership at 217 writers from 17 cities.²³ Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, who became General Secretary of the PWA in 1949, has never been a member of the CP, pre or post partition and neither had Faiz. In addition, the CPP was not established until February 1948. This followed the Calcutta Congress of the CPI in February of that year where a decision was taken to formally divide the CP between the two countries.²⁴ What this document does reveal is the level of close surveillance that progressive writers were subjected to by the new state of Pakistan. Moreover, as mentioned in chapter 3, when the CPI gave support to the idea of separate nationalities and self-determination in 1943, it was taken by many nationalist activists as support for the Pakistan demand. Consequently, Hasan Abidi

²¹ See Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, 1959, pp. 406-445.

²² Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, vol. 1, p. 5.

²³ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, vol. 2, pp. 414-420.

²⁴ See *Documents of the Communist Movement in India, (1944-1948)* vol. 5, 1997, pp. 757-761.

(1929-2005) stated that arguably the Communists did more than the Muslim League to give popular shape to the notion of Pakistan.²⁵ According to Hamid Akhtar, many people accept that the CPI gave organisational form to the Pakistan demand but as soon as Pakistan was established, Communist Party activists were under surveillance by the state police. When Sajjad Zaheer went to Lahore in June 1948, he had to travel incognito and remain underground as warrants had already been issued for his arrest.²⁶ As this report demonstrates the Pakistan state regarded all left wing influence as an internal threat.

The second conference of the APPWA was also held in Lahore from 11th to 13th November 1949. This was a pivotal juncture for the movement as the meeting paved the way for a more confrontational attitude towards the Pakistani state and non-progressive writers. In a policy statement issued by Zaheer Kashmiri, he declared that 'literature is for revolution' and 'with this slogan all previous concepts have become outdated.'²⁷ There were calls for the boycotting of "reactionary" writers, who were deemed to be those who championed the notion of 'literature for literature; Pakistani literature; Islamic literature; Freudian literature.'²⁸ Hasan Abidi, a member of the PWA, in recalling the period, defined it as one of deep sectarianism towards other writers:

In carrying a unanimous motion stipulating that progressive writers were not to write for anti-progressive journals and right wing writers should be banned from contributing to progressive journals the PWA created a clear cleavage between right and left and this had very serious

²⁵ Interview with Hasan Abidi,

²⁶ Interview with Hamid Akhtar in Lahore, 12th May 2004.

²⁷ Quoted in *Severa*, 7&8, p. 6.

²⁸ See Manifesto of 2nd APPWA conference in *Severa*, 7&8, p. 27.

implications as progressive writers were left isolated from the community of other writers and artists.²⁹

This meant that when the state decided to take action against radical movements, the PWA remained isolated from the wider community of intellectuals, including moderates as well as liberals. In addition it provided the state extra room for manoeuvre against those it sought to arrest.

The conference was attended by over 100 delegates, including peasants, factory workers and a large body of civil servants.³⁰ In addition to Urdu and Punjabi writers, there were Baluchi, Sindhi and Pashto intellectuals present.³¹ But even before the statements issued at this conference were uttered progressive writers found themselves under siege. The Provincial and Central governments had declared the PWA to be a political organisation for the purposes of Government Servants' Conduct Rules.³² This had the effect of discouraging government employees from any association with the PWA.

Then there was also the question of the conference venue. Initially it was to be held in the then village of Okhara, just outside Lahore. But the objections raised by religious figures and the local CID resulted in the municipal authorities cancelling the venue out of concerns for public safety. The conference eventually took place in a workers' settlement about two miles from the town at the Open Air Theatre, Baghi-i-Jinnah.³³ Alas, even here there were difficulties. There had been a bomb scare at the venue and delegates attending the sessions were attacked and beaten up. According

²⁹ Interview with Hasan Abidi at Karachi Press Club, 5th May 2004.

³⁰ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, vol. 2, p. 423.

³¹ See *Severa*, 7&8, p. 243.

³² Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, vol. 1, p. 56.

³³ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, vol. 2, p. 421.

to Akhtar, *agent provocateurs* had been hired specifically to attack the conference.³⁴ Members of the *kisan sabah* had been invited and these peasants helped to defend the conference. ‘The goons were waiting in the shadows to ambush people as they were leaving but the peasant delegates came out to stave them off.’³⁵ In addition, the water and electricity supply had been turned off in the hope of preventing the conference taking place.³⁶

At this conference invitations had been issued to progressive writers from outside Pakistan. In the event, only a Russian delegation arrived by road via Kabul. It comprised eight Russians, including writers. Their delegation leader, Tikhonov, and the Tajikistan poet, Tarsoom Zada, brought English translations of the great Russian classics, such as Tolstoy, Chekhov and Pushkin. However, the following day police raided the offices of the PWA and confiscated all the material they could find, including this collection. The books were never returned.³⁷ According to the report in *Severa*, during the conference there were sermons in mosques declaring the delegates to be atheists and troublemakers. The imams pleaded with the government to act against these “unbelievers”.³⁸ The conference passed four key resolutions: the first two concerned local demands, denunciation of the Okhara municipal authorities for denying a venue and demanding that the policy of defining the PWA as a ‘political organisation’ should be revoked. The latter two related to the international situation and included opposition to the atom bomb and condemnation of the Anglo/US bloc.³⁹ This last point is pertinent in terms of how the PWA viewed the positioning of the Pakistan government in the wider world. The end of the war had resulted in a new

³⁴ Interview with Hamid Akhtar,

³⁵ Interview with Hamid Akhtar,

³⁶ Reported in *Sang-e-Neel*, Special issue, Peshawar, January 1950, p. 20.

³⁷ Interview with Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Lahore, 13th May 2004.

³⁸ See report on 2nd APPWA conference in *Severa*, 7&8, p. 242.

³⁹ See report on 2nd APPWA conference in *Severa*, 7&8.

world order emerging with two new superpowers. In 1950 Prime Minister Khan had visited Washington and South Asia had become a focus of the cold war as the US was desperate to ensure influence in this region.⁴⁰ Pakistan had become part of the US sphere of influence. This caused consternation within the PWA as it was seen as the continuation of western imperial ambitions in the region. This line of reasoning was advanced further by the decisions of the CPI at its conference in 1947 that those who stood for peace should lead movements against this imperialist bloc.⁴¹

In Pakistan this was to be decisive in determining the future of radical movements. For the left the decision to undertake opposition to the state was not based on insurrectionary movements of peasants, workers, national minorities or students but on the disaffection of a layer of army officers reeling from their defeat in Kashmir. On 9th March 1951, the Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan announced on the radio that a conspiracy in the armed forces 'to create conditions in the country by violent means and to subvert the loyalty of Pakistan's defence forces' had been uncovered and that those believed to be its instigators had been arrested.⁴² The statement refused to 'disclose publicly the details of the plans of those who were implicated in the conspiracy', citing national security concerns but he asserted that if their plans had succeeded 'they would have struck at the very foundations of our national existence and disrupted the stability of Pakistan'.⁴³ In the conspiracy thirteen army officers and four civilians were arrested, charged and found guilty. The main protagonists of this attempted coup were Major General Akbar Khan, Chief of General Staff, his wife, Nasim Akbar Khan, and Brigadier Muhammed Abdul Latif

⁴⁰ *Pakistan Times*, Lahore, 14th July 1950.

⁴¹ Interview with Hasan Abidi.

⁴² *Dawn*, Karachi, 19th March 1951.

⁴³ *Dawn*, Karachi, 10th March 1951.

Khan, Commander of 52nd Brigade and Station Commander Quetta. The civilians associated with this were Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Sajjad Zaheer, both prominent members of the PWA and Zaheer was also the general secretary of the CPP.⁴⁴ On 16th April 1951 the government announced that Parliament had passed the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Act 1951, appointing a Special Tribunal to try the accused.⁴⁵ The Act declared that the trial would be held outside Pakistan's normal legal system so consequently several special provisions were included. These stipulated there would be no jury and instead convictions would be determined by a government-appointed tribunal; the tribunal would have the power to convict the accused of crimes in addition to those they were initially charged with and all statutes of limitation on previous crimes would be repealed; the proceedings would be held in camera and the accused were forbidden to speak to anyone other than their counsel or face prosecution under the Official Secrets Act 1923; the convictions of the Special Tribunal would be exempt from appeal or future revision and could only be overturned by pardon or reprieve from the Governor-General.⁴⁶

The involvement of Faiz and Zaheer seemed to provide some intellectual credibility and left wing veneer for this attempted coup. According to Hasan Abidi, Major General Akbar Khan and his wife were on very friendly terms with Faiz and Sajjad Zaheer.⁴⁷ From the accounts contained in the CID report Faiz had visited Kashmir whilst military operations were taking place and on his return he had praised the

⁴⁴ See list of accused in H. Zaheer, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy 1951: The First Coup Attempt in Pakistan*, Karachi: OUP, 1998, pp. xxx-xxxvii.

⁴⁵ H. Zaheer, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy 1951*, p. 16.

⁴⁶ For full details of the entire Act see H. Zaheer, *Times and Trials of Rawalpindi Conspiracy*, pp. 305-309, and full details of full debate see *Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Debate*, vol. IX, no. 4, 16th April 1951, pp. 74-118.

⁴⁷ Interview with Hasan Abidi, in Karachi Press Club, 5th May 2004.

heroism of army officers.⁴⁸ In addition Akbar Khan was a personal friend of Latif Afghani, a prominent CP member and close associate of Sajjad Zaheer.⁴⁹ He also had the addresses and telephone numbers of Palme Dutt, the then Secretary of the CPGB, and the secret address of Sajjad Zaheer in Lahore.⁵⁰ Faiz also carried the message outlining the rationale and intentions of the army officers to the CPP to see if they would approve.⁵¹

All this would seem to support Hasan Zaheer's assertion that this was the first and only time an attempted military take over had been sanctioned by a progressive and secular political party.⁵² However, it is necessary to disentangle the motivations of progressive writers from those of the army officers. Akbar Khan had been a lieutenant colonel at the time of independence, had risen to the rank of brigadier by March 1948 and eventually achieved promotion to become major general in December 1950.⁵³ He had been part of the Pakistan armed forces to go into Kashmir in October 1947 and like many soldiers on a losing side, felt that political leaders had been guilty of cowardice in not continuing the war. The following account from November 1948, by a Brigadier F.H.B. Ingall expressed the sentiments of an influential layer of officers:

...after dinner the general conversation centred on the situation in Kashmir, and there was much improper opinion aired. I cannot remember who was present, but beyond Latif there was a Major General comd [commanding] a Division in Peshawar, and an Air Vice Marshall, and other senior officers, mainly Army. Generally speaking the opinions aired were that General Gracey (C-in-C Pak Army) should be replaced by a Pakistani, and the Government then located in Karachi, should be

⁴⁸ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan*, vol. 2, p. 582.

⁴⁹ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan*, vol. 2, pp. 582-583.

⁵⁰ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan*, vol. 2, p. 583.

⁵¹ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan*, vol. 2, pp. 583-584.

⁵² Zaheer, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy 1951*, p. x.

⁵³ Zaheer, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy 1951*, p. 162.

pressed to approve forthright action in Kashmir against the Indian Army...⁵⁴

The reference to Gracey is indicative of the fact that British army officers still exercised control of the Indian and Pakistani armies as they had Dominion status initially after August 1947. This was a cause of much resentment within the armed services as the states were supposed to be independent. It is clear that for army personnel, Kashmir was a pivotal issue in providing inspiration for the coup plans. But for progressive writers and those within the CCP, their motives were somewhat different. As Victor Kiernan states, Faiz ‘was not an armchair reformer, but a pioneer ready to take part in any ongoing efforts for progress.’⁵⁵ He was the most celebrated and well respected writer of the new state. As editor of the *Pakistan Times*, he was vocal in his denunciation of obscurantism, conservatism and vested interests that he saw as maintaining privilege and status. He was also vice-president of the Trade Union Congress and Secretary of the Pakistan Peace Committee.⁵⁶ As such he was completely identified with leftist causes that the new state found discomfiting. As an infant state, Pakistan desperately needed to define itself *vis-à-vis* India. Intellectuals could facilitate the process of national identity and pride through their works. However, from the outset leading writers of Pakistan were at loggerheads with the state. Even though Faiz opted for Pakistan after partition, he never accepted the narrow jingoistic interpretation of this state. His poem *Dawn of Freedom* is testament to this. As the most famous and well respected writer in Pakistan, the authorities probably expected him to write fiction that was supportive of the state and to provide intellectual legitimacy as a means of harnessing a distinctive Pakistani

⁵⁴ Quoted in Zaheer, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy 1951*, pp. 163-164.

⁵⁵ See Preface to Faiz, *Poems by Faiz*, trans. with an introduction and notes by Victor Kiernan, New Delhi: OUP, 2000.

