Introduction

All historical narratives contain an irreducible and inexpungeable element of interpretation. […] the historical record is both too full and too sparse. On the one hand, there are always more facts in the record than the historian can possibly include in his narrative representation of a given segment of the historical process. And so the historian must ‘interpret’ his data by excluding some facts from his account as irrelevant to his narrative purpose. On the other hand, in his efforts to reconstruct ‘what happened’ in any given period of history, the historian must include in his narrative an account of some event or complex of events for which the facts that would permit a plausible explanation of its occurrence are lacking. And this means that the historian must ‘interpret’ his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential and speculative grounds. A historical narrative is thus a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events…

Hayden White: Tropics of Discourse

Choosing to write a history of any kind inevitably involves a compulsory sequence of further choices. Frequently, it is as if one is sitting at what Roland Barthes has called the ‘huge traffic-control center’ of narrative, where the ‘trajectory of choices and alternatives’ constantly threatens to take you toward multiple and contradictory dénouements, or sometimes, frustratingly, none at all. There have been several studies of the post-Independence Bengali group theatre movement in recent years, written both in English and in Bengali. Most of these have been in the nature of compendiums, while others have concentrated on the lives and work of individual directors and actors. These latter ones

3 Ibid.
4 I have found it more to consistently use ‘Bengali’ rather than ‘bangla’ in the following work since most of my source texts in English use the same.
have mostly been in the nature of comprehensive and critical biographies\(^7\). Some, very rare, books have chosen to engage in a more intensely analytical way with the aesthetic and political underpinnings that have shaped the nature of this movement – for example, Rustom Bharucha’s *Rehearsals of Revolution*\(^8\) and Himani’s Banerjee’s *Mirror of Class*\(^9\). There have also been commemorative volumes and collections of essays published on vital figures in the movement\(^10\), as well as a few edited memoirs collated from varied pieces of writing by actresses like Tripti Mitra\(^11\) and Sova Sen\(^12\). While some of the (auto)/biographies of actresses from the movement attend to gender questions in tangential ways, a sustained and critical engagement with the gender politics of the group theatre movement as a whole is yet to be undertaken. The following study attempts to address this absence by concentrating on the difficult, complex and ambivalent negotiations of a ‘movement’ that self-consciously fashions itself as a leftist cultural enterprise (even the unofficial ‘cultural front’\(^13\), as it were, in some cases) with questions of gender and sexuality. It endeavours to do so by studying the movement in two different ways. It examines both the aesthetic representations of women on stage and the actual participation of women as cultural activists in the movement. Women’s self-fashioning vis-à-vis this engagement, which was often seen not just as a creative-artistic but a political participation, was coloured by several socio-political factors. These included the operation of implicitly gendered hierarchies within the internal organisation of the groups, as well as certain modalities of language and action that frequently succeeded in making women’s concerns unintelligible within the discourse of the movement. The primary intention of this work is to tease out the possible schisms between the announced egalitarian ideology of the movement, reflected ever so often in the radical revisionings of gender roles and hierarchies on stage, and the actual workings of the groups themselves, where women continued (throughout this period) to occupy marginal and largely silent positions. The object is not just to write a political history of women in the Bengali

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group theatre movement between 1950 and 1980, but also to write a *gendered history* of the politics of the movement as a whole. This has involved exploring how ideas of political agency, as well as certain modes of political subject-formation, are in themselves gendered, even within politico-cultural movements that fashion themselves around radical claims of social transformation and revolutionary change. One moves inevitably towards the conclusion that gender as a cultural norm is woven into the very structures of political language and that even a cultural movement that seeks to rearticulate revolutionary convictions cannot very often effectively escape the operation of inherently gendered hierarchies within its organisational structures. The following sections of the introduction contain a more detailed and nuanced elaboration of the theoretical/political intentions of the project at hand.

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**The ‘People-Nation’ and Bengali Theatre in the 1940s**

Writing a political history of women in the group theatre in Bengal has involved looking at a ‘movement’ that was in no way cohesive, a movement without a manifesto (as it were) or a unified aesthetic impulse, and many separate and conflicting articulations of political intention. It is difficult even to determine with any degree of certainty the source or origins of the movement’s nomenclature. ‘Group theatre’ was the name that this movement eventually acquired, but various other names had competed for their rightful place in the history of this movement, including ‘Nabanatya’ - a name generated by *Bahurupi*, one of the first important theatre groups to emerge out of the IPTA in the late 1940s. ‘Nabanatya’, which meant, quite simply, the ‘new theatre’, perhaps also contained an oblique sonic reference to ‘Gananatya’ or the ‘People’s Theatre’, the child and rival of which it happened to be. Other names included somewhat peculiar coinages like ‘Shatnatya’ or the ‘honest theatre’.

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14 An idea discussed by Partha Chatterjee in his book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, where he draws extensively on Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the ‘passive revolution’ in order to theorise the history of India’s national independence. In Chatterjee’s book, ‘people-nation’ is set against ‘state-representing nation’, where the latter subsumes the former and holds its interests forever in suspension. [Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 168. This is discussed in further detail later on in the thesis.]
However, it is the less formal ‘group theatre’ that seems to have survived the test of time—interestingly, referring to not the content of theatre concerned but rather its organisational structure. One of the sources for the name ‘group theatre’ might have been the famed Group Theater in America, founded in New York in 1931 by Harold Clurman, Lee Strasburg and Cheryl Crawford. The Group Theater in New York, which was finally dissolved in 1940 as a result of internal conflict and the pressures of war, had become known through the 1930s for its use of Stanislavskian methods in acting and their staging of uncompromisingly leftist political plays, including Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* in 1935.

