



INDIA'S NEW ANTI-FASCIST CULTURE

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ARCHIBALD MACLEISH has said that "There is no greater persuader than art when it is permitted to touch the vital nerves." To the people of India, who, in their years of struggle for liberty have time and again been exposed to external emotional appeals, these words now have special significance. Faced with the onslaught of the Japanese armies, the Indian people are today themselves creating new arts, arts to clarify, to convince, and to unify them in their trials. Based on ancient traditional art forms but concerning themselves with the all-important struggle now facing India, these movements, during the past year, have been mushrooming up throughout the land.

It was inevitable that any new and vital culture must spring from the worker and peasant of India, for the national dilemma has stilled many of India's best known artistic leaders. They have been confused by the appearance of a new relentless enemy at a time when the struggle for independence has not yet been won. They have been unable to give their art direction, to

make clear the importance of the anti-fascist struggle or to connect it with the man-made famine which has taken millions of lives, with the need for the release of imprisoned leaders and the formation of a truly national government. Many, instead, have given way to a feeling of helplessness, expressed by saying that to defend India is to perpetuate her slavery, while others have said that defense is possible only if the imperialists surrender power first.

The people in the path of the oncoming Japanese armies have no time or patience for such debate, however. Their task is clear, and already they are forming guerilla bands in accordance with plans rehearsed for many months. And the songs they sing are their own, and reflect their determination to withstand the fascist invaders. It is no accident that Bengal, Andhra, and Malabar, provinces threatened by the Japanese, have been in the forefront of the new cultural upsurge. This awakening has presented the Indian writers and poets with a most direct challenge. They must face the question asked

by the people and by their own inner integrity: can they keep pace with the people, and reflect the thoughts and problems of imperiled India?

The Fourth All-India Progressive Writers' Conference, meeting in Bombay on May 22 last year, pointed this question in concrete terms. S. A. Dange, representing the Marathi language section on the Presidium of the conference, urged those hitherto unable to resolve their inner conflict to find a place in the anti-fascist struggle.

"To those souls in torment and despair, we may ask, are you with the people or against them? It is our duty to give expression," he continued, "through art, to organize through our art, if we are with them and not against them. Bureaucracy or no bureaucracy, our people must live, and it is the task of art to inspire them to do so."

"To the souls in torment we say—if you sit on the fence, with folded hands, if you believe that the victory of the nations led by the Soviet Union is no con-



Activities at the Festival of National Cultures held last summer at Bombay, India. Top row (left to right): 1. Kolattam, the stick play dance of the Telugu-speaking squad from Andhra, on the east coast of India. 2. Kummi, or Women's Dance, of little peasant lads and lasses of Kerala. 3. Old Bengali Muslim peasant's song. He sings: "Allah, send us rain, give us water." Bottom row (same order): 4. The Harijan, or Untouchable's Dance. 5. Ottam Shullal Dance of Kerala. 6. The religious mendicant's dance. This is one of the finest examples of how old art forms are being converted to new anti-fascist methods.

cern of yours, you are not paving the way for freedom from your national enslaver, you are aiding a worse slavery to take his place; you are aiding not only your annihilation, but the annihilation of all people, all culture. To defend India is our concern; not to save this or that government, but to save ourselves, to save our people, to gain freedom."

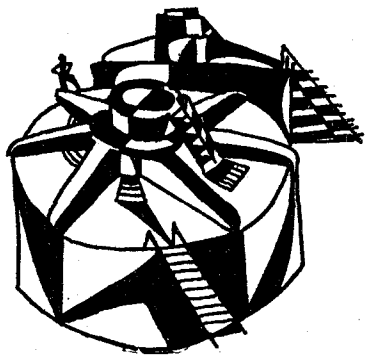
PERHAPS the finest expressions of the new anti-fascist culture were reflected at the historic Festivals of National Culture. These Festivals were held in the Damodar Hall in Bombay last May, on the occasion of the First Congress of the Communist Party of India following its legalization, and again in November, during the celebration of the anniversary of the founding of the Soviet Union.

Never before in the history of India had such functions been organized, and spectators were overwhelmed by the variety of forms, the feast of colors presented, and the potency of their appeal. Over a hundred actors, singers, and dancers participated in the series of cultural offerings at the festivals. Participants came from every part of India, from virtually every class, nationality and language group. Squads traveled hundreds of miles to present their specialties; their members were drawn from the peasantry, the working class, the middle class, and even the *jennmis*—the landlords. Each visiting squad presented its offering in its own language—Telugu, Bengali, Hindi, Malayalam, Punjabi, Urdu, Marathi, Gujerati, etc.—a variety of forms peculiar to each nationality, but all with the same patriotic content.