⁵⁶ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, vol. 2, p. 572.

identity. But he was not prepared to oblige. According to his eldest daughter, the Pakistan state never forgave him for this and it was for this reason that he was targeted.⁵⁷ From the beginning Faiz stood for progressive values of communal harmony. After Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948, a London newspaper described him as a 'brave enough man to fly from Lahore to Gandhi's funeral at the height of Indo-Pakistan hatred'.⁵⁸ There were several voices who implored him not to go as the first war with India over Kashmir had just ended, with the Pakistan army having to retreat. As his daughter Salima recalls, 'people warned him not to go, it was too dangerous they said. But his reply was, "I am editor of a leading newspaper in Pakistan, how can I not cover this story?"'.⁵⁹ Faiz's interest in this was not purely journalistic but was intended to demonstrate his support for the idea of a common people and shared history in spite of partition.

Faiz had never been a Communist Party member. He was described as 'a very close Party sympathiser'.⁶⁰ But his wife Alys was. She was British and had joined the Party at sixteen in London. Such was the paranoia over Communist influence that when Faiz was arrested all the books in their house were confiscated by the police. At the trial these books were produced as evidence of Faiz's culpability and the danger he represented to the state. Faiz asked the judges to read the name inside the cover and there they found that all the Marx and Engels, Lenin, and books on the Soviet Union belonged to Alys. This did not help Faiz in his defence as he was now seen as guilty by association but following this revelation, the CID believed Alys to be a very senior member of the British CP, second only to Harry Pollit and Palme

⁵⁷ Interview with Salima Hashmi in Lahore 9th January 2005.

⁵⁸ Quoted in *The Observer*, 11th March 1951, London, at the time of Faiz's first arrest.

⁵⁹ Interview with Salima Hashmi in Lahore, 9th January 2005.

⁶⁰ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, vol. 2, p. 572.

Dutt! Alys was absolutely thrilled!⁶¹ This again demonstrates the total paranoia that gripped the Pakistani establishment and is indicative of the lengths to which it was prepared to go, to silence dissent.

Faiz was arrested on 9th March 1951 at his home and Sajjad Zaheer was tracked down by police and arrested on 24th April.⁶² On 4th June 1951 all those accused under this Act were officially charged and sent by a specially commissioned train under armed guard to the Hyderabad jail. The walls of the prison were raised higher, additional police were hired to guard the jail and all the gates were electrified.⁶³ This is clearly indicative of both the seriousness of the crime and the degree of danger with which these individuals were held by the state. If the state was deadly serious about offences committed against it, Faiz initially did not appear to give the matter much weight. In his first letter after his arrest to his wife Alys, dated 7th June 1951, he seemed almost jovial about the experience, as if he were going on some mystery tour:

How grandly we travelled! We had everything – the only thing missing was a brass band! The moment we boarded the train it felt as if all our troubles had vanished. The joy of travelling, the pleasure of seeing the world again, the elegant meal – so many delightful things happened to us all at once. For the first time since that distant day when they suddenly took me away from home, we had a really delicious meal – roast chicken, pulao, fruit cocktail and ice-cream. (Unfortunately, I didn't have an appetite.) But the best thing of all was to have some human company – the most cherished thing in the world – something we had been denied for so long. ...Our home in the jail is not bad. We have enough to eat. It doesn't get too hot either. Anyway, the worst days are over. Whatever else may happen, I need not fear being put into solitary confinement again. Nor is there any reason to fear further interrogation by the police. My life and my self-respect are intact. Now I can put before me your picture – and the children's – and smile. My heart no longer aches

⁶¹ Interview with Salima Hashmi in Lahore 9th January 2005.

⁶² Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, vol. 2, p. 597, p. 589.

⁶³ T. Genoways, "Let Them Snuff Out the Moon", Faiz Ahmad Faiz's Prison Lyrics in *Daste-e-Saba*, in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 19, 2004, p. 102.

thinking of you the way it used to. I am now more than ever convinced that in spite of everything life is wonderful – and also very lovely.⁶⁴

On his prospects before the hearing he had this to tell his wife:

...no fear has touched my heart since the moment we reached here. Of course, even earlier, I was not afraid. Not only have I not done anything that could remotely be called morally wrong, I have done nothing that can be labelled a crime even in the most strict of legal senses. But now I don't even feel as though I am in jail, unless someone reminds me of it. I feel as if I am here of my own free will – that if ever I want to leave no one can stop me.⁶⁵

This relaxed attitude was mirrored by one of his co-accused, a Major Muhammad

Ishaque who had been arrested in May 1951. He described the atmosphere in jail thus:

...we felt that we were having a picnic. There was fun and laughter all round. There were guffaws of laughter and hope and steadfastness. We were having *Qawwali* meetings and fancy dress balls.⁶⁶

However, Faiz could not simply walk out. He was incarcerated by a state that did not view him as a great writer to be revered as a national hero, but as a traitor who had subverted the national army. As prisoners they were treated harshly. The same Major Muhammad Ishaque recalled how the 'toadies of the government were demanding, in newspapers, advertisements and their meetings, our death by a firing squad'.⁶⁷

Faiz was imprisoned on 9th March 1951 and released in April 1955. The strict nature of the prison regime can be gleaned from the fact that Zaheer and Faiz were separated after sentencing and they were forbidden to correspond with each other.

Zaheer recalls how it was only 'through letters of some friends and some magazines

⁶⁴ Faiz, "Faiz to Alys to Faiz: Some Prison Letters", *Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 5, 1985, p. 118.

⁶⁵ Faiz, "Some Prison Letters", p. 118.

⁶⁶ Major Muhammad Ishaque, "The Story of the Prison House" in *An Introduction to the Poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz*, ed., by Imdad Husain, Lahore: Vanguard, 1989, p. 45.

⁶⁷ Major Muhammad Ishaque, "The Story of the Prison House", in *An Introduction to the Poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz*, Lahore: Vanguard, 1989, p. 45.

in Urdu, I had the opportunity of reading a few ghazals and poems of Faiz'.⁶⁸ Faiz's prison stories, *Zindan Nama* was written between July 1952 and March 1955 when Faiz was in Montgomery jail and Lahore Central jail. The hearing into this case ended in December 1952. Both Zaheer and Faiz had been held in the central jail, Hyderabad. After the trial when a sentence of four years imprisonment was passed they were separated with Faiz sent to the Punjab jails and Zaheer sent back to the central jail in Baluchistan.⁶⁹

On 16th October 1951, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated by Saad Akbar in Rawalpindi. The assassin himself was immediately shot several times by the Prime Minister's bodyguards.⁷⁰ This had led to speculation that perhaps his guards, acting under orders from their superiors, were party to the murder. The removal of Khan brought some hope and American writers such as Paul Robeson and Howard Fast wrote letters to the Prime Minister's office appealing for the release of Faiz and Zaheer.⁷¹ However, any sign of a reprieve for the PWA was quickly diminished as police scrutiny of the case increased and the conspiracy now included the plot to murder the Prime Minister as well.

In 1951 Liaquat Ali Khan had issued an ordinance that prohibited any government employee from being a member of political associations.⁷² The PWA fell under this category. According to Ahmed Nadim Qasmi, this was the first attack of this nature on the writers' movement.⁷³ After the Rawalpindi conspiracy case was over and sentences passed, there were many arrests of writers, trade unionists, students and

⁶⁸ S. Zaheer, "Foreward to *Zindan Nama*", in Husain, *An Introduction* p. 42.

⁶⁹ See H. Zaheer, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy 1951*, p. 295.

⁷⁰ T. Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People's Power*, London: Cape, 1970, pp. 54-55.

⁷¹ Interview with Salima Hashmi. As a writer of international repute, Faiz's arrest and imprisonment caused a degree of outrage amongst intellectuals in the West.

⁷² Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan*, vol. 1, p. 51.

⁷³ Interview with Qasmi.

peasant workers in both wings of Pakistan. Qasmi had been General-Secretary of the association from the 1949 conference and he was re-elected in 1952 and continued in post until 1954 when he resigned. His resignation was due to the fact that no activity – literary or political – was possible after 1954 as the state set about proscribing certain organisations that were perceived as a threat to national security.

The severity of the charges against the accused and other activists can be gleaned from the sentences handed out. Sajjad Zaheer and Faiz were imprisoned for four years under Section 121A of the Pakistan Penal Code.⁷⁴ They were part of the group specifically charged under the conspiracy offence but other writers also suffered incarceration. So Ahmed Nadim Qasmi was jailed for six months, Hamid Akhtar was imprisoned for six months, Sibtey Hasan, Hasan Abidi and Chaudhry Rehmat Ullah Aslam were also arrested.⁷⁵ There was a People's Publishing Bookshop in Lahore, premises owned by the undivided CPI before partition. It became the hub of progressive publishers and radical books. Rauf Malik was put in charge of this by Sajjad Zaheer until it was shut down in 1951.⁷⁶

In addition to arrests the Pakistan government suppressed three leading progressive journals. *Severa*, *Naqoosh* and *Adab-e-Latif* were banned. Only *Sang-e-Neel*, published from Peshawar, was allowed to continue publication in the period from 1948 to 1950. Its fifth issue from May 1949 condemned the state attacks on writers as well as those orchestrated by the press.⁷⁷ This was a reference to the English newspaper, *Dawn*, which urged the government to take action against progressive

⁷⁴ Zaheer, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy, 1951*, p. 295.

⁷⁵ Interview with Abdul Rauf Malik in Lahore, 3rd January 2005.

⁷⁶ Interview with Abdul Rauf Malik in Lahore, 3rd January 2005.

⁷⁷ *Sang-e-Neel*, 5, Peshawar, 1st May 1949, pp. 4-6. This publication escaped the earlier suppression due to fact published from Peshawar.

writers as they were deemed “anti-Pakistani” and guilty of depicting pornography in their literature. This last reference is to the publication of Manto’s short story “Open It” and “Cold Meat”, both about partition. The editorial of *Sang-e-Neel* also condemned the Indian government for its arrest of Ali Sardar Jafri and noted how both governments were attempting to crush the progressive movement.⁷⁸ It was not only a question of repression at home for these journals. The state government of Gujarat had banned the entry of *Adab-e-Latif* and *Sang-e-Neel* into Ahmedabad on the grounds of protecting public safety.⁷⁹

Even if we account for the different motivations of progressive writers from the army officers, it is undeniable that this whole episode was disastrous for the writers’ movement. In commenting on the CPI tradition and its impact on the PWA, Zamir Niazi (1932-2004), a student member of the Party who was a volunteer at progressive writers’ conferences, stated that the Party made many mistakes historically and in the recent past. For Niazi the greatest ‘historical blunder’ was perpetrated by B.T. Ranadive as General Secretary of the undivided CPI in 1949.⁸⁰ This articulated the position of onward struggle against the indigenous regimes of India and Pakistan. According to Niazi, this was analogous to a recent error of the Communists in India which came in the aftermath of the 1998 general election campaign, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to form the national government. The Communists had the opportunity to prevent this if Jyoti Basu, the General Secretary of the CPI (M) would have had agreed to form a coalition with other parties. However, the Party leadership refused to endorse this move and so no

⁷⁸ *Sang-e-Neel*, 5, Peshawar, 1st May 1949, p. 6.

⁷⁹ Reported in *Sang-e-Neel*, 6, 1949, pp. 10-11.

⁸⁰ Interview with Zamir Niazi in Karachi, 2nd May 2004. Niazi was a member of the All-India Student Federation and later worked as a journalist on the Bombay *Inquilab*. He migrated to Pakistan in 1953 and joined the staff of *Dawn* in 1954. In Pakistan he was held in high esteem by progressives, radicals and even his conservative opponents who respected him for being the “conscience” of journalism.

coalition was possible. For Niazi this was as great a “historical blunder” as the BJP formed the ruling party and shifted the political terrain decisively to the right.⁸¹

After this period the PWA was able to organise one more conference. This took place in Karachi 12th -13th July 1952. This conference reversed the mandates and resolutions of the 1949 session. So the manifesto declared that ‘the PWA is a literary organisation and is not linked with any political Party.’⁸² This was clearly an attempt to distance the PWA from any association with a political organisation in the hope that the state would cease to label the writers as such. This statement was intended as a signal to the state authorities that progressives were only going to engage in literary activities and therefore there were no political grounds on which to detain writers in prison. The same sentiment was recorded in their journal *Severa* from that year. In explaining the new manifesto, Mumtaz Hussain claimed that their disavowal of the earlier pledges from 1949 was not a tactical manoeuvre but was intended to ‘allow writers to have a closer connection to reality.’⁸³ This proximity to social life was being denied by constant state harassment of PWA activity, imprisonments of leading members, and confiscation of material. He continued to explain why they had not used the phrase “United Front” as in previous declarations, stating that ‘the issue had been debated by delegates and all agreed to drop the term from use as the United Front means a political alliance and the PWA is not a political organisation.’⁸⁴ As if to further emphasise this “turn”, the chair of the session was the

⁸¹ Interview with Niazi.