Even though it could be said that Bengali group theatre (at least in the period between the 1950s and 1980s) was chiefly driven by what has been called a ‘leftist’ ideology, the largely amorphous nature of this cultural enterprise allowed for the (not always peaceful) coexistence of many divergent politico-cultural strands - ranging from the broadly progressive and patriotic to the violently radical. Perhaps the one thing that might go some way towards holding the different faces of this cultural conglomerate together is, surprisingly, the peculiar nature of its political economy. The economic structures that continued to dominate the group theatre for almost fifty years drew primarily from the ideology of the Indian People’s Theatre Association in the moments of its first articulations in the 1940s. As Malini Bhattacharya has written in the introductory section to her essay ‘The IPTA in Bengal’:

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15 Kuntal Mukhopadhyay, in his book *Theatre and Politics*, traces the origins of the name ‘group theatre’ directly to the ‘Group Theatre, New York Production Company’. He writes: “The term ‘Group Theatre’ everywhere is taken from a movement in the United States of America, when Director-Producer Harold Clurman and dramatist Clifford Odets were moved to organise group theatre in order to oppose the Broadway star system. The essential characteristic of the Group Theatre is its anti-establishment nature towards the so called star system in theatre and towards the established order in society. Brian Clark points out that in a society which is deeply divided, the group theatre arises as an opposition to the so-called prevailing established theatre. […] The group theatre in Bengal distinguishes itself as the ‘other theatre’. […] Group Theatres are not commercial, in the sense that they are not performed to make financial profits. […] Unlike established theatres, the group theatres of Bengal produce plays in rented halls and do not possess their own premises. Moreover unlike the ‘commercial’ theatre, personal and occasionally public donations form the mainstay of the financial strength of the group theatre in Bengal. One other special distinction of the group theatre of Bengal is that they consist almost wholly of urbanized middle-class intelligentsia.” Mukhopadhyay, *Theatre and Politics*, 21.


17 This ideology derived, as we shall see, from the work of the Indian People’s Theatre Association from the 1940s and found itself frequently in conflict with the cultural policies of the Congress-ruled central government.
When one even begins to talk about Bengali theatre today, one has to talk about the ‘theatre movement’ in Bengal. That such a movement exists and that it struggles to establish the performing arts on an alternative economic basis from the thriving commercial theatre is entirely due to the tradition created by the IPTA in the 1940s. The movement is not confined to sporadic, amateur efforts with a restricted audience of the initiate, but has deep, far-reaching roots even in the remotest corners of the state; and however much the hundreds of small, theatrical groups may differ from each other in their specific political persuasions and their modes of experimentation, they still put up a solid common front against large private ownership in the sphere of the performing arts and the cultural values it represents. This, too, is largely a legacy of the IPTA.¹⁸

The assertion regarding “a solid common front against large private ownership” was something of a general fact till at least the 1990s. Along with this, because of the particular nature of West Bengal politics between the 1950s and 1970s, there were also widespread reservations about accepting funding and patronage from the cultural institutions of the Congress-run government at the centre, which continued more-or-less till the coming of the Left Front government to power in the 1977 elections¹⁹, after which the left theatre movement received a large amount of institutional support from the CPIM-run state government.²⁰ Malini Bhattacharya goes on to write how “the activities of the IPTA in the 1940s lead towards a wholly new conception of the relationship with the consumers of culture.”²¹ The idea of the ‘people’s theatre’ implied a novel cultural relationship between the

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¹⁹ See the Conclusion to this thesis.
²⁰ The problems of the financial sustainability of this theatre might have been somewhat similar to the problems faced by the IPTA during the production of Nabanna in the 1940s. Bhattacharya writes: “Sisir Bhaduri’s comment that the visual and emotional tension that this ‘beggar’s theatre’ imposed upon its audience would not allow it to be performed on a regular basis unless it was aided by the state, had a grain of truth in it. In its subsequent performances in Calcutta, Nabanna was unable to draw as large audiences as it had initially done. So the problem was of continuing and developing the new form of audience reaction Nabanna had inspired. On the other hand, in its performances outside Calcutta, the IPTA activists confronted a totally new kind of audience, which though politically aware, found the Nabanna type play quite unfamiliar as a cultural form. As it may be expected, response was not always immediate. Here, Nabanna merely broached, and did not solve, the question of communication gap. […] The problem of getting continuous financial returns from the performances simply in order to survive, while maintaining the non-commercial character of the organisation, was also causing a headache […]”. [Bhattacharya, “The IPTA in Bengal”, 10-11.] In the mid-1950s, Bhattacharya writes that the IPTA, after ‘broad recruitment’ offered ‘a cultural jamboree under the auspices of the bourgeois landlord government’, diluted political concerns and by 1957, even announced that ‘the encouragement given to the art and culture by our Government’ was a great factor. [Bhattacharya, 13]. This, of course, as we shall go on to discuss, reflected the CPI’s broader conciliatory stance towards the Congress government at this time.
²¹ Bhattacharya, 6.
urban middle classes, workers and the rural poor. It was a theatre for, of and by the people, where ‘people’ (not excluding the urban middle classes, Bhattacharya points out) were envisioned not simply as the consumers but also as active producers of cultural artifacts. However, the ‘people’s theatre’ was, at this juncture, an “ideal yet to be achieved.” This ideal, when achieved, would “mean that the people as consumers of culture would no longer be a faceless mass sitting passively in the cozy darkness of the auditorium, but their relationship with the producers of culture would be one of continuous active exchange.”