Of the rich treasure of Indian folk lore, the ballad recitation is the most popular and common in every section of the country. In Maharashtra and in Andhra, in United Provinces and in Kathiawar, the peasants sit for hours listening to the ballad singer who tells of the heroes of antiquity, or of the more modern brave but kind outlaws.

The most remarkable ballad recitations at the Festivals were given by the cultural squad from Andhra. In that province, the popular form of ballad is known as the *burra-katha*, or the story with the goglet drum. The squad consisted of three people: one played the story teller, another a wag, and the third acted as commentator. The balladeer sang his story in rhyme, creating, at the same time, a distinct rhythm with castanets and thambura. The wag skeptically interrupted the balladeer's story with questions calculated to raise all manner of doubts and suspicions, and was answered by the commentator, who amplified what the singer had said, doing away with the confusion caused by the wag's questions.

The Andhra squad had adapted this ancient art form to suit the new realities. Their story dealt with the life of Baburao, a boy from a peasant family, who went to



the town to educate himself and became a patriot. Baburao was jailed, but eventually, as the war developed, he was released and went forth to urge the people to unite and defend their homeland. The ballad began with:

*Don't believe, don't believe, the professions of the Japanese.
They enslaved Malaya and Burma,
they are attempting to enslave
China, and they are out to enslave us.*

The wag, taking the part of a misguided patriot, said that the anti-Japanese talk was pure nonsense, nothing but British propaganda, and that the balladeer must be a British agent. The commentator, taking his cue, broke in to explain how there are good and bad people in all nationalities. Among the British, for example, there have been appeasers who have cooperated with the Japanese in the past. Freedom-loving people, including most Englishmen, and the Indians under the leadership of the Indian National Congress, have consistently opposed the fascists, and supported the Chinese and all other peoples in their struggles against enslavement. The balladeer then sang of what the Japanese have done and are now doing in China, Malaya, and Burma. Rape, murder, and loot are the watchwords of Hitler's and Tojo's fascist armies. Can you, the ballad demands, allow your wife or sister to be outraged, your mother to be molested, your land occupied and ravaged? The wag then must confess that his blind hatred of the British and his ignorance of world affairs led him to doubt the need for organized struggle.

IN ANDHRA today audiences of fifteen and twenty thousand peasants sit for hours on end, listening to this powerful story. The peasant learns for the first time how the invasion peril is tied up with the national crisis, with his burden of taxation and oppression by the landlord and money-lender. While a speech of two hours would tire him, the peasant sits intently while a *katha* of seven hours weaves reality with rhyme, wit with rhythm. He comes away from these recitations with a desire to know more of the world around him, and he is taught in a familiar form about his new duties in the present period.

One of the most remarkable contributions to recent Indian literature is the work of Anna Sathye, a textile worker of Bombay, who proved himself a vital and talented artist in composing a ballad on the epic defense of Stalingrad. It is interesting to note that Sathye is a member of the "depressed class," the Untouchables, that stratum of Indian life which for centuries has been the most socially oppressed of Hindu society.

Sathye has long been recognized as one of the foremost artistic leaders of his people, and his awareness of world events appears in his earlier ballads as well. During the Spanish war he composed an epic ballad on the defense of Madrid.

Sathye's singing of his "Stalingrad Defense" marked the strongest development of the Marathi ballad form known as a *Povada*, the most popular folk form in Maharashtra. It has since been published in Marathi, and preparations are being made for translation into Urdu and the other Indian languages and dialects.

As for the new anti-fascist songs, by far the best come from Bengal, the torch-bearer of the Indian renaissance. Music and drama have been the forte of the Bengalis ever since Ram Mohan Roy ushered in a new era. Rich in musical tradition, Bengal has also produced some of the world's best poetry and painting. Today, when Bengal has seen fully a tenth of its sixty millions die within twelve months from a famine created by the profiteers who control the black market, when the marauding Japanese are within striking distance of India's richest province, the youth of towns and cities are banding together with the young peasants for a last ditch fight. New ties of friendship between the urban and rural folk are being cemented in the course of the struggle. For-saking musical gymnastics, the students from the larger towns have taken to the vital, direct folk tunes of Bengal's peasantry, tunes which pulsate with the dynamic rhythms of a strenuous life of toil.

The Bengal folk songs are simple, with superb melodies and haunting refrains. To this crude ore, Binoy Roy brought his refining touch. He combined cultured voice with forthright verse. A fine example of his craft is his "Guerrilla Song of the Bengal Peasantry," a song which has thrilled thousands of hearers, inspiring them with determined resistance to the Japanese:

*Hark, hark, hark, the Japanese are
coming to our village.
Come out, you young guerrillas!
Come Rahim, come Rehman, come
Jogesh, come Paran!
Come out, Hindus and Muslims all!
Hold your weapons firm—sickle, axe,
sword,
Lathis, spikes, javelins, bows and
arrows.
Listen, Laxman, listen Fatima, listen
aunt and*

*You, oh bride! Listen, all the women
of the village.*

*Hush, hush, hush, be careful, walk
gently*

*Through the bushes and jungles.
The devils*

Must not know we are here.