⁸² Manifesto of 3rd APPWA quoted in *Indian Literature*, no. 2, 1952.

⁸³ M. Hussain, “New Manifesto” in *Severa*, 12, 1952, p. 167.

⁸⁴ Hussain, “New Manifesto”, p.171.

President of the *Anjuman-Taraaqi-Urdu*, a respectable, establishment literary association.⁸⁵

Hussain had been an ideological critic of the PWA, particularly during the period 1948-51, when the organisation was viewed as displaying a sectarian and intolerant veneer towards those who did not share its narrow principles. In the previous issue of *Severa*, Hussain had a long article entitled "The United Front and Progressive Writers", in which he provided a personal account of the history of this approach within the PWA. He identified three phases of this method. Firstly, there was the early history of the pre-independence progressive movement. In this period Hussain believed that the overriding factor influencing unity was opposition to colonial rule and feudal control.⁸⁶ Hence, the progressive literary canon in his opinion could incorporate 'anti-progressive writers such as Iqbal, Sadaat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai.'⁸⁷ For him Iqbal was problematic as he had his own peculiar brand of Islamic philosophy which meant that he could 'bemoan the plight of the poor but still resist the call for a workers' government as he viewed this as a dictatorship.'⁸⁸ In a similar vein, although Hussain conceded that the literature of Manto and Chughtai concerned itself with the poor, destitute and oppressed, he still believed them to be anti-progressive as he held their work to be crude and salacious.⁸⁹ He acknowledged that this broad front had positive elements as it brought some non-political writers to support the cause of the victims of the Bengal famine.⁹⁰ But he also believed this phase of united front activity resulted in the PWA being too much of a broad church

⁸⁵ Interview with Hasan Abidi.

⁸⁶ M. Hussain, "The United Front and Progressive Writers" in *Severa*, 10&11, 1952, p. 143.

⁸⁷ Hussain, "The United Front" pp. 144-145, pp. 158-161.

⁸⁸ Hussain, "The United Front" p. 146. It is interesting to note that in 1939 Jafri had written about the contradictory nature of Iqbal but he never described him as 'anti-progressive', as Hussain does here.

⁸⁹ Hussain, "The United Front" p. 161.

⁹⁰ Hussain, "The United Front" p. 162

as it was possible for some writers, presumably he meant those above, to remain aloof from political engagement. For him this was a mistake as it weakened the movement. However, he then argued that after 1948 the pendulum swung in the opposite direction and the organisation became too proscriptive as it excluded writers who did not subscribe to its strict manifesto declarations.⁹¹ This article demonstrates how even before the conference in 1952, there was recognition that the PWA had adopted some extremist positions that had to be rectified. However, it is also indicative of a change in policy and thinking within the Left. By late 1951 and early 1952 it had become self-evident that “revolution was not around the corner” and that the Pakistan state was real and had to be contended with.

The contrast with the last conference could not have been more obvious. As Hamid Akhtar has stated they represented the two milestones in the history of the Pakistan movement.⁹² Although this PWA conference discussed the errors of the previous period there was no acknowledgement that the activities of Faiz and Zaheer had embroiled the PWA in a military adventure with sections of the army. For most activists on the left the armed services were viewed as instruments of state oppression and therefore held notions of social progress and transformation as anathema. Disagreements within the CPP were evident from the interception of a letter by the CID, which showed that the decision to back the coup was taken by three to two in the Central Secretariat.⁹³ By contrast, the silence of PWA publications on this aspect of the affair was deafening. After his release, Sajjad Zaheer was deported to India under Nehru’s protection and on the undertaking that Zaheer would

⁹¹ Hussain, “The United Front” pp. 166-167.

⁹² Interview with Hamid Akhtar, Lahore, 12th May 2004.

⁹³ Ali, *The Communist Party of West Pakistan in Action*, vol. 2, p. 585.

never interfere in the internal affairs of Pakistan again.⁹⁴ The CCP was finally banned as a political organisation in July 1954.⁹⁵ Four years later, one of the first directives of the Ayub Khan government was the removal and destruction of all socialist literature from public libraries.⁹⁶ Another act was the expropriation of Progressive Papers Limited in order to exercise full control of the media.⁹⁷ The progressive movement suffered as no organisational work by the association was permitted. This was an experience from which the APPWA never recovered.

The PWA in India

India had emerged from the ruins of partition as a democratic, secular state with Nehru as Prime Minister. The Indian Constitution of 1950 had decreed universal suffrage, initiated some policies on land reform and re-structured the Union along linguistic states that accorded official recognition to the fourteen main languages of India.⁹⁸ These were welcome reforms and seemed to vindicate the belief in Nehru's socialist credentials. This would appear to suggest that prospects for a radical writers' movement should have been bright. However, the PWA encountered state opposition on that side of the border too. As stated above, the state government of Gujarat had banned the entry of two Pakistan progressive journals for similar reasons as the Pakistan government. The Indian PWA demonstrated their solidarity with their Pakistani comrades as the Indian journal *Naya Adab* condemned the ban on three progressive journals in Pakistan and demanded the state rescind this immediately.⁹⁹ In addition it called on the Gujarat ban to be lifted.¹⁰⁰ In India, the UP state

⁹⁴ See K.A. Abbas *I am Not an Island*, pp. 298-299.

⁹⁵ Zaheer, *The Times and Trial of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy 1951*, p. 223.

⁹⁶ Interview with Rauf Malik.

⁹⁷ T. Ali, *Pakistan: Military Rule or People Power*, pp. 100-104.

⁹⁸ See Indian Constitution published in

⁹⁹ *Naya Adab*, vol. 10, no. 3, Bombay, October 1948, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ *Naya Adab*, vol. 10, no. 3, Bombay, October 1948, p. 5.

government had banned a short story by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, claiming it was communalist.¹⁰¹ These measures were viewed as an attack upon progressive writers by the Congress-led government. The inability or unwillingness of the centre to do anything about these state level measures led to disaffection among progressive writers. This was combined with a level of disillusionment at the timidity of Nehru's reform programme. Many progressive writers felt exasperated at what they perceived as reluctance to proceed with wholesale land and industrial reform. This sentiment found expression in a short story by Krishan Chander (1914-1977) written in 1949. Entitled *Mahalakshmi Bridge*, it tells the story of industrial workers living in the slums on one side of the bridge, whilst on the other side is the racecourse where the rich come to worship in the temple of *Lakshmi*. On the bridge where the train passes are hanging six threadbare, faded, plain saris. Each sari belongs to six very ordinary women and they reflect the dull, grey and colourless lives they lead. Each one has a story of loss, either of a husband, employment or eyesight. As the Prime Minister drives by in his chauffeur driven car, the narrator of the story, who of course is Chander, boldly demands:

Look, I am not asking you to be a socialist. I am not even preaching the sermon of class war. I only want to ask whether you want to lay your stakes on the right or the left side of Mahalakshmi Bridge.¹⁰²

Chander was one of the most devoted members of the PWA and went on to become its General Secretary in 1953. He was from Kashmiri Rajput stock and his father was an active social reformer in the Arya Samaj. After completing his studies Chander went to Lucknow where he joined All-India Radio and met up with Sardar Jafri and

¹⁰¹ See "Sardarji" by K. A. Abbas, in *Sang-e-Neel*, 1, 1949, and K.A. Abbas *I am Not an Island*, for his account of legal and defence case, pp. 313-328.

¹⁰² K. Chander, "Mahalakshmi Bridge" in Narang, G.C (ed.), *Selected Short Stories*, trans by Jai Ratan, New Delhi: Sahitya Academi, 1990.

Sibtey Hasan.¹⁰³ He was arguably the most proficient progressive writer of Urdu short stories and is better known for his stories on partition.¹⁰⁴ The question posed in this story was aimed at Nehru for his apparent abandonment of the poor and slum dwellers. It was appealing to Nehru's socialist convictions of a decade earlier. What becomes clear is that Nehru as a young fire brand radical leader under colonial rule was one thing. As Prime Minister of independent India he was quite another. On the one hand, given partition, Nehru represented the best hope progressives had of delivering a radical agenda to re-organise society. On the other, Nehru could not act independently of the Congress machinery, of which he was an integral part. It was with this contradiction and harsh reality of the late 1940s and early 1950s that progressive writers had to contend.

The situation was further complicated by an internal debate within the CPI, which eventually led to a split in the leadership. At one level, this debate was a re-assessment of the political situation in India post-independence but, at a more fundamental level, it reflected the shift in the international communist movement after the war. During the war Communist Parties had been encouraged to collaborate with "progressive" bourgeois governments but after 1945 the USSR attempted to re-assert its control of local parties through a campaign against "Browderism". This referred to Earl Browder, the leader of the CP USA, who had dissolved the Party into political associations. For this he was denounced, replaced and eventually expelled in 1946.¹⁰⁵ The switch became more pronounced with the onset of the Cold War during

¹⁰³ Interview with Salma Siddiqi, Krishan Chander's widow, in Bombay, 23rd January 2004.

¹⁰⁴ See *Hum Vahishi Hain*, 1947 and *Selected Short Stories*, ed., by Gopi Chand Narang, trans. by Jai Ratan, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990.

¹⁰⁵ Earl Browder followed the logic of pre-war alliances to declare that communism and capitalism could peacefully co-exist. Consequently, he abandoned the notion of class struggle and his political association sought entry into the Democratic Party. With the ending of the pre-war Great Power alliance and the beginning of the Cold War, this position was criticised by the communist movement.

1947-48. In June 1947, the US was promoting its Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Europe¹⁰⁶ and in September the Soviet Union responded by organising a new international body, the Cominform, comprising the communist regimes of Eastern Europe.¹⁰⁷ Right across the world, Moscow encouraged its supporters to engage in mass strikes and agitation against their governments and, in Asia, in insurrections on the model of guerrilla warfare that brought Mao Zedong to power in China a year later. So Zhdanov delivered the main speech at the Cominform gathering where he argued that the western powers were ‘seeking to keep India and China under the sway of imperialism and its continued political and economic bondage’; that in the current international situation ‘the chief danger of the working class...lies in underrating its own strength and overrating the strength of the enemy’; and that communist parties must lead national resistance to the ‘plans of imperialist expansion and aggression along every line’.¹⁰⁸ The impact in India was to encourage Communists and their supporters to regard the Congress as mere puppets of the imperialist west and to engage in very militant struggles against it. The old leadership of Puranchandra Joshi rejected this position but he was promptly removed and demoted, to be replaced by B. T. Ranadive in 1948. Five years later there was a swing back as the USSR began to see independent states, like India, as political allies in opposition to the US.

The campaign against him was orchestrated in 1945 by the French Communist, Jacques Duclos, who accused him of revisionism.

¹⁰⁶ See “Marshall Sees Europe in Need of Vast New U.S. Aid; Urges Self-Help in Reconstruction” in *Washington Post*, 6th June 1947, pp. 1, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Full fuller account see E. Reale, “The founding of the Cominform” in Milorad M. Drachkovitch and Branko Lazitch, eds., *The Comintern: Historical Highlights, Essays, Recollections, Documents*, Stanford: Stanford University, 1966.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in G.D. Overstreet and M. Windmiller, *Communism in India*, pp. 267-268.

The confusions this would have raised for radical elements in Indian society perhaps explain why it took almost two years for the PWA to meet.¹⁰⁹ The first progressive writers' conference in India since independence was planned for the beginning of 1949. This was the fifth AIPWA gathering and the venue was meant to be in Bombay. However, the conference was banned and the owners of the venue withdrew permission under pressure from the Bombay state government.¹¹⁰ The conference finally took place in Bhiwandi, a suburb of Bombay. The proceedings lasted three days from 27th to 29th May. The reception committee was chaired by Ismat Chughtai, who characterised the world as being 'divided into two camps: workers and capitalists' and called on writers not to be discouraged by the attacks on cultural organisations being waged at that time on the PWA and all its activities.¹¹¹ This was a reference to state scrutiny and harassment of leading progressive writers. Five months earlier, Ali Sardar Jafri was arrested on 20th January under the Public Safety Act for supposedly fomenting communalism.¹¹² He was planning the organisation of an Urdu Progressive Writers' conference in the same town. The Chief Minister of Bombay, Morarji Desai, had issued warnings that this conference could not go ahead. Jafri was released after a few days following protests in India and Pakistan by journalists and writers but only to be arrested again in May 1949. The thwarting of independent cultural and political activity by the first independent government, and one headed by Nehru, appeared to be quite scandalous to many writers.

¹⁰⁹ Interviews with Zamir Niazi 2nd May 2004. Niazi believed that in India the situation confronting the left was made very awkward with Nehru at the centre.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Hamid Akhtar.

¹¹¹ 5th AIPWA conference held in Bhiwandi, 27th-29th May 1949 as reported in *50 Years of PWA – Souvenir*, Lucknow: Golden Jubilee Celebrations Committee, 1986, p. 64.