In spite of this, however, the imagination of the middle-class cultural activist as a ‘vanguard’ individual, who must first activise the imagination of the rural ‘masses’ in order to bring them into a ‘continuous active exchange’ with their urban counterparts, was a pervasive one within the cultural front. It is not difficult to see how the thought of Kautsky and Lenin on the primacy of the vanguard revolutionary intelligentsia’s role in the process of class struggle and in the fostering of a socialist consciousness might have influenced and shaped this conception. Kautsky had written: “…thus socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arises within it spontaneously.” Lenin’s position in favour of vanguardism is summarised well by Carl Boggs in his book Intellectuals and the Crisis of Modernity. He writes:

Like nineteenth-century radicals, Lenin viewed social transformation as a process initiated and guided by enlightened elites; unlike them, however, he was far more explicit about the theoretical premises of his vanguardism, including his deep

22 Ibid.  
23 Bhattacharya, 7.  
24 Vladimir Lenin’s view of the vanguard is epitomized in his foundational work What is to be Done? Lenin writes: “Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships of all classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between all classes. For that reason, the reply to the question as to what must be done to bring political knowledge to the workers cannot be merely the answer with which, in the majority of cases, the practical workers, especially those inclined towards Economism, mostly content themselves, namely: “To go among the workers.” To bring political knowledge to the workers the Social Democrats must go among all classes of the population; they must dispatch units of their army in all directions. […]For it is not enough to call ourselves the “vanguard”, the advanced contingent; we must act in such a way that all the other contingents recognise and are obliged to admit that we are marching in the vanguard.” [Vladimir Lenin, “What is to be Done?”", in V. I. Lenin: Collected Works, Volume 5, May 1901- February 1905 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), 422-426.]  
skepticism regarding the democratic impulses of the masses. Lenin did not believe that peasants and workers could become political subjects on their own. They would ultimately play a crucial role, of course, but mostly as objects to be mobilised by and through the party organisation – a disciplined, centralized, and professional structure designed to ensure leadership, flexibility and control.\textsuperscript{20}

For the undifferentiated ‘faceless mass’ at the receiving end of culture to be transformed into an active and engaged ‘people’, who could establish radically new (non-commercial) cultural relationships between artiste and audience, the IPTA was required to emerge as the necessary transformative force. For the rural poor to engage culturally with the thinking urban middle-classes, as also produce their own (albeit transformed by socialist modernity) cultural artifacts, it was necessary for the united cultural front to step in as mediator and vanguard. Bhattacharya also admits that for the performing arts to be freed entirely from commercialisation, it was necessary for the ‘economic base’ of contemporary Indian society to have undergone a complete ‘structural change’, which was a situation that had not yet come to pass. In this sense, we could say that this imagined state of affairs – a cultural field that would be free from the ‘laws of the market’ and the effects of ‘commodity fetishism’ – was the utopic horizon of the IPTA’s vision of ‘people’s theatre’. It was an idealised projection into the future, towards which all present forces were required to struggle. Bhattacharya tells us that this struggle could not, of course, be complete unless “ownership of products, both material and cultural, came to the people themselves”\textsuperscript{27}. Should this be read to mean ‘until a successful communist revolution had taken place’, a phrase where we could perhaps, with justice, gloss ‘people’ to mean ‘proletariat’? In India, of course, the notion of ‘people’ had to be extended to mean not just the urban proletariat and industrial workers, but the large bodies of the rural poor and agricultural labour who populated the villages; this would perhaps explain the IPTA’s consistent attempts to engage with ‘folk’ forms and practitioners throughout the mid-1940s. Bhattacharya writes:

…from the work of the IPTA, one may infer that the term [‘people’] referred mainly to the vast masses of workers, peasants and various sections of the petty bourgeoisie whose ‘struggles for freedom, economic justice and a democratic culture’ all over the world are found to be the predominant characteristic of the period following the First World War. […] But in the Indian context, the term came to have a richer significance, because in a semi-feudal set-up, the tardy growth of industrial capitalism

\textsuperscript{20} Boggs, 27.
\textsuperscript{27} Bhattacharya, 7.
has ensured a longer lease of life to indigenous forms of folk culture. [...] Its organisational character enabled the IPTA to explore alternative cultural formations still prevalent in non-urban areas and to establish a link between the traditional and the contemporary. [...] The idea was for cultural activists to go to the people and activate them to create new theatrical forms for themselves.28

Besides the vanguardist intentions of the IPTA indicated in the last line of the above passage, we can also see that the ‘people’s theatre’, conceived as a professional yet non-commercial cultural enterprise, was, according to Bhattacharya, a necessarily ‘political idea’ that needed to be realised in the here-and-now. This was especially so perhaps primarily in the interest of building up the ‘united’ cultural front that was the need of the hour in 1942-43 (as we shall go on to see in Chapter One). She writes: “...it cannot wait to be realized in some distant future when the social order will change. It has to start working on the existing basis.”29 This meant the nurturance of a new kind of professional ethic, which entirely de-prioritised commercial concerns, in a world where such a project could not yet come into successful completion or become easily sustainable, quite simply because no structural change at the level of economic base had as yet taken place. This conception of artistic work as revolutionary labour of a certain kind entailed that, cultural workers (whether or not directly attached to the CPI) functioned like party whole-timers, working both as missionaries/political labourers who ‘went among’ the people and as creative professionals. The issue at stake here is not whether all the cultural front workers at this time found themselves committed to the communist/revolutionary cause (indeed, as we shall see in Chapter One, some of them arrived as broad ‘progressives’ and/or nationalists simply wishing to empathetically address the immediate suffering of the ‘masses’ that encountered them in the shape of the Bengal Famine in 1942-43), but the modality of work and discipline that the IPTA seems to have brought about in the sphere of the arts. This modality of work (combining missionary zeal with serious discipline), where professional labour was demanded without professional remuneration and where financial concerns/constraints (however severe) appeared unimportant, if not wholly irrelevant, in the face of the sheer force of ideology, was one that continued to determine the systems of functioning in the Bengali group theatre for at least the next forty years. Of course, the economics of doing art in an impoverished postcolonial polity has never been quite smooth sailing, but in the group