*Strike with the axe, dagger and spike!
Strike with the bows and arrows, and
with javelins!*

*Be careful, lest one of them get away.
Inquilab Zindabad! Killed ten ene-
mies:*

Got ten rifles in our hands.

Who can resist us now?

*Let a hundred Japs come now—we
would knock them down*

*Like jute trees. We are not afraid of
bombs and cannons.*

*Let any bastard come, we will slay
him.*

*We, all the peasants together, will
achieve freedom!*

All over India, not only in Bengal, hundreds of such songs have this one theme of an awakened people marching forward to defend their motherland, to achieve their certain liberation.

The collective folk dance has flourished throughout the countryside, giving rise, over a period of many years, to a rich tradition. The *Kummi* and *Kolkalli* of Malabar, the *Ras* and *Garba* of Gujerat are typical. And on special festive occasions there are added the religious *Bhajans*, and such dances as the *Holi* and the *Gokul Ashtami* in Maharashtra. From Malabar and Andhra, where the peasants are best organized, come the finest collective dances. The *Bhajan* of the Andhra cultural squad is worthy of mention as typical of the new trend. Instead of the usual prayer, a dirge for dying Hitler is presented, which opens with these lines:

O hoity-toity Hitler!

*You expected to smash the workers'
and peasants' state;*

*Now gather your shattered limbs as
best you can!*

Beginning with slow and measured steps, the dance works up its tempo and ends in an exciting frenzy of movement.

The *Kolkalli*, or stick play dance, and the *Kummi*, or women's dance, performed by peasant girls and boys from Malabar, have shown how these simple traditional steps may be put to a new and potent use. In Kerala, the *Poorakalli* is the militant folk dance, a lineal descendant of a war dance of the Mairs, a warrior caste under the Zamorings, the old rulers of Calicut. An adaptation of ancient harvest dances, it is essentially a peasant dance, powerful and swift in movement, requiring a robust constitution. The song to which the Kerala peasant lads danced the *Poorakalli* had for its theme not the gods of the past, but the

problems of the present. It dealt with the national crisis through August 1942, and included important historic events up to Gandhi's fast.

FAR away from India's bustling towns, in her many thousands of villages, there are a few quaint individuals with colorful dress and speech whose antics as soothsayers, religious mendicants and quack doctors attract large audiences. For centuries they have made a living from the faith, innocence, and ignorance of the superstitious element among the peasants. Moving from village to village, aware of events outside the peasants' little world which is bounded by the town limits, they have been the bearers of tidings good and bad, of stories strange and often terrifying. Throughout the generations the peasants have listened to the mendicants, gleaning from them something of a world of which they knew nothing.

Until recently large sections of the peasantry in India had never been touched by social or political movements. They have been awakened for the first time in the remote areas of activities of the Kisan Sabha, or Peasant Congress, which has spread branches of its organization throughout the land. Squads of such peasants attended the Cultural Festivals and brought with them their traditional forms. Nagabhushanam, president of the Kistna district Peasant Congress, and Gopalkrishnyya, a talented young peasant, were leaders in the adaptation of these old forms. They sought especially to utilize the mendicants and medicine men, and even the Harijan village crier, who in the past announced any threat to the village, and even today makes known the births and deaths.

The medicineman of the Andhra countryside is the lineal descendant of the early huntsman. In other days his visits to the jungle and his familiarity with plants and herbs and their medicinal qualities automatically constituted him the village doctor. Later, when newer generations gave up hunting, they found it profitable to retain the role of medicineman, and today they are represented by quacks who imbue the peasants with awe and attempt to inspire faith in their healing powers by the display of weird-looking claws and bones.

Certain sections of the peasantry still cling to their age-old faith in the medicineman. Gopalkrishnyya has therefore brought a new type of medicineman into existence in Andhra. He schools them at an anti-Japanese cultural camp in one of the provincial villages.

Today the medicineman still wears colors on his face, feathers in his turban and carries medicines in his haversack and a bow and arrow on his head, but his songs are of the people's war. He offers pills to exterminate the fascists, and powders to choke the imperialists. National unity is the medicine he gives for the successful defense

of India, and the attaining of freedom. At the Festivals the medicineman performed the traditional Harijan dance, the dance of the village crier. With tom-tom in hand he called out:

*O heroes of Ind, the war of defense
of the Motherland is come.*

*Gird up your loins; the peoples of the
world are on your side.*

With this as their theme the new artists and writers of India are using their talents to forge a united will of the people, to inspire them with faith in themselves, and to rouse them to a passionate defense of their land which will lead to a world in which their people and culture will have freedom to develop their potentialities to the fullest.