¹¹² See *Shahrah*, 2, Bombay, February 1949, pp. 4-6.

This conference deliberated on its policy formulations and voted for a manifesto that was bold in its criticism of the Nehru-led government,

Under the leadership of Nehru and Patel the national government is crushing the people's movement and giving a free hand to capitalist culture. Any effort to sustain people's and socialist culture is being aborted.¹¹³

The manifesto described a world that was divided between an 'Anglo-American nexus and the peace-loving people of the world and the Soviet Union'.¹¹⁴

Consequently, writers could not remain neutral and delegates voted to oppose the Western bloc, which they identified with their past oppression under the British. This manifesto was presented by Ram Bilas Sharma and seconded by Krishan Chander, who ended his speech by describing the current situation as: 'we were slaves before 15th August and are slaves after 15th August. The only difference is that our rulers are not white but brown but their hearts are black.'¹¹⁵

This conference was a turning point for the PWA in India as for the first time progressive writers found themselves on the opposite side of the fence to their former comrade and hero, Nehru. As with their Pakistani counterparts, this conference took place when the notion of revolutionary change was espoused by communist parties in South Asia and enthusiastically taken up by many activists outside them. It declared that it was 'the duty of the progressive writer to struggle more and more for freedom of expression and justice.'¹¹⁶ This position was alluring as in India a series of insurrectionary movements had developed in the lead up to independence. The most significant of these was in Andhra Pradesh where a movement of peasants had struck

¹¹³ Manifesto of 4th AIPWA conference, reported in *50 Years of PWA*, p. 64.

¹¹⁴ Manifesto of 4th AIPWA conference, reported in *50 Years of PWA*, p. 64.

¹¹⁵ See *Shahrah*, 3&4, p. 365.

¹¹⁶ Declaration of the 5th AIPWA conference, reported in *Shahrah*, 3&4, p. 10.

to oppose the demands of local landlords. In addition, Andhra was the seat of one of the princely kingdoms. The Nizam of Hyderabad had refused to secede to the Indian Union after 1947 and Hyderabad became the only princely state to declare independence in 1947.

This struggle of the armed peasantry against their landlords and the Nizam was the most insurrectionary movement of peasants that South Asia had seen. It pitched thousands of indigent and pitiable peasants against the offensive might of the *zamindars* as well as the crumbling edifice of the bureaucracy and state functionaries of the principality. The movement inspired progressive writers and within Andhra state itself a PWA unit had existed in Hyderabad since 1936. The stalwart of this organisation was the great Urdu poet, Mohinuddin Makhdoom. He was a Communist Party member and very active in the region. He was a fighter alongside the peasants of Telengana and penned several poems to the heroic struggles of these peasants.

Although Hyderabad had been a princely state there was a radical left base that had been built by the CPI. In his highly detailed account of the Telengana uprising, Barry Pavier states that several groupings had formed under the umbrella of the Andhra Provincial Committees from the Andhra coastal region of the Madras Presidency in British India. This comprised students who had been involved in the singing of *Bande-mataram* at Osmania university, radical elements in the Andhra Mahasbha and also a group of intellectuals in Hyderabad city known as the 'Comrades Association', which included the Urdu progressive poet, Makhdoom Mohiuddin.¹¹⁷ Makhdoom was general secretary of the Andhra PWA and a member of the CPI. The Communists had roots in Nalgonda, where they took up agrarian issues affecting

¹¹⁷ B. Pavier, *The Telengana Movement, 1944-1951*, New Delhi: Vikas, 1981, p. 81. This is the most comprehensive account of this movement.

peasants, such as forced labour and tenancy questions when landlords started evictions. In all this they supported mass mobilisations of peasants who were prepared to fight.¹¹⁸ By 1943 the CPI had built a well-developed organisation in Telengana consisting of a state committee with a secretariat of nine that included Makhdoom.¹¹⁹ There were district committees in Nalgonda, Karimnagar, Adilabad and Hyderabad city going down to area organisers and village cells, which had their own committees.¹²⁰ In addition to rural areas, the CPI had roots in the small but growing trade union movement in Hyderabad itself. The trade unions were only 20,000 strong but they included the railway workers, the colliery workers from the Singareni mines in Warangal district and the textile workers in the large mills.¹²¹ So in pre-partition India the left had built up a credible base amongst the peasantry and industrial workers.

In order to fully appreciate the impact and consequences of this episode it is necessary to understand the background to the dispute in Telengana. The movement was sparked by the killing of Doddi Komarayya, a shepherd by trade and an activist.¹²² D. V. Rao, a young student of Hyderabad and district secretary of the CPI in Nalgonda recalled how, in December 1945 in the village of Palakurthi, local peasants had defeated an attempt by the landlord to expropriate the crop of a widow by guarding her fields.¹²³ But the landlords returned with greater force to punish those responsible for thwarting their designs and they captured and tortured them. In response peasants from surrounding villages decided to protect the village and on 4th

¹¹⁸ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 89.

¹¹⁹ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 85.

¹²⁰ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 85.

¹²¹ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 90.

¹²² Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 95.

¹²³ Quoted in Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 95.

July 1946 Doddi Komarayya was shot dead by the landlord's men.¹²⁴ Following this, a crowd of 2000 people gathered outside the landlord's residence to loot his mango grove and set his house alight.¹²⁵ He was only saved by the arrival of 60 armed police, who managed to get the crowd to disperse, on the basis of promising to bring Komarayya's murderers to book, which they did not.¹²⁶

According to Pavier, this killing sparked a movement that spread to about 150 villages in the surrounding area, where 200 acres of land was seized and distributed under the guidance of local CPI members.¹²⁷ This took the struggle of agrarian workers to a new plane. They were no longer content to protect crops and grain stores but instead went from defensive action to embark upon a programme of land redistribution, which of course brought them into open conflict with the *deshmukhs*.¹²⁸ This sort of self-activity by the dispossessed was inspiring for progressive writers and activists. The IPTA produced a play specially written for this entitled, *Ma Bhoom*, (My Land). According to a member of the Comrades' Association, this proved to be immensely popular amongst the peasantry.¹²⁹

This would seem to vindicate the position taken by Communists in believing India to be ripe for revolutionary activity. However, the state of Andhra did not stand by idly. It acted with ruthless force and in November 1946 the princely state banned the CPI in Hyderabad.¹³⁰ The reason for this was the fear the Nizam had that radical and seditious ideas would spread amongst his subjects. State police were sent to the

¹²⁴ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 96.

¹²⁵ P. Sunarayya, *The Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, Calcutta: CPI (M), 1972, p. 36.

¹²⁶ Sunarayya, *The Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, pp. 36-37.

¹²⁷ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 96.

¹²⁸ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 96.

¹²⁹ Recollection of Raj Bahadur Gour, quoted in Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, pp101-102.

¹³⁰ R.N Reddy, R. *Heroic Telengana*, New Delhi: CPI, 1975, p. 46.

interiors and set up camps outside the villages. These were used as a base to launch armed raids and the troops engaged in indiscriminate firing and looting.¹³¹ However, the opposition was not easy to quell and for a few weeks what can only be described as a situation of dual power existed:

In 2000 villages, the will of the Nizam does not exist. It is the People's Courts, composed of peasants, that dispense law and justice; people's enemies are punished; land is given to the tiller and effective steps are taken to curb the exploitation of the landlords. In these areas peasants have forged a new weapon of power, embodying their own sovereignty. They have been able to do so on the basis of their armed resistance to the Nizam's police and hireling goondas. The armed defence of the agrarian revolution is producing before our eyes a new state in which the political and economic power belongs directly to the masses and not to the cheats from the upper classes.¹³²

Given this volatile situation, the Nizam was completely unable to restore "order". In a desperate bid for survival, the princely state declared independence in 1947 and banned the flying of the Indian flag.¹³³ On 4th May 1948 the ban on the CPI was lifted by the Nizam. The Party immediately denounced the idea of accession to the Indian Union, which it held to be an "imperialist plot" and instead called for *Azadi* Hyderabad.¹³⁴ This support for independence was interpreted as support for the Nizam as far as the national government was concerned. However, it is important to understand that the support for independence by the CPI was not indicative of political support for the princely state. For radical activists, demanding independence was synonymous with supporting the demands of the peasantry. It implied a challenge to the powers of landlords as well as the social ills that plagued the lives of village people. Radical intellectuals identified with the heroism displayed by communist activists in the movement and actions of the peasantry. In addition to the

¹³¹ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 100.

¹³² Quoted in *People's Age*, Bombay, 11th April 1948.

¹³³ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 111.

¹³⁴ Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, p.179.

IPTA play, Krishan Chander wrote his novel, *Jab Khet Jage* (When the Fields Awake), during this period. The novel deals with the problems of the Telengana peasantry and particularly with their attempts to retain the land given to them in the reforms that resulted from the land tenure system. The central character of the novel is a young peasant leader, Raghu Rao, who is about to be hanged as the novel opens. The novel depicts Raghu's final night as he recalls the events that have led to his imprisonment. The book quite sensitively and graphically portrays the harsh economic lives of the peasants and their families. It illustrates the brutality of everyday indignities and pettiness that blight the poverty stricken existence of these people.¹³⁵ Chander's total identification with this struggle and the peasantry is indicative of the central role this played in PWA thinking at the time. Many progressive writers assumed that Telengana would herald a nationwide revolt by peasants and other oppressed groups, but this was not to be.

The Indian government did not tolerate this declaration of unilateral independence and on 15th September 1948 the Indian army entered Hyderabad from four directions and three days later fighting ceased.¹³⁶ Although the former regime was abolished and, with it, its archaic feudal privileges, for the peasants of Telengana the Indian state did not come as a liberating force. The national army came into the villages and demanded that confiscated land be returned. As one account explained:

The army resorted to atrocities unheard of even in the Razakar period. Throwing people into thorny and prickly-pear bushes and dancing on them with heavy-shod military boots on, forcing the people to crawl for furlongs in the hot sun, hanging the people upside-down from tree-tops and kicking them like a ball with booted legs, releasing the ropes suddenly from treetops, throwing people down to the ground covered with pebbles and stones and road-making material, shaving the heads of

¹³⁵ K. Chander, *Jab Khet Jage*, Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1949.

¹³⁶ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 141.

women, raping them – these are some of the modes of the enemy’s atrocities.¹³⁷

There were some 50,000 Indian troops stationed in Telengana. As one participant described, by December 1948 the total number arrested was 10,000¹³⁸ and up to 500 activists were killed.¹³⁹ This behaviour seemed to justify the position Communists and some writers had taken earlier in denouncing the Nehru government.

In this situation, within the PWA a sectarian view emerged whereby only those writers who accepted this analysis could be deemed progressive. The task of the writer was to write about such struggles and to fully identify with a particular ideological viewpoint. Hence the novel by Chander, which according to one source sold out of four editions in the first year.¹⁴⁰ Notwithstanding this, the fact of the matter remains that the PWA project was also about intellectuals not only identifying with the masses but also having some knowledge of their subject matter. This was the essence of the realism that they had attempted to inject into literature and the arts in general. The early pioneers of the movement had articulated the necessity for reality as well as close proximity to the masses. For Makhdoom to pen poems to the heroism of the Telengana peasantry was not surprising as he was part of the region. Chander, on the other hand, did not belong to Telengana and was not familiar with the issues and concerns of the people. However, during this period of PWA history this was seen as irrelevant to the central point of progressive writers producing literature “made to order”. As Narahari Kaviraj states:

¹³⁷ Sundarayya, *Telengana People’s Struggle*, pp. 208-209.

¹³⁸ D.V. Rao, quoted in Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 145.

¹³⁹ Sundarayya, *Telengana People’s Struggle*, p. 202.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Shamim Faizi, in New Delhi on 2004. Shamim is editor of the CPI newspaper, *New Age*.

...it was not possible for all writers to go to Telengana...this was an absurd position to adopt...it created artificial literature and isolated progressive writers from the wider community of intellectuals who could be drawn to the progressive fold.¹⁴¹

To articulate this line of argument does not imply a criticism of Chander. His motives in writing a novel were genuine and based on his loyalty to what he believed was the role of intellectuals in society.

In addition to arrests and imprisonment of progressive writers and activists for their political opposition to the state, the Indian government resorted to colonial measures to ensure that any opposition would be suppressed. So in 1950 the Congress government re-enacted the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876.¹⁴² This Act had been used by the colonial state to suppress any plays that presented critical opinions in the years following the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. The IPTA had called for the immediate repeal of this Act in its entirety at its Seventh conference in Bombay in 1953.

On 26th January 1950 India was declared a republic as it had a new constitution guaranteeing basic civil liberties, freedom of the press and democracy. But, according to the PWA publication of that year *Shahrah*, attacks on progressive writers continued unabated. Government employees were banned from holding membership of the PWA and IPTA.¹⁴³ This was the same ordinance used in Pakistan to prevent civil servants from association with what were defined as political organisations. In addition, several progressive writers, artists and poets were arrested. So Amrit Rai

¹⁴¹ Interview with Narahari Kaviraj in Calcutta on 14th February 2004. Narahari was an active member of both the CPI and PWA in Bengal from 1946-53.