28Ibid, 5-6. [Emphasis mine.]
29Ibid, 7.
theatre this hardship acquired the affective force of missionary fervour that continued to exercise itself forcefully through many decades, drawing its strength from the skeleton of an ideology whose actual content had turned somewhat amorphous and distant. A structural change at the level of economic base had long since been put away as a goal by the Communist Party of India in the interest of participation in parliamentary democracy and the ostensible project of ‘nation-building’. The rift in the CPI that continued to simmer under the surface of this ‘nationalist’ compromise finally erupted around 1962 during the Sino-Indian conflict, which led to the split in the party in 1964 and the formation of CPI (M). What might have been justified within the party in the 1950s in the name of a ‘people’s democratic revolution’ (that sought to address at the same time the effects of colonial economic domination and the unequal relations of production within the country, allowing for the coexistence and simultaneous assertion of nationalist and socialist demands), slowly began to lose ground as the disillusionment with Nehruvian socialism grew manifold.  

While the contradictions within the Indian left continued to unfold, culminating in the crisis of Naxalbari in 1967, the theatre movement in Bengal continued to assert its allegiance to a broadly leftist politics. The operative word here, of course, is ‘broad’. While a large strand of the movement participated in the 1950s in a progressive rhetoric aimed at a

30 Mallarika Sinha Roy has cogently summed up the history of this period in Bengal in the introduction to her book Gender and Radical Politics in India: “In 1964 the Communist Party of India (CPI) underwent a split, giving birth to the second communist party in India – the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)). The divide was precipitated by the Sino-Indian war in 1962, but it was also the result of a long ideological debate within the communist movement in India. Following the international Sino-Soviet debate on different interpretations of Marxist revolution, the Indian communists became divided into two sections – pro-Soviet and pro-China. While the pro-Soviet faction participated in the electoral process and discouraged violent revolutionary methods, the pro-China faction harboured a more militant revolutionary ideology and had an ambiguous relationship with parliamentary democracy. During the Sino-Indian war in 1962 the difference between the pro-Soviet section and the pro-China section became too wide and in 1964 the new party was launched by the pro-China faction. By the beginning of the 1960s a militant political mood had already set in and was marked by a number of radical Left movements in the previous few decades and years. […] All these found a culminating point in the Food movement of 1966. The year 1966 experienced a severe food shortage, and violent food riots broke out in West Bengal when a large section of the people took to the streets. Tramcars were burned on the roads of Calcutta, students threw home-made bombs at the police, demonstrations and rallies against the state government, at times, helped to develop political solidarity between the working class, lower middle class, and students. This series of events fuelled an upsurge in leftist student politics, and student leaders, influenced by Maoism, formed the core of the radical student movement. It seemed that the entire state was poised on a violent outbreak of mass fury.” [Mallarika Sinha Roy, Gender and Radical Politics India: Magic Moments of Naxalbari (1967-1975), (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.]
kind of national social reconstruction that sat well with the project of Nehruvian welfarism, another, more subterranean, strand of resentment against the nationalist bourgeois government and its cultural collaborators within the state continued to bubble under the surface euphoria surrounding ‘independence’. This is the strand that emerged as more and more dominant through the mid 1960s to the 1970s – starting with the split in the party in 1964, following on to the successive events of the Khadyo Andolan in 1965-1966, the failure of the two United Front governments, the Naxalbari uprising, two instances of President’s Rule and finally the national Emergency from 1975 to 1977. In fact, the trajectory of a political transition from ‘progressive’ to ‘revolutionary’ can, on occasion, be traced in the work of individual playwright-directors in Bengal, for example in the work of Utpal Dutt from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s i.e. from Angar (1959) to Kallol (1965). In an interview with A. J. Gunawardana published in The Drama Review in 1971, Dutt makes it clear that by ‘progressives’ he means middle-class intellectuals. He says of his own 1959 play Angar: “Angar can at best be called a progressive play, and I consider the term "progressive" damaging, derogatory, almost abusive. Progressives never talk revolution; they will only sympathize with the revolutionary from a distance.” On the question of ‘revolutionary theatre’, on the other hand, Utpal Dutt says in the same interview:

Revolutionary theatre is essentially people's theatre, which means that it must be played before the masses. The audience is our first concern; matters of form and content come second. A genuinely revolutionary play put on before an intellectual audience in the city is irrelevant because the intelligentsia simply won't change. Essentially, the revolution is first for workers and peasants. Revolutionary theatre

31 Politically, this would find its parallel in the CPI’s continued cooperation with the Congress government at the centre – a stand that was read as hypocritical subservience by many members of the Party. Bhattacharya writes: “The implicit faith of the Communist Party in this period in the progressive role of the Congress government in the development of national culture and for the maintenance of world peace is matched by the IPTA’s confining its activities mainly to the propagation of social harmony and world peace, as the cultural wing of the Communist Party. […] The revisionist tendency, of course, had already emerged triumphant early in 1947, when the Communist Party came out with unconditional support for the compromise between the nationalist leaders and the British Government.” Bhattacharya, 14.