¹⁴² Reported in *New Age*, 1st July 1956, p. 6.

¹⁴³ *Shahrah*, 6&7, 1950, pp. 5.

was arrested in Benares and his house was subject to a police raid where unpublished material was confiscated.¹⁴⁴

The PWA clearly did suffer through its association and subscription to this hard sectarian position. The CPI had been declared illegal in Hyderabad and other states and was heavily repressed in the rest of India.¹⁴⁵ In spite of the actions of the Indian state, for the PWA to subscribe to the notion that India was not truly independent and to label the Nehru government as “puppets of imperialism” was ridiculous in the extreme. To denounce the Indian state for taking control of Hyderabad against the feudal edifice of the princely state, even if it did not imply support for that regime, was an enormous blunder. This does not in any way excuse the actions of the government but it does point to a fundamental miscalculation that was made by left progressive circles. However, this line did not persist and by the time of the next PWA conference there had been a softening of the position towards Congress and this allowed for a more sober assessment of the Indian situation. In an article by S.A. Dange, the general secretary of the Marathi PWA and leading CPI member stated the following:

I wish to state most emphatically that we do not hold the view that in the present conditions a successful armed revolution is the only step to overthrow the Nehru government and establish a People’s Democratic State in India. That definitely is not on the agenda of the Party today and appropriate changes are being made in the leadership of the Party.¹⁴⁶

Appropriate changes were made. Ranadive was removed as general secretary of the CPI and replaced by A.J. Ghosh in June 1950. The CPI was keen to contest elections and on 26th October that year the CPI organ advised guerrillas to stop fighting. The

¹⁴⁴ *Shahrah*, 6&7, 1950, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴⁵ Pavier, *The Telengana Movement*, p. 149.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in *Crossroads*, 28th July 1950.

peasant struggle petered out and with it all remnants of the sharp hostility towards the Congress and particularly Nehru.

The sixth AIPWA conference took place in Delhi between 6th and 8th March 1953. Around 180 delegates attended this session from Bengal, Bihar, UP, Punjab, Kashmir, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bombay, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.¹⁴⁷ In his inaugural speech, the out-going General Secretary, Ram Bilas Sharma, stated the following:

It is necessary first of all that we cease to think of the Progressive Writers' Association as a closed guild of Marxist writers. Our purpose should be to strengthen it as our patriotic and democratic writers association.¹⁴⁸

As with their comrades over the border, this manifesto is evidence of a more liberal and non-sectarian approach of the association. Some scholars have taken this statement as an explicit acknowledgement that changes in policy by the PWA mirrored the change in policy by the CPI.¹⁴⁹ This is undoubtedly the case but at a more fundamental level it implies an understanding that the movement had to be broader and willing to accept those who might not necessarily subscribe to Marxist philosophy. It was also indicative of an appreciation, through bitter experience, that a Nehru-led government could not be equated with "imperialism". As in Pakistan, by 1952 it was clear that India was not ripe for revolution and as the Telengana movement dissipated the Indian state was able to impose its will on the state of Andhra.

¹⁴⁷ Report of the 6th AIPWA conference published in *Indian Literature*, no. 2, 1953, pp. 53-59.

¹⁴⁸ Paper delivered by Sharma to 6th AIPWA conference, *Indian Literature*, no. 2, 1953.

¹⁴⁹ C. Coppola, *Urdu Poetry*, p. 632.

The conference agreed to organise the association on a linguistic basis as opposed to provincial or regional. And it called for progressive writers to ‘cooperate and work with other literary organisations and act as the unifiers of their national language and culture.’¹⁵⁰ The reference to unifiers of national language and culture is pertinent as it implies an acceptance of identification of this notion of national interest, i.e. of the state, with the people.

A central concern of this conference was the defence of Indian culture in opposition to perceived imperial ambitions of the former colonial power. The address by Ram Bilas Sharma gave the following warning:

The culture of the British imperialists is full of deceit, fraud and hypocrisy. It shields the interests of the imperialists, deceives the people by talk of equality and friendship of nations in the British Commonwealth, while it actually preaches hatred among nations by propaganda against People’s China and the USSR, seeks to suppress the national liberation movements of the Korean and Malayan peoples through hypocritical talk of defending democracy from totalitarianism, etc. It serves the interests of the imperialist oppressors of the Asian people. It is the culture of the war-makers.¹⁵¹

This can be seen as evidence that the ideological coordinates of the PWA were towards the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China which were both seen as exemplars of a more just and equitable society. It firmly identifies the Western bloc as war-mongers, responsible for the continued suppression of national aspirations in Asia and as the enemies of India. But it is also necessary to understand that partition represented a nightmare for the PWA. The horror of violence so pre-occupied writers, that much of their writing was devoted to partition themes in 1947-48.¹⁵² Disillusionment at the type of independence resulted in much soul searching

¹⁵⁰ See Report of 6th AIPWA conference.

¹⁵¹ Sharma speech delivered to 5th AIPWA conference in *Indian Literature*, no. 3, 1953.

¹⁵² See Alok Bhalla, ed. *Stories about the Partition of India*, New Delhi: UBSPD, 1995.

and an attempt to make sense of the incomprehensible. To simply ^{read} the progressive project as following the dictates of a party line ignores the genuine anguish many felt at what they perceived as South Asia's holocaust.

The speech also made clear its opposition to conservatism at home. Sharma criticised traditional interests which he defined as reactionary:

This dying culture of priests and landlords condemned by history hundreds of years ago, thriving on the illiteracy of the masses seeks to revive itself and hold back the spread of education and science among the people. It seeks to divide them on the basis of caste and creed, to keep them backward by upholding ideas of fatalism and passivity and to defend the special privileges of landlords and princes by depicting them as the defenders of religion. We seek to save our popular democratic culture from the clutches of this reactionary culture and to develop it...we oppose those revivalists who glorify ideas which are harmful to people, ideas of caste, communalism and superstitions. Leaving these apart, we revive our democratic culture which has for long been oppressed by British imperialism, defend the national character of our literature and inculcate the sense of national pride in the people.¹⁵³

This demonstrates that the chief concerns of writers had not altered much since independence. In spite of the defeat of colonialism and fascism, the core social, economic and political problems they identified in the 1930s still seemed to persist.

For Sharma the principal characteristics of national Indian culture was its "humanism" and the fact that it stood for

peace and friendship among nations, of heroic resistance to aggression and oppression. It is a popular and democratic culture serving the interests of the people and closely linked with their life.¹⁵⁴

Here the notions of nation, people, popular and culture were presented as a single entity linked to power of resistance to autocratic rule.

¹⁵³ Report by Ram Bilas Sharma to 6th AIPWA conference in Delhi, March 1953.

¹⁵⁴ Sharma's report.

The address called for progressive writers to be open and non-sectarian. Sharma insisted that

there is a large body of patriotic writers who are not in the PWA, but who are not reactionary. We seek unity with such writers both inside and outside the PWA.¹⁵⁵

However, on fundamental issues the original principles were restated with emphasis.

A significant portion of the report dealt with restating the case for progressive literature and a movement that related to social life. He countered accusations of progressive writers being too “political”:

It is said that only those writers who describe the economic grievances of the people or call the workers to go on strike are progressive. Progressive literature reflects all that is significant in our people’s life, including their love, joys and sorrows. Native poetry, lyricism, novels about the past, literature embodying the moral qualities of our people, all this is a vital part of progressive literature.¹⁵⁶

His speech referred to many objections that had been levelled against the PWA and Sharma went to great lengths to answer these charges. To those who claimed that only Communists and atheists could qualify for membership of the PWA he retorted that the ‘PWA is and had been open to all who agree with its aims and objects.’¹⁵⁷

And he proceeded to cite the example of a progressive writers’ conference in Delhi in July 1950, where writers as varied as Sardar Gurbax Singh, Editor of *Preet Lari*, Shyam Lal, Assistant Editor of *The Times of India*, Matadin Bhageria, then Editor of *Nava Bharat Times* and Haridatta Sharma, a member of the Editorial Staff of *Nava Bharat Times*, participated.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Sharma’s report.

¹⁵⁶ Sharma speech

¹⁵⁷ Sharma speech

¹⁵⁸ Quoted by Sharma in his speech. These writers were not members of the PWA.

There had been accusations of the PWA for its association with the left. An editorial in *The Hindustan Times* stated that ‘of all the organisations which the Communists are utilising for their own ulterior objectives, the most dangerous is the Progressive Writers’ Association.’¹⁵⁹ And it cursed the ‘intellectual instability of the intelligentsia’.¹⁶⁰ To this charge Sharma made a robust defence of the organisation of which he had been General Secretary, arguing:

The Progressive Writers’ Association is dangerous only for those who profit by the misery of the people. All attempts to slander and crush it have failed. This is because it genuinely serves the people and upholds the best traditions of their culture... The progressive literary movement is bound to flourish, because it relies for strength neither on dollar aid nor on Community Projects but on the people.¹⁶¹

It is interesting how Sharma declares the PWA to be independent of both superpower blocs and insists on the indigenous basis of their tradition. The manifesto launched at this conference and adopted unanimously called upon writers ‘to unite in the service of the people and inspire them by their creative work, to attain a happy and prosperous life.’¹⁶² As with their Pakistan colleagues this conference acted as a counterweight to the previous one and overturned past resolutions. But unlike their comrades over the border, it enabled the PWA in India to survive intact from this period and it was able to proceed with its activities relatively unhindered for the remainder of Nehru’s premiership.

The Progressive Tradition lives on in India through the film industry.

By the mid 1950s there was a sharp contrast between the situations in Pakistan and India. In Pakistan the aftermath of the conspiracy trial had considerably weakened

¹⁵⁹ *The Hindustan Times*, 22nd March 1951, Delhi

¹⁶⁰ *The Hindustan Times*, 22nd March 1951, Delhi

¹⁶¹ Sharma speech

¹⁶² Manifesto of the 6th AIPWA conference as quoted in *Indian Literature*, no. 3, 1953.

the PWA both organisationally and politically. Although the ideas of the left and progressive circles continued to have some resonance right through to the Bhutto period of the early and mid 1970s, as Hasan Abidi put it, 'after the ban, not one single organisation of the APPWA ever emerged'.¹⁶³ Pakistan's alliance with the US made it a very inhospitable environment for progressive groups. The situation in India was quite different. By the mid 1950s Nehru had made what appeared to be conciliatory gestures to the left and was seen to be challenging conservative sections within his party. So his limited land reforms of the early 1950s were viewed with some hope. In addition, there was Nehru's friendship with the government of the USSR, as signalled by his state visit to Moscow in June 1955 and the return state visit by Krushchev to Delhi in December that year.¹⁶⁴ Finally as the cold war set in an international meeting was organised in Indonesia in 1955. This was the Bandung conference, which saw African and Asian states meet to establish the Non-Aligned Movement in April 1955.¹⁶⁵ Its declared principles were to champion anti-colonialism and to remain neutral between the Western and Eastern blocs.¹⁶⁶ This movement was founded by Ghana's Prime Minister, Kwame Nkrumah, Egypt's President, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Indonesia's President, Achmed Sukarno, Yugoslavia's President Tito, and Nehru.¹⁶⁷ Nehru's leadership and championing of this movement was like manna from heaven for the progressive ideal. Nehru's distrust of the Western bloc was welcome as this was seen as synonymous with western imperial designs on South Asia. If India was to have any hope of building a more just society it could only come through an independent approach.

¹⁶³ Interview with Hasan Abidi,

¹⁶⁴ *SWJN*, 2nd series, vol. 31, New Delhi: OUP, pp.

¹⁶⁵ Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life*, p. 260.

¹⁶⁶ *SWJN*, vol. 31, p. 141

¹⁶⁷ *SWJN*, vol. 31, p. 143

The culmination of these factors served to create a more favourable environment for the progressive movement. In this respect the radical aspirations of the PWA seemed to correspond with the current of Nehruvian socialism. This was accompanied by parliamentary success for the left with the election of the first democratically elected Communist state government in Kerala and growing support in West Bengal.¹⁶⁸ Elsewhere the left was relatively weak but the result of this was that progressive intellectuals were not marginalised or isolated from a wider milieu. This was particularly true for those writers who moved on from writing for theatre to the film medium.

India's movie capital, Bombay, is not normally associated with radicalism let alone political films. Early Indian cinema was founded on specific genres such as mythological and devotional themes, where the struggle is between good and evil or of personal sacrifice in the name of truth. Sound came to the Indian silver screen in 1931 with *Alam Ara* (The Light of the World). This signalled the beginning of the all-singing, all-dancing film and became hugely popular.¹⁶⁹ This genre developed out of the Urdu Parsee Theatre, especially around Bombay but also in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Bengal.¹⁷⁰ According to the film director M.S. Sathyu, popular theatre in India had used quite ornate language, high Urdu, which many people could not understand. However, he believes that the medium provided such a theatrical and lively performance that many people watched productions for the sheer spectacles that they were.¹⁷¹ This was a narrative form that had skilfully dramatised Victorian plays and Persian love legends. The courtly love stories of the Urdu Parsee Theatre

¹⁶⁸ In 1957 the CPI polled 12 million votes and became the largest opposition Party. It formed the first democratically elected Communist government in the state of Kerala and by the 1962 election formed the major opposition in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal.

¹⁶⁹ Kabir, *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story*, London: Pan Macmillan, 2001, p. 8-9.

¹⁷⁰ Kabir, *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story*, p. 8.

¹⁷¹ Interview with M.S. Sathyu in London, 21st November 2004.

are probably the reason behind Indian cinema's dependence on romantic themes and the way they link love, obstacles and tragedy.¹⁷² Film is an obvious form of entertainment and also a cultural medium. However, it can also be viewed as a witness to history. Another popular genre of this period was the historical film. So the 1941 film *Sikandar*, directed by Sohrab Modi, used Alexander's invasion of Sindh to arouse nationalist fervour against the British. Similarly, Ramesh Saigal's *Shaheed*, made in 1948, is a nationalist film set in the context of the Quit India agitation and the terrorist activities that ensued following its suppression.¹⁷³ There were also films dealing with controversial issues relating to women. So in the late 1930s the director Rajaram Vankudre Shantaram made *Duniya Na Mane*, about the injustices of enforced marriage and *Aadmi*, based on the relationship between a policeman and a prostitute.¹⁷⁴ Sarojini Naidu, the poet, PWA supporter and a former Congress President made the following observation on the power of the big screen,

Cinema can do to a whole people what a loving and devoted wife (can) do to an erring husband. To root out superstition, to make people rational and make them better informed, and to give them useful entertainment.¹⁷⁵

There clearly was an established tradition of questioning, thought-provoking and quite radical films in India's movie capital, Bombay. This was the tradition that progressive writers sought to build on with their foray into Bollywood.

The first and only IPTA film was the 1946 classic *Dharti ke La*. (Children of the Earth). This film was directed by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (1914-1987) and tells the story of the 1943 Bengal famine, in which millions died as a result of the diversion of

¹⁷² Interview with M.S. Sathyu.

¹⁷³ Kabir, *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story*, pp. 9.

¹⁷⁴ G. Kaul, *Cinema and the Indian Freedom Struggle*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1999, pp. 32.

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in *Filmindia*, January 1943, Bombay: p.41.

food supplies away from the people of Bengal to British and US forces on the Burmese front. This film was based on the short story by Bengali progressive writer Bijon Bhattacharya entitled *Navann*, (The New Harvest), written in 1944, an IPTA short play, *Antim Abhilasha* (His Last Desire) and also the short story by Krishnan Chander, *Annadatta* (Foodgiver), written in 1943.

In the same way that IPTA troupes had travelled the country to perform their plays on the famine and help to raise awareness and funds for the victims, the aim of the film was to inform the entire nation of this tragedy but also to challenge official versions of the causes. Abbas, an old PWA and IPTA stalwart who had written many plays, short stories, was now adapting scripts for a new medium. Abbas first saw *Navanna* in Calcutta in 1944 when he was general secretary of IPTA. The impact this had on him is best explained in his own words:

All the gruesome tragedy was powerfully, realistically, artistically and humanly, if possible beautifully, portrayed on the stage. The rags that the characters wore (and which were later acquired by me for the film) seemed to have the stench of death which no amount of washing in Lysol and Dettol could remove... All the hopelessness, the helplessness, the tragic inertia, the degrading, dehumanising process of begging for food, scrounging for scraps, of desperately, selfishly fighting for leftovers like dogs – all that was there, etched in dramatic black and white.¹⁷⁶

Influences from all three stories would go into the making of *Dharti ke Lal*. This film stressed not only the sentiment expressed above but also the reality of how ordinary people suffered at the hands, not only of the colonial order, but also as a consequence of the actions of an indigenous class of profiteers. As a progressive writer and close sympathiser of the CPI, Abbas made connections between indigenous elites and business interests within the colonial order that he felt were responsible for

¹⁷⁶ K.A. Abbas, *I am Not an Island: An Experiment in Autobiography*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT LTD, 1977, p. 266.

maintaining inequality and poverty. He also wrote the script for the film *Neecha Nagar* (World Down Below). This was also made in 1946, partly funded by IPTA and directed by Chetan Anand (1915-1997). This film too focuses on social injustice in rural India. This time the battle lines are clearly drawn between the Indian rich and poor. It centres on the lives of poor village folk at the bottom of a valley. At the top of the hill stands a palatial estate belonging to a fabulously wealthy landlord, the *Sarkarji*. The dispute here is over sewage that the landlord allows to pass into the village's water supply, so helping to spread disease to the peasants. Through this imagery of contaminated water the world that the film depicts is one divided into *ooncha nagar* (upper town/world) and *neecha nagar* (lower town/world). The world of this film is not simply one of two antagonistic classes but also depicts corrupt municipal officials who collude with vested interests. The polluted water supply is an analogy of a world dominated by social elites who oppress the poor and the film graphically portrays the social tensions between these classes.

It is claimed that these two films were made as a contribution to the war effort because they required government licences during the war.¹⁷⁷ It is true they did receive government licence but these films cannot be seen as supporting a colonial war effort at the expense of the nationalist movement. The films attempted a realistic portrayal of economic conditions for the mass of ordinary people. So the themes reflect the privileges of status, landlord power, clerics and industrialists who collude to maintain the status quo at the expense of ordinary people. Neither of the films

¹⁷⁷ A. Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: OUP, 1994, p. 23.

were commercial success stories but they were widely acclaimed, with *Dharti ke Lal* being the first Indian film to be hailed in the Soviet Union.¹⁷⁸

Two other films made in the early 1950s bear the PWA hallmark. The 1951 *Hum Log* (We the People), directed by Zia Sarhadi is based in an urban setting. This film centres around the life of a bank clerk, Lala Haricharan, who attempts to support his family on a meagre salary. He has three children who all face a grim future. His eldest son, Raj, played by Balraj Sahni, grows up disaffected and is an unemployed youth; his sister is seriously ill and his younger brother drops out of school through lack of funds for his education. The film emphasises the anonymity and impersonal reality of the urban jungle. It also lays bare the cruelties of economic hardship which compel individuals to desperate remedies. So the character of Raj is arrested following the death of his friend. He is tried for murder and found guilty but in a dramatic court scene he delivers a speech that places the world around him on trial.¹⁷⁹ Balraj Sahni (1913-1973) was a leading stalwart of the IPTA, which he joined in 1944 when he moved to Bombay. He was arrested in 1951 during the Telegana uprising in the state's witch hunt and suppression of Communists.¹⁸⁰ It is difficult to state with certainty whether he was a CPI member but what is undeniable are his left wing beliefs.

The second and most influential film of this period is the haunting *Do Bigha Zameen* (Two Acres of Land), directed by Bimal Roy (1909-1966) in 1953. This film also stresses the exploitation of the poor by rich landlords and starred, yet again, the IPTA

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Zorah Seghal in New Delhi, 12th April 2004. Zorah was born in Saharanpur, UP. She is better known to western audiences for her performances in *Bend it Like Beckham*, or *Anita and Me* playing the old South Asian grandmother. But she began her career as classical dancer and played a role in the film *Dharti ke Lal*. She is an old and loyal IPTA stalwart.

¹⁷⁹ The inspiration for this scene stems from an encounter Sahni had with an assistant on the set who poured out venom on the greed and hypocrisy of society.

¹⁸⁰ Sahni, B. *Balraj: My Brother*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1981, p. 52.

stalwart Balraj Sahni in the central role of Shambhu. The plot is based on the life of a poor farmer, Shambhu Mahato (brilliantly played by Sahni) who must go to Calcutta to earn enough money to pay back a cheating landlord, Murad, in order to save his two acres of land which the *zamindar* wants in order to build a factory. The landlord uses his contacts to manipulate the legal system to ensure that Shambhu has to settle his long term debt to the landlord within three months. Failure to do so will result in him relinquishing the land. Shambhu and his son arrive in Calcutta, where they live in a slum, with Shambhu working as a rickshaw driver. One of the most harrowing scenes shows a dehumanised Shambhu with a customer in his hand drawn rickshaw, urging him to catch up with his girlfriend, who is in a rickshaw ahead. Shambhu is shown as running as fast as he can like a horse in order to earn a few rupees. Sahni prepared for this role by watching the hand-drawn rickshaw drivers of Calcutta. And he lost weight in order to play the part as he had done for his earlier role in *Dharit ke Lal*.¹⁸¹

This film was heavily influenced by, and owed its inspiration to the Italian neo-realist cinema. The central theme of father and son eking out a living by temporary work in the informal sector – the father as a rickshaw driver and the son as a shoe-shine boy – has echoes of the Italian film *The Bicycle Thieves*, directed by the highly influential De Sica in 1948. With this film Roy introduced a realism and subtlety that marked him off as pioneer in Indian cinema. In an address given to the jury at the first International Film Festival Moscow in 1959, Roy stated the following:

...cinema has become the most important means to help man understand his responsibilities and potentials, to identify new areas of activity, to feel the beauty of new relations amongst various people...the struggle for human rights, no matter where it is fought, cannot be ignored. People are

¹⁸¹ Sahni, *Balraj: My Brother*, p.111.

becoming aware now that exploitation of man by man must stop, that any kind of warfare must stop too, and everyone must strive to avert the tragedy of the human condition.¹⁸²

His film was purposeful and realistic in its depiction of the cruelties of economic reality and the harsh degradation that individuals are subjected to where all semblance of humanity is stripped away. The film portrays a violence perpetrated on Shambhu and his family through the ravages of greed and hypocrisy. The last few scenes see Shambhu's wife arrive in the city where she has an accident and it is Shambhu's rickshaw that is used to cart the body to a hospital. All the money they have earned is spent on medical bills. This ending is slightly contrived but nevertheless the film won critical acclaim at home and abroad. When it was released in London in 1956 the British media hailed it as a path breaking endeavour:

No film has moved so much since "Umberto D" whose plea was chiefly for the neglected old. *Two Acres of Land* pleads not only for the neglected but the exploited of all ages and chiefly for the young, whose neglect and exploitation in any city anywhere must continue to postpone on becoming citizens of the world.¹⁸³

Nothing could be more unfamiliar than the baked Indian earth of hovels from which Calcutta's poor emerge to grub a living, legitimate or otherwise, on the streets. But this film has that rare touch of magic, that sense of universal humanity, which makes the world kin.¹⁸⁴

TWO ACRES OF LAND, [*Do Bigha Zameen*] shows movingly and chasteningly, what it might feel like to be a dispossessed peasant who comes with his small son to the sordid city of Calcutta and there tries to earn enough rupees to keep his holding. Told with a mixture of ingenuous storybook simplicity and detailed realism of background it is a touching work.¹⁸⁵

And in India one film critic reported it as a "Blemishless Production", declaring that

¹⁸² Quoted in R. Bhattacharya, *Bimal Roy: A Man of Silence*, New Delhi: Indus, 1994, p. 19.

¹⁸³ *News Chronicle*, 17th August 1956.

¹⁸⁴ *Oxford Mail*, 18th August 1956.

¹⁸⁵ *Financial Times*, 20th August 1956.

...as a picture of life in the raw it does one's heart good to see the film. Of lily-fingered men and women in studio make-up and trumped up finery there is none. All the characters are as real and down to earth as could be.¹⁸⁶

The *Manchester Guardian* also praised this film but its review added:

India is a new country in the political, if not in any other sense – and it is odd that, at this early moment of Independence, any Indian director should make a savagely pessimistic film.¹⁸⁷

The pessimism that this review refers to is indicative of the harsh reality of life in Nehru's India for those who were at the bottom of the social ladder. This is an India embroiled in corrupt officials, unscrupulous landlords, moneylenders and an indifferent commercial class. Unlike Abbas's *Dharti ke Lal*, which has a hopeful ending modelled on the Soviet collective farming techniques, in *Do Bigha Zameen* there is no hope for the peasant. There are no "happy endings", no victorious peasants who overcome the injustices meted out to them. It is severe in its delineation of the inequality, injustice and oppression that pre-dated the freedom struggle but is a stark reminder that for the poor and dispossessed of rural and urban India independence had very little to boast. It was this reality that Roy was attempting to portray and in this respect *Do Bigha Zameen* represents the most powerful exposition of progressive themes in the film medium.

Not all the films from this period were as sharp in their realism or as pertinent in their themes. Abbas continued to work with many producers, actors, musicians and lyricists. As the 1950s progressed he worked with Raj Kapoor in his films, such as *Shree 420* and *Barsaat*. But these films lacked the poignancy of the earlier films. The predominance of populist techniques of song, dance and music that had started to

¹⁸⁶ R. Bhattacharya, "A Blemishless Production" in *The Statesman*, 17th June 1953.