32 The Food Movement or the widespread unrest and riots that emerged in the state owing to the severe food crisis and the unprecedented rise in the prices of basic food grains.

33 Analysed at length in Chapter Four.

34 Gunawardana, 226. The more positive notions of ‘progress’ that were current within the cultural front in India in the 1940s, in contrast, are discussed in further detail in Chapter One, especially vis-a-vis the inception of the Progressive Writers’ Association in India in 1936 and Sajjad Zaheer’s Preface to ‘Towards a Progressive Literature’ written in 1940.
must preach revolution; it must not only expose the system but also call for the *violent smashing of the state machine*.  

This interview, recorded in Calcutta in November 1970, soon after Dutta’s foray into Naxalite politics and his staging of the more-or-less directly Maoist play *Teer* (1969), sets out clearly what Dutt sees as the distinction between a broadly ‘progressive’ theatre and the truly ‘revolutionary’ theatre. Here, the idea of ‘progression’ is here done away with in favour of a violent rupture. In Walter Benjamin’s foundational work ‘On the Concept of History’, the smashing of the clocks in the July Revolution of 1830 in France served as an image of a violent, structural change – a rupture that might jolt ‘the masses’ out of their gradual progression through ‘homogeneous, empty time’.  

Thus, while the term ‘progressive’ connotes a certain continuity amidst positive change, ‘revolutionary’ brings forth a different notion of time – not of critique and improvement within a broader linear progression, but of brutal, immediate rupture, i.e. a ‘violent smashing of the state machine’. By the 1960s, therefore, disillusionment and distrust of Nehruvian socialism within the non-institutional Indian left (i.e. outside the CPI) ensured that the term ‘progressive’ had taken on an unmistakably negative connotation for radical cultural practitioners like Dutt, in sharp contrast to the far more positive implications of ‘progress’ during the years of the united cultural front in the 1940s.

While the idea of ‘revolution’ as the image of this kind violent rupture continued to return intermittently in Bengali cultural discourse, erupting through the surface of the

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35 Gunawardana, 225.

36 In his essay ‘On the Concept of History’, Benjamin writes of another kind of ‘smashing’, also against the idea of ‘progress’ and the linear directionality of history. The passage bears quoting at length: “Progress, as pictured in the minds of the Social Democrats was, first of all, progress of humankind itself (and not just advances in human ability and knowledge). Second, it was something boundless (in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of humanity). Third, it was considered inevitable – something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. […] The concept of mankind’s historical progress cannot be severed from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. […] What characterises revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode. The Great Revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar presents history in a time-lapse mode. And basically it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus, calendars do not measure time the way clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness […] In the July Revolution an incident occurred in which this consciousness came into its own. During the first evening of fighting, it happened that the dials on clocktowers were being fired at simultaneously and independently from several locations in Paris.” [Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 260-262.]
rhetoric of national ‘progress’ and the ‘socialist’ narrative of planned economy, the idea of a theatre ‘for, of and by’ the ‘people’ persisted unabashed. Inevitably, however, being an notion that subsumed separate historical, political and chronological imaginings at different periods of Indian history, in post-independence India, ‘the people’ as a term bore an incredibly variable potentiality for multiple significations. However, each of these separate ‘meanings’, taken individually, sought to connote ‘one body’ which could be imagined as a whole – always total, always moveable as a unit. The ‘people’ were mobilised as a political notion at every street corner and proscenium. However, the imagination that accompanied this mobilisation could continually shift between several registers of meaning: the nation’s unified citizenry, the urban middle class, an imagined proletariat, or the ‘masses’ of rural India. ‘People’ – as a flexible discursive-effect with several simultaneously possible meanings - could be brought to bear on various political agenda: a Congress nationalist’s speech, in the trade unionist’s address or in the graffiti painted by the Naxalites. At the heart of the simultaneous multiplicity and emptiness of ‘people’ as political signifier par excellence in

While the words ‘people’ and ‘masses’ are often popularly used as interchangeable, it is interesting to note here how Hardt and Negri theorise their differences in their work. In the Preface to their book Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire, they write: “The people has traditionally been an unitary conception. The population, of course, is characterised by all kinds of differences, but the people reduces that diversity to a unity and makes of the population a single identity: ‘the people’ is one. […] The masses are contrasted with the people because they too cannot be reduced to a unity or an identity. The masses certainly are composed of all types and sorts, but really one should not say that different social subjects make up the masses. All the colors of the population fade to gray. These masses are able to move in unison only because they form an indistinct, uniform conglomerate.” [Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), xiv.] While no notion of ‘multitude’ (as Hardt and Negri conceive it in their book) could be said to exist in effect in pre-independence India, several imperatives had existed, since the late nineteenth century onwards, for the creation of differently-inflected notions of ‘the people’ in the interest of nationalist discourses, which were often contradictory and stood in contestation with each other. This was done differently by different political groups/alliances (for example, in the interests of the ‘nation’ against colonialism by the various anticolonial forces of resistance and in the interest of the ‘united front’ against international Fascism by the CPI) as well as by writers like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore and Manik Bandyopadhyay in their literary work from the nineteenth century onwards. Colonial governmentality had also brought the idea (and reality?) of the ‘population’ into existence and this too was added to this complex conglomerate of conflicting notions that shaped the ‘masses’ into ideas of ‘the people’, for both the colonial government and the different forces of anticolonial resistance. However, at the time of the consolidation of the ‘united front’ as the Marxist cultural front in the 1930s and 1940s, the urban ‘proletariat’ and the oppressed rural masses as a subject of leftist discourse were being posited in increasingly specific and concrete ways. They were envisioned now, perhaps also as a result of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, as a force rather than a problem. Therefore, the ‘proletariat’ or the ‘sarbahara’ (with the inclusion of the rural agricultural poor) became the subject (both in the sense of the ‘source’ of origin and the ‘topic’ to be addressed) and the object (in the sense of the addressee or the audience) of the new Marxist political culture that was to be brought into being. [Rajarshi Dasgupta, Marxism and Middle Class Intelligentsia: Politics and Culture in the Late Colonial Bengal, 2003, unpublished thesis].
independent India was, in my view, what Partha Chatterjee has called (borrowing from Antonio Gramsci) ‘the passive revolution of capital’, which determined the progression of the dominant narratives of Indian nationalism. I quote from his book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*:

The conflict between metropolitan capital and people-nation it [nationalist thought] resolves by absorbing the political life of the nation into the body of the state. Conservatory of the passive revolution, the national state now proceeds to find for ‘the nation’ a place in the global order of capital, while striving to keep the contradictions between capital and the people in perpetual suspension. All politics is now sought to be subsumed under the overwhelming requirements of the state-representing-the-nation. The state now acts as the rational allocator and arbiter for the nation. Any movement which questions the presumed-identity between the people-nation and the state-representing-nation is denied the status of legitimate politics.  

Earlier on in the book, Chatterjee writes that ‘passive revolution’: “[...] requires the mobilization of popular elements in the cause of an anti-colonial struggle and, at the same time, a distancing of those elements from the structure of the state.”  

In my view, in the years following Independence, it is at the moments in which Bengali group theatre stepped out of its implicit alliances with ‘state-representing-nation’ and clearly attempted to reach for an imagined/remembered ‘people-nation’ that the movement acquired an undeniable character of illegitimacy and incurred the wrath of the state. The tensions generated by the ‘perpetual suspension’ of the contradictions between these two terms (‘people-nation’ and ‘state-representing-nation’) became intensified in a radical direction (at least in Bengal) in the build-up towards the Naxalite movement and particularly during the national Emergency. The performance of Utpal Dutt’s *Kollol* in Calcutta in 1965, right after the split in the Communist Party in 1964 and at the beginning of the *Khadyo Andolan*, along with his subsequent arrest and imprisonment, is one of the cases in point. Much of the edginess and ambivalence of the internal dynamics of the group theatre in Bengal in this period derives from the ideological tug-of-war between docility and unruly memory i.e. passive collaboration with the rhetoric of ‘state-representing-nation’ and repeated, nostalgic, even compulsive gestures towards the utopian memory of ‘people-nation.’ The issue at hand is

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39 Ibid, 51.
not whether, in the 1940s, the IPTA had indeed successfully mobilised ‘popular elements’ in actuality (there are many debates about the real effectiveness and reach of IPTA’s rural-urban collaborations and its mobilisation of ‘folk’ culture in the interests of a ‘people’s theatre’\(^4\)), but the fact that a compulsive nostalgia subsequently created this moment repeatedly as one in which the interests of ‘people-nation’ had been courageously articulated by a political theatre that could unabashedly speak its name. Some such moments of nostalgia are discussed at length in Chapter One through anecdotal and autobiographical accounts of those, for example, who had participated in the production of *Nabanna* in 1944. Bewilderment at the loss of ‘people-nation’ - that imagined/remembered moment of unity – and consistent attempts to return to the same, thus constantly militated against demands for a forward-looking loyalty to the state’s narrative of ‘national progress’. This nostalgia was also in evidence in many films of the period, especially perhaps in the work of Ritwik Ghatak – for example, in *Komal Gandhar* (1961, discussed in Chapter Two) and *Subarnarekha* (1965).

In my view, the emptiness left behind by that loss began to produce, by the 1970s, frequently dystopic cultural visions of the failed nation, which was the other face of remembered utopia. Between the moment of Independence and that of the national Emergency, the oscillations between the idea of ‘people-nation’ and ‘state-representing-nation’ also marked, in my understanding, a swaying between polarized cultural imaginations of utopia (‘the people-nation’ in its fullness) and dystopia (the emptiness of the ‘state-representing-nation’ with ‘the people’ left behind, lost, oppressed). It is my contention that the tensions between these two contrary pulls shaped the trajectory of Bengali group theatre in the first three

\(^4\) Bhattacharya herself writes: “What then did *Nabanna* do? For it did bring about a great change in Bengali theatre, with all its limitations. It seems to me that its signal achievement was to use the naturalism which dominated commercial theatre to a totally new purpose and in doing this, it was enabled to go beyond the prescribed limits of naturalism. The fact of its success both in Calcutta and in some district towns was evidence to the demand for such experimentation; but it also spearheaded a movement which created such demand among the audience. At the same time, it explored the possibility of finding new audiences other than the urban middle class one, in a manner that would be totally unthinkable for the exponents of commercial theatre. It is true that outside Calcutta it was performed mostly in the trail of meetings and conferences organised by the Communist Party or its different mass fronts like the Kisan Sabha, and the IPTA appeared as a cultural rearguard to this organisations. This meant that they were performing in front of people who were already participants in the political struggle which the cultural struggle was a part, people who were already familiar with the militant theme of *Nabanna*. But it was still a great achievement to give dramatic form to what was emerging as a new political reality and but for the breakdown of the IPTA movement in the 1950s, might have served as the first step towards building up a mass organisation which would be able to establish cultural links even in those areas where little other political work had been done.” [Bhattacharya, 8. Emphasis mine.] In Chapter One, I argue that this ‘breakdown of the IPTA movement’ was an inherent possibility of the very structure of its organisation and an inevitable fall-out of its internal contradictions.
decades after independence. I have tried to discuss the manifestations of this in detail in Chapter Four, vis-à-vis the theatrical work of Sambhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt in the 1960s and 1970s.