¹⁸⁷ *Guardian*, Manchester, 18th August 1956.

penetrate Bollywood came to bear their mark on progressive films. So even in the 1951 film *Awaara* (Vagabound), the central ingredients of what would come to define formulaic Bollywood cinema are all too obvious – long song and dance routines; poor boy falls in love with rich girl; mystical dream sequences peppered with a myriad of gods and a happy ending. The theme of this film is the debate between nature and nurture and how an individual turns to a life of crime. This theme is epitomised by a repeated line of dialogue '*Shareefon ki aulad hamesha shareef aur chor daakuon ki aulad hamesha chor daaku hoti hain*' ('The children of the decent always grow up to be decent, and the children of criminals grow up criminals'). At the end of the film the protagonist is asked if he picked up his criminal habits from his parents and his reply is: 'No, I picked up crime from the gutters that run through this city'. In this respect, the theme here could still be considered a progressive one in that the onus for criminality, misfortune and poverty are shown to be the result not of individual failings but the consequences of the type of social order that prevails in society.

In spite of this the progressive project faced a difficulty in independent India. By the end of the period of this thesis many progressive writers had been absorbed into a Nehruvian socialist consensus. This resulted in quite nationally minded populist films, where the progressive message was muted in the interest of national unity. The dramatic realism of the early efforts had taken as their core themes rural and urban injustices and connections were made between the power of landlords, corporate interests and corrupt state officials. By the end of the 1950s this has been replaced by narratives based around reformed gangsters, kind-hearted policemen, and poor man makes good and marries a rich girl. If the progressive message had been hijacked by nationalist fervour there are two respects in which the PWA influence was still

apparent. Firstly, the number of established figures from Bollywood who have had contact with the progressive project is enormous. From Raj Kapoor, Ravi Shankar, through to Amita Bachan, these artists have collaborated with progressive writers. In this regard, the PWA was successful in linking their tradition to a wider intellectual milieu of liberals and Nehruvian nationalists.

The second aspect is more fundamental. In terms of language, as discussed in the previous chapter, the PWA did not succeed in winning its notion of a popular idiom, Hindustani, as the official language of independent India. At the level of the civil service, public broadcasting and education an attempt has been ongoing to introduce a Sanskritic, high level Hindi. However, in the most popular and widely accessible medium, the Bollywood film industry has been marked by its use of Hindustani. All the songs, dialogue and scripts are composed in this popular vernacular which supposedly does not exist. The explanation for this is simple. According to Kabir, over 150 million people in India understand Hindustani, which she describes as a 'mix of Hindi and Urdu, also known as the language of the bazaar'.¹⁸⁸ This also explains why the Bollywood cinema is so popular in Pakistan where millions of people buy cassettes and DVDs of Indian film songs. The credits for the films *Dharti ke Lal* and *Neecha Nagar* are presented in Hindustani written in both the Devanagiri and Persian scripts as well as the Roman script. The fact of the matter is that the basic lingua franca of large parts of north India remains this eclectic Hindustani which, no constitutional assembly or re-writing of texts could remove. This is reflected in the largest popular cinema of the world and hence the language of Bollywood has always been open to progressive writers to produce material in this popular vernacular.

¹⁸⁸ Kabir, *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story*, p. 118.

Conclusion

The PWA project experienced many highs and lows after 1947. The euphoria over independence gave way to the despair over partition. The hope inspired by the Telengana peasantry was eclipsed by the state's ability to curb and throttle progressive initiatives and organisation through bans, imprisonment and confiscation of material. The Pakistan PWA was able to convene in the few months after August 1947. For this side of the border it was necessary for progressive writers as a body to constitute itself as an All-Pakistan entity. It was imperative for writers and intellectuals to establish themselves in this new country. The fact that Sajjad Zaheer was sent on a visit across the border is indicative of how seriously the PWA in India and Pakistan viewed this. However, in India it was not until almost two years after independence that the first AIPWA could convene post August 1947. Perhaps this suggests that as an already established organisation in India there was no urgency in meeting. It could also intimate an acceptance and willingness to see what a Nehru-led government would offer the masses. It could be indicative of the traumatic conditions under which the Indian PWA emerged. August 1947 did not simply result in a geographic and political partition; partition ushered in a linguistic bifurcation which threatened the literary tradition that had been built.

What is apparent is the fundamental mistake progressive writers made in accepting the slogan of false freedom. In hindsight many writers came to view the 1949 manifesto as "extremist".¹⁸⁹ However, this was not how it was interpreted at the time. The notion of false independence was understandable, given the sense of betrayal writers felt about the nature of freedom. However, to continue propagating that slogan and, more critically, to act on it in the manner that progressive writers did on

¹⁸⁹ Interviews with Sobho Gianchandani; Hamid Akhtar; Hasan Abidi; Mulk Raj Anand.

both sides of the border was another matter altogether. Both governments, almost as if to prove their independent credentials, acted as any state would towards groups and activities it regarded as anti-national and presenting a threat to national security. This in no way excuses the suppression visited upon the PWA but it does help explain the unenviable position writers found themselves in the post-partition years.

The trajectory of the movements in both countries was the same as they followed similar policies. However, the outcome in Pakistan was far more dramatic than in India. The Rawalpindi escapade and the embroilment of leading progressive intellectuals in this resulted in the state building up a powerful machinery to deal with future internal “threats”. After his release from prison, Sajjad Zaheer was deported to India. With this Pakistan lost one of its most charismatic, energetic and experienced left activists and the PWA lost its central driving force. Consequently, the work of the PWA suffered enormously and no coherent united progressive writers’ association emerged from this period. By contrast, parliamentary democracy in India survived and the left was able to make its peace with Nehru’s government after 1953. This allowed PWA activists to reconstitute the organisation. In addition, the film studios in Bombay offered an opportunity that was irresistible to Urdu and Hindi progressive writers. It was a fast expanding medium that was open to the creative talents and subversive ideas of these artists. The early films crystallised progressive ideas of justice, equality, redistribution of resources and total opposition to an existing social order. In this respect writers were attempting to keep alive the original principles of their tradition as well as maintaining a vision of what constituted a committed writer. As the 1950s progressed, it can be argued that much of the sharpness of the progressive ideal was muted by an accommodation to Nehru’s India. However, this is not the same as complete surrender or an abdication of that

ideal and to this day many artists in Bollywood pay homage and acknowledge their debt to this progressive project.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Interviews with Shabana Azmi, Javed Akhtar, M.S. Sathyu, Zohra Seghal, A. K. Hangal.

CONCLUSION

The period covered by this thesis, from late 1932, with the publication of *Angare*, to the mid 1950s, was undoubtedly a period of intense ideological ferment and profound social change in the political and geographical make up of South Asia. In the space of just over thirty years South Asia had travelled from a colony, with minimal constitutional representation, to independence, with two nation states carved out of one. The movement for independence had emerged as a very constitutionally-minded, patrician-led component of indigenous politics. Its constitutional methods lent itself to a tentative and hierarchical approach to the question of emancipation. But by the mid 1930s it had been transformed into a vibrant and militant movement, characterised increasingly by mass mobilisation and forthright demands for freedom. Non-cooperation gave way to civil disobedience and this was replaced by virtually insurrectionary measures during the Quit India movement. As each phase of mass agitation subsided the militancy that had been displayed could only be matched by a radicalisation in the political philosophy of the nationalist movement.

In assessing the strength and success of the PWA project Ralph Russell identifies three levels at which this movement can be judged. The PWA set out, firstly, to win individuals who were not committed to any cause; secondly, to court the support of those whose allegiance was elsewhere but whose support for a new movement would not compromise this; and finally, to ally themselves and gain as champions those individuals who were already established leaders with a following that could be harnessed to the new project.¹ The evidence from my research demonstrates that in terms of leadership the accomplishments of the PWA were quite considerable. The PWA did win over subscribers from all three groups. As chapter 2 shows they were

¹ Russell. R. "Leadership in the All-India Progressive Writers' Movement", pp. 118-119.

able to mobilise very large numbers of writers and other artists and non-artists to their project. They won the allegiance of national leaders, such as Nehru and Sarojini Naidu, and in the literary field their champions included Premchand and Tagore. The movement developed from a primarily Urdu tradition to widen its base among the writers and artists of India. Consequently, it succeeded in establishing a pan-Indian organisation that covered the majority of linguistic areas and by 1947, just before partition, there were fifty branches with a total membership of 3,900.² Its objective had been to unify the intellectual community around a set of specific political and literary commitments corresponding to the great political issues of the period. It succeeded in this through the adoption of its manifesto and initial resolutions. As such it was able to unite writers on a regional and linguistic basis as well as across communities. The PWA provided organisational form and space and direction for writers who were pursuing an agenda of political commitment. This was ^{the} first national literary project in India to achieve such an ambitious goal and on this level it can be judged as successful.

The impetus for the writers' movement had been created from the experiences of writers in Europe organising to oppose fascism. The techniques and methods of organisation for Indian writers were taken from their experience of the conferences in Europe. But the internal dynamic of colonial oppression and the maturing nationalist movement provided an essential ingredient to the motivations of young writers who were desirous for social change. The PWA movement spanned a range of cultural forms from writing, theatre, film as well as song, dance and painting. In their literary endeavours progressive writers used Indian themes and characters to probe aspects of social life that were usually ignored or peripheral to literary output.

² Report by Sajjad Zaheer on PWA (1943-47), in *50 Years of PWA*, p. 62.

Imaginative literature and later public performances were used to give centre stage to the experience of ordinary people with their mundane, colourless lives. Publications of journals and local and national meetings were utilised as forums for discussion of literary and political questions. Their activity incorporated involvement in the freedom struggle, opposition to fascism and war and solidarity work for the victims of famine and communal violence. In this respect the PWA project showed that it was possible not only for writers to be politically engaged but that these issues were legitimate concerns for the intelligentsia. In this respect Indian writers were able to theorise about questions of art, culture and society in similar ways to their counterparts in the Soviet Union and Western Europe.

As well as advancing the notion of a new type of literature, the PWA project espoused its vision of a popular unified nation that would emerge post-colonial rule. This vision did not materialise as progressives had fought for. As a literary and cultural movement they were trying to achieve political goals and their engagement with political organisation is evidence of an appreciation that these cannot be realised by intellectual activity alone. Although fascism and colonialism had been defeated, India did not emerge as a unified state and there was no unified popular language as the official national lingua franca of the new states. If anything the division between Hindi and Urdu accelerated after independence and the secular, radical vision of society that progressives had yearned for did not develop. There is no doubt that some political errors were made by the progressive movement. During the war the official public pronouncements of the AIPWA over their apparent support for the war effort, as well as giving credence to the notion of separate nationalities could easily have resulted in the loss of support from some writers and national leaders. In the post-1947 period, to adopt a position that the freedom obtained was 'false', was

perhaps understandable, given the dismemberment of India but was not sustainable, given that two independent nations emerged with indigenous rulers. Furthermore, to entertain a military-inspired coup was political adventurism in the extreme and one that the radical tradition has yet to recover from in Pakistan. However, these errors were not simply the preserve of the PWA movement. To some extent it was a victim of circumstances beyond its control and its limitations and weaknesses cannot be separated from the wider political movement. The colonial context provided a degree of unity for nationalism but it also presented challenges that undermined a collectivist, coherent, popular-based unity from emerging. Despite this my research demonstrates how in the latter half of the war the PWA tradition grew in influence through theatre and *Mushairas* (revolutionary poetry recitals). In the post-partition era, although the movement was embroiled with various oppositionist ventures that led it to its eventual decline, particularly in Pakistan, the progressive tradition continued to influence writers and artists. Right into the mid 1950s many of the core themes of progressive literature found expression in the most popular medium of film in India.

Mushirul Hasan believes that there is a moral value attached to the PWA tradition, which is evident to this day.³ It is certainly the case that as the most visible, all-encompassing cultural movement its adherents included the most talented and creative sections of the intelligentsia that South Asia produced in this period. Even an ardent critic like Nazar Mohammed Rashid acknowledged, ‘no-one writing today

³ Interview with Mushirul Hasan in New Delhi, 20th November 2003.

can afford to close their eyes to their social environment and the problems of man as a whole.⁴ He went on to affirm the following:

Their movement has gradually spread enough consciousness of the existing human situation that any writer today who wishes to write for himself alone or to indulge in self-pity or a morbidly personal nostalgia must feel a sense of guilt in doing so.⁵

It is easy to mock writers of the 1930s as vain, pompous intellectuals who were ‘playing’ at politics from the comfort of their cushioned world of literary circles and café lifestyle. However, this was not some academic exercise. When necessary, writers swapped their pens for guns, as did the British writer Ralph Fox when he died fighting for the republican cause in Spain.⁶ Many Indian writers took enormous risks to their personal safety as well as their literary activity. They were subject to censorship, house arrest, detention and imprisonment. It would have been very simple for writers to remain aloof from the political domain and simply restrict their horizons to narrow literary questions. After all there was no monetary reward in attaching themselves to a radical political project. They may not have achieved their aim of cultural hegemony over the nationalist movement but they made an imprint on South Asian cultural history that still persists to this day.

⁴ N.M. Rashid quoted in A. Ali, *Selected Short Stories from Pakistan: Urdu*, New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1989, pp. 3-4.

⁵ Rashid quoted in *Selected Short Stories from Pakistan*, p. 4.

⁶ See *Left Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, February 1937, “Report on death of Ralph Fox” p. 1 and “Tributes” pp. 2-4.

APPENDIX TO SOME KEY WRITERS

ABBAS, KHWAJA AHMAD (1914-1987) was born in Panipat, Punjab. He graduated from Aligarh Muslim University in 1933. He was originally a journalist writing for a New Delhi newspaper, *Aligarh Opinion*. Abbas served as film critic for the *Bombay Chronicle* from 1935-47 and he is perhaps best known for writing the *Chronicle's* "The Last Page" from 1941-86, making this India's longest running political column. His directorial debut was the IPTA film *Dharti ke Lal* in 1946. He also wrote the scripts for *Awaare*, *Shri 420*, *Dr Kotnis Amar Kahani*, *Jagte Raho*, *Mere Naam Joker*, *Bobby* and *Henna*. His short story *Ababeel* was translated and printed in *New Indian Literature* in 1939. Abbas was a very loyal member of the PWA and IPTA but in the autumn of 1948 he faced two charges of writing 'objectionable' material. The first was with the Allahabad Magistrates Court where he was charged with inciting hatred against Sikhs. This stemmed from his short story *Sardarji*, published in 1948 in Pakistan and India. The story, like many of the period, was based on the dehumanising impact of communal violence. Misinterpretation of the story led to the court case. However, the charges were dismissed after it became clear that the story was strongly anti-communal. In the second case Abbas was not so fortunate. This was filed by his comrades in the CPI and PWA for a preface he had written to Ramanand Sagar's novel *Aur Insan Mar Gaya*, (*And Man Died*). The preface placed the blame for communal violence squarely on the colonial power but also probed the psyche of Indians and Pakistanis who had perpetrated this violence. For this Abbas was expelled from the PWA and IPTA in 1948-49.

ALI, AHMED (1910-1994) was born in Delhi and studied English at Aligarh and Lucknow universities. He taught at the universities of Lucknow and Allahabad from

1932-46 and joined the Bengal Senior Educational Service as Professor and Head of the English Department at Presidency College, Calcutta from 1944-47. He was one of the four authors of *Angare*, the collection of ten short stories in Urdu which was banned by the Government of India in 1933. He published three collections of short stories, *Hamari Gali* 1942, (Our Lane), *Qaid Khana* (Prison House) 1944, and *Maut Se Pahle* (Before Death) 1945. His famous novel is *Twilight in Delhi*, 1940.

Although he was one of the founding members of the PWA in India, Ali formally left the association in 1939 over disagreements in the political direction of the movement.

ANAND, MULK RAJ (1905-2004) was born in Peshawar, the son of Lal Chand, a coppersmith and soldier. He was educated at Khalsa College, Amritsar and then the University of Punjab graduating in 1924. Anand went to London in 1925 to study English at Cambridge and the University College London, gaining his PhD in 1929. He studied and later taught at the League of Nations School of Intellectual Cooperation in Geneva and between 1932 and 1945 he also taught at the Workers Educational Association in London. Anand was a founding member of the PWA in London and co-authored the original manifesto in 1935. He represented India at the 2nd International Writers' Congress in Spain 1937 and went to the war front with the Republican militia. His major writing includes the novels *Untouchable* 1935, *Coolie* 1936, and the trilogy *The Village* 1939, *Across the Blackwaters* 1940 and *The Sword and the Sickle* 1942. Whilst in London Anand read Karl Marx's writings on the Indian Mutiny in the *New York Times*. He was so impressed with these that he published them with an introduction in 1939.

ASHRAF, KUNWAR MOHAMMED (1903-1962). He was General Secretary of the AICC. In 1937 he instigated Nehru's Muslim Mass Contact campaign. He joined

the CPI in 1936. In 1946 he wrote a two volume historical account on Muslims in India, *Hindu-Muslim Question and Our freedom Struggle, 1857-1935*.

AZMI, KAIFI (1918-2002) was born Akhtar Husain Rizvi in the village of Majwan in Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh. His family elders wanted him to be a theologian and so Azmi was sent to a seminary in Lucknow. Non-conventional by nature, Azmi formed a Students' Union and led the student body on strike for 18 months, for which he was expelled. He finished his education at the universities of Lucknow and Allahabad and became proficient in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. A loyal member of the CPI and IPTA throughout his life, Azmi's contribution to poetry is considerable. He published three anthologies and recently Penguin has published a translation of his poems in English, *Selected Poems of Kaifi Azmi*. Azmi moved into the film medium and was responsible for the script, lyrics and dialogue of M.S. Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* 1973. He also composed the lyrics for Guru Dutt's *Kaagaz ke Phool* 1959 and Chetan Anand's *Haqeeqat* 1964.

CHANDER, KRISHAN (1914-1977) was one of the PWA's most prolific writers penning over 20 novels, 30 collections of short stories and scores of radio plays in Urdu. He was the general secretary of the AIPWA from 1953-66. He made his mark as a short story writer in the aftermath of partition with unforgettable stories such as *Peshawar Express*.

CHUGHTAI, ISMAT (1915-1991) was born in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh but grew up in Jodhpur where her father was a civil servant. In 1942 she was charged with obscenity for her short story *Lihaf* (The Quilt) which dealt with lesbianism. In celebrated trial she was acquitted when her solicitor successfully argued that the

story could not be a corrupting influence as its subject matter could only be understood by someone who had experienced a lesbian relationship! His major novels include *Ziddi* (The Stubborn One) and *Terhi Lakeer*. (The Crooked Line)

FAIZ, FAIZ AHMAD (1911-1984) was born in Sialkot, Punjab where his father was a barrister. Faiz studied at Government College Lahore for his M.A. in English Literature and then at Oriental College for an M.A. in Arabic Literature. He joined the AIPWA in 1936 and during the Second World War served in the British Indian Army where he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 1944. He was arrested and imprisoned in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy case in 1951 and two of his best collections of writing are from this period, *Daste Saba* 1953 and *Zindam Nama* 1956.

GORAKHPURI, FIRAQ (1896-1982) His real name was Raghupati Sahay but he chose to write under his pen name taken from his place of birth Gorakhpur. He was nominated for the civil service but he chose to join the freedom movement instead. He was arrested in 1920 for nationalist activities and after his release he worked for the Indian National Congress as one of its Under Secretaries. Gorakhpuri was one of the major poets of the 20th century leaving his imprint on three important genres of Urdu poetry, *ghazal*, *nazm* and *rubaayee*.

IQBAL, MOHAMMED (1877-1938) was born in Sialkot. He obtained his PhD from Munich for his work on the metaphysics of Persia. He developed his concept of *Khudi* (Selfhood) by incorporating influences from Rumi, German Vitalism and Quranic thought. His principal works are *Bang-e-Dara* (The call of the Marching Bell) 1924, *Baal-e-Jibreel* (Gabriel's Wing) 1935, *Zarb-e-Kaleem* (The Blow of

Moses' Staff) 1936 and *Armughan-e-Hijaz* (The gift of Hijaz) 1938. His best known poems include *Saqi Nama* (Ode to Saqi) and *Masjid-e-Qartaba* (Mosque of Cordoba). His support for the All-India Muslim League and the creation for a separate homeland for Muslims combined with his strong nationalist sentiment as exemplified in *Tarana-e-Hind* (The Song of India) popularly known as *Saare Jahan se Achcha* along with his espousal of some Marxist philosophy, made Iqbal quite a complex and contradictory figure.

JAFRI, ALI SARDAR (1913-2000) was born into an aristocratic family in the town of Balrampur in Uttar Pradesh. He was expelled from Aligarh University in 1936 for organising a student strike and arrested on several occasions in both pre and post independent India. Jafri joined the PWA in Calcutta 1938 and became one of its leading exponents in Urdu literature.

JAHAN, RASHID (1905-1952) was born in Aligarh. Her father was the great social reformer Sheikh Abdullah who established the Women's College at Aligarh University. Jahan trained as a gynaecologist at Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi. She was an active member of the CPI and a leading voice in the PWA. Her collection of short stories include *Aurat aur Dusre Afsane* (Woman and Other Stories) 1937. Jahan contributed two stories to *Angare* and as the sole woman of the quartet she was targeted for most of the abuse and criticism.

MAHMUDUZZAFAR, SYED (1908-1956) was from an aristocratic family in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh. He was educated mostly in Britain and wrote in English. It is claimed that Sajjad Zaheer had to translate his short story *Jawanmardi* (Manhood) into Urdu for inclusion into *Angare*. Mahmuduzzafar was married to Rashid Jahan

and after her death he published his travelogue on his trip to the Soviet Union, *Quest for Life: a record of five months in the Soviet Union*.

MALIHABADI, JOSH (1898-1982) was born Shabbir Hasan Khan in Malihabadi. He was educated at St Peter's College, Agra and spent six months at Shantiniketan and studies Arabic and Persian. He was working at Osmania University in 1925 but was exiled from the state of Hyderabad for writing a poem against the Nizam. Malihabadi started a magazine called *Kaleem* in which he regularly wrote articles against the British.

MOHIUDDIN, MAKHDOOM (1910-1969) was born in the village of Medak in the former princely state of Hyderabad. He completed his M.A. in Urdu at Osmania University in 1932 and was a lecturer in Urdu at City College, Hyderabad. He became a full-time CPI worker in 1942 and was the vice-president of the state Railway workers union. In 1948 he played a leading role in the Telengana agitation and was arrested in 1951. He is best known for his verse collection *Bisat-e-Raqs* (The Dance Floor) which includes his early collection *Surhk Savera* (The Red Dawn) 1944 and *Gul-e-Tar* (The Dewdrenched Rose) 1961.

PREMCHAND (1880-1936) was born in ^{the} village of Lamhai just outside of Benares. His real name was Dhanpat Rai Srivastava but he chose the pen name Premchand after his first collection of stories had been burnt by a magistrate for being 'seditious'. Premchand's father was a clerk in a post office. Both his parents died when he was very young and his early adult life was scarred by considerable poverty. He worked as a sub-inspector in schools in UP but when Gandhi called for government officials to resign in 1921, Premchand promptly obliged. He worked as the proprietor of a

printing press editing political and literary journals. He was a prolific writer in Urdu and Hindi with 12 novels and over 300 short stories.

SAHNI, BALRAJ (1913-1973) was born in Rawalpindi. He studied at Government College Lahore and graduated in Literature. After college he began to write English poetry including a poem for Bhagat Singh after his execution. Sahni was actively involved in IPTA throughout the post independence period. He starred in Abbas's *Dharti ke Lal* 1946, Zia Sarhady's *Hum Log*, 1951, Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* 1953 and one of his most memorable roles was in M.S. Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* 1973.

SHARMA, RAMBILAS (b.1912-) was born in a small village in Uttar Pradesh. He belonged to a family of peasants and soldiers and the landscape of his native UP rural life had a big impact on his literary and political ideas. Sharma was an active member of the CPI and became the general secretary of the AIPWA from 1949-53. He was a renowned Hindi scholar who wrote extensively on the theme of progressivism and Hindi literature.

TAGORE, RABINDRANATH (1861-1941) was the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore, who was founder of the Brahmo Samaj. Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and two years later he was awarded a Knighthood. He returned this in 1919 as a protest against the massacre in Amritsar at Jallianwala Bagh.

YASHPAL (1903-1976) was born in the Kangara Hills. His initial attraction to Gandhi soon gave way to more radical ideas. Yashpal joined the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army and participated in terrorist activity in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He was arrested in Allahabad in 1932 as he ran out of bullets and was

apprehended by the police. His most famous novel is *Jutha Sach* (The False Truth) published in 1958.

ZAHEER, SAJJAD (1905-1973) was born into an aristocratic family in Golaganj Lucknow. He was educated at Oxford University gaining an M.A. and LLB. He then went to London University to gain a diploma in Journalism. Zaheer was a leading member of the Communist Party of India and a founding member of the Communist Party of Pakistan. He was pivotal to the PWA movement in both countries. He was elected secretary of the Allahabad Indian National Congress and placed on the AICC with responsibility for foreign affairs. His main role was as an organiser for the PWA. Zaheer contributed five stories to *Angare* and his other works of fiction include *London ki ek rat* (One Night in London) 1937 and a play *Bimar* (The Sick Man) 1941.

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