The variously-inflected and often amorphous notion of the ‘people’, continued to function as the horizon towards which cultural creation oriented itself. The ‘people’, as an idea that could be used severally, provided a sense of political directionality to a heterogeneous cultural movement and justified its economic and organizational structures. But in strict fact, while ‘people’ remained the imagined/ideal addressee of much of the political discourse generated in and around Calcutta in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, group theatre at this time shaped itself as a primarily middle class enterprise – both practised and consumed by the urban middle classes. Two simultaneous utopic horizons – idealised projections towards a society with radically changed economic relationships and towards an imagined audience of the (oppressed) ‘masses’ who articulated their political resistance as a ‘people’ through this theatre – continued to shape the nature of internal conflicts that plagued the movement. Yet, there could not but be an awareness, on the part of conscientious practitioners, of the limited political reach of this kind of middle-class art practice.\(^4\)

We will go on to analyse at length the repercussions of this critical self-reflexivity and the dogged attempts at reaching the ideal of a ‘people’s theatre’ in Chapter Three. For now I would like to point out that this struggle at the heart of the group theatre movement led, through the 1960s and 1970s, to several experiments aimed at making a ‘professional’

\(^4\) Director Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, for example, wrote in his essay ‘Dol Bhangabhangi Bisoy’: “In a society ridden by class divisions, the art theatre is a plaything for the middle classes. They produce it, they watch it, they criticize it, they are overjoyed and enthused by it. They are the ones who make and break ‘groups’ and then eventually retire. […] Politics is here merely an ornament for the middle class sensibility. […] Theatre becomes meaningful if you add politics to it. […] Some people like travelling: others enjoy catching birds, some like hunting deer, yet others like collecting coins. Similarly, ‘politics’ is a hobby for the middle classes. They are really happy to see evidence of ‘politics’ in any work of art.” [Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, ‘Dol Bhangabhangi Bisoy’, (‘About the Splitting up of Groups’), in Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay Nirbachito Prabandho Sangraho (Calcutta: Natyachinta, 1991), 64- 67. Translation and emphasis mine.] ‘Art theatre’ is a term Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay occasionally uses for ‘group’ theatre, ostensibly in order to set it apart from what was known as ‘commercial’ theatre in contemporary Bengal. The term perhaps also carries, in Ajitesh’s intonation, a mildly ironic inflection that satirizes what he sees as the hollowness of contemporary group theatre’s pretensions to artistic and political commitment. ‘Politics’ in these contexts, almost always, connotes leftist politics - a putative commitment to the idea of a classless society, as also towards an art that is aimed at working for the ‘masses’ and becoming ‘the people’s’ singular voice. The intensely satirical tone of this passage bitterly mocks what the author sees as an ultimately hollow enterprise, where both ‘politics’ and ‘art’ are reduced to the status of ‘hobbies’ for the Bengali middle classes.
theatre that was simultaneously economically viable and politically committed to the cause of the ‘masses’. This included, in the 1960s, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay’s work with the commercial theatre hall Rangana and Utpal Dutt’s work at Minerva theatre. Dutt’s prolonged engagement with the Jatra\textsuperscript{42} form in rural/small town Bengal from the late 1960s onwards, through his efforts to create a specifically political Jatra, could also be seen within this framework. It appears to me, therefore, that to study urban group theatre in Bengal between 1950 and 1980 is to attempt to imagine a possible theatrical space which emerges from a core duality – a space of performance practice that is, indeed, marked by its being continually at the crossroads, through the complex and centrifugal pulls faced by a ‘middle class art’ theatre when it continually and doggedly attempts to become, in actuality, a ‘theatre of the people’.

\section*{What Kind of History?}

The scope of this work does not allow it to be an exhaustive compendium of events in the Bengali group theatre between 1950 and 1980, nor to provide a comprehensive overview of all strands of Bengali political theatre. Neither does this work attempt to be a chronicle of the lives and work of all the women who were involved with the group theatre movement during this time. It would also not, under any circumstances, be able to deliver successfully as an informative handbook or meet the demands of an encyclopaedia on Bengali women in theatre in the three decades following Independence. The questions and concerns informing this work invariably demand the provisional suspension of some dimensions of this history and an intensive engagement with some others. The following section of the Introduction discusses what these political and historical concerns have been.

Janelle Reinelt has written in her essay “Performing Justice for the Future of Our Time:"

Performance is perhaps an event in which the possibilities of history that were not realised are remembered as conjectural possibilities for a future as yet unmade. The

\textsuperscript{42} The jatra is, briefly, form of traditional folk theatre popular in the rural and small town areas of Bengal.
repetitions of the past are transformed in the first time / last time of performance. The past haunts the performance, but does not determine it.\textsuperscript{43}

The nostalgic desire for the seamless coming together of art and politics (a coming together that ostensibly marked the moment of the performance of \textit{Nabanno} by the IPTA in the 1940s and is discussed at length in Chapter One) reiterated its presence continually in the history of Bengali theatre in the twentieth century. These many moments of repetition were also, in fact, “conjectural possibilities for a future yet unmade”, that provided a pull towards attempts to create a ‘truly’ revolutionary dramatic art (in form, location and content) and the justification for the doggedly austere economic logic that held this multiform cultural ‘movement’ together. Janelle Reinelt writes: “In performance there is a way to stage nowhere while gesturing toward somewhere.”\textsuperscript{44} In my opinion, in the non-commercial sphere, Bengali theatre was often envisioned at this time, severally and half-consciously, as a way of writing a ‘history of the present’ that could function as a sort of ‘local critique’\textsuperscript{45}, especially in relation to the dominant and totalizing narrative of ‘nation’. In doing so, this theatre attempted to resurrect ‘subjugated knowledges’\textsuperscript{46} in several different ways and with no particularly

\textsuperscript{44} Reinelt, 50.
\textsuperscript{45} Michael Mahon writes in his book \textit{Foucault’s Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power and the Subject}:

“Two intellectual events, according to Foucault, characterize the period during which he wrote, and these events made genealogy a distinctly appropriate mode of research. The ‘efficacy of dispersed and continuous offensives’ or the ‘efficacy of discontinuous, particular and local critique,’ first, characterises this period of history. By this he means that ‘things, institutions, practices, discourses’ have been showing an increasing vulnerability – “A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence” – a vulnerability to local and strategic critiques which operate without “any systematic principles of coordination.” Such local critique, according to Foucault, is autonomous and non-centralized; it does not depend on established ‘regimes of thought’ for its validation. […] Corresponding to this efficacy of local critique, secondly, is the discovery of the inefficacy of global or ‘totalitarian theories’; ‘the attempt to think in terms of a totality’, according to Foucault has in fact, proved a hindrance to research. This is not to suggest that global theories such as Marxism and psychoanalysis have not been useful for local research and critique. Foucault does want to claim, however, that such global theories have been useful to the extent that their global character, their ‘theoretical unity’ has been ‘put in abeyance, or at least curtailed, divided, overthrown, caricatured, theatricalised, or what you will.’ Micheal Mahon, \textit{Foucault’s Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power and the Subject} (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 120.

\textsuperscript{46} To quote Mahon once more: “The Foucauldian genealogist’s task is to afflict the comfortable by dredging up what has been forgotten, whether actively or passively. He or she counteracts the prevailing social amnesia by emancipating subjected historical knowledges. Foucault calls it ‘an insurrection of subjugated knowledges’ by means of which local critique proceeds.” Pp. Local critiques, when effectively employed, help ‘the rediscovery of “the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle.”’ Pp. Subjugated knowledge would further imply, according to Mahon, that “a knowledge that is regional, specific to a particular domain, which cannot be unanimous. Critique functions, Foucault maintains, by means of the resurrection of such regional knowledge. Subjugated knowledges, both in the form of buried erudition and in the form of disqualified, regional knowledge, maintains the memory of historical struggles; their insurrection resurrects the memory of hostile encounters.” Mahon, 121.
coherent or holistic plan in view. This meant that performance was at times an, albeit haphazard\(^47\), epistemological and pedagogic project, as also a continual gesturing towards a ‘somewhere’ in staging the radical and/or dystopic contours of a ‘nowhere’. (Cases in point could be the city of Champaknagar in Sambhu Mitra’s 1977 play Chandbaniker Pala or the deck of the ship Khyber in Utpal Dutt’s 1965 play Kallol, both discussed in Chapter Four.) These repeated gestures towards a ‘somewhere’, while functioning as critique, also allowed for significant moments of regress, excess and rupture. At times, moves towards a radical critique of bourgeois social structures were made only to step back into timid institutionalism (as we shall see in Chapter Two) and at others, the internal contradictions of revolutionary rhetoric allowed for articulations of desire and control in ways that interrupted the logic of single-minded resistance to oppression (discussed in Chapter Four). In speaking of the notion of ‘subjugated knowledges’, Foucault has said in his “Two Lectures” delivered in 1976 and printed in the 1980 book *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*:

> [...] I believe that by subjugated knowledges one should understand something else, something which in a sense is altogether different, namely, a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. I also believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges (such as that of the psychiatric patient, of the ill person, of the nurse, of the doctor—parallel and marginal as they are to the knowledge of medicine—that of the delinquent etc.), and which involve what I would call a popular knowledge (*le savoir des gens*) though it is far from being a general commonsense knowledge, but is on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it—that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work.\(^48\)

It would be possible to discount harshly the status of Bengali group theatre as ‘popular knowledge’ in the Foucauldian vein, given its status as a middle-class, sometimes ‘elite’, and certainly not a ‘subaltern’, intellectual and cultural enterprise (however, even this

\(^{47}\) I mean this in the sense of being, in Foucault’s terms, ‘incapable of unanimity’.

characterization of the group theatre falls short of the ‘total’ – if there is one – given that the ‘middle class’ in Bengal has for long functioned as a complex conglomerate of consanguineous sensibilities rather than an economic class per se. However, I would still claim for it the status of a “particular, local, regional knowledge”, especially “a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity”49, through the means of which a certain kind of criticism “performs (literally in this case) its work”. My claim here also relates directly to another, more basic, claim: one made for ‘performance’ itself as a possible form of ‘subjugated knowledge’50 – “located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” – discredited as a form of knowledge, even when lauded as a form of art. What we may attempt to do, in writing the history of specific genres of performance practice, is to map the possibility of the emergence of certain kinds of subjugated knowledge through the event of their being ‘acted out’ on stage. Through this, we may be able to tap some of the insurrectionary potential of performance itself as a form of non-systematised knowledge production with anti-epistemic possibilities, where ‘episteme’ is seen in terms of Foucault’s definition of it as: “…the strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won’t say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and, which it is possible to say are true or false. The episteme is the 'apparatus' which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific.”51 In so far as it is impossible in performance to tell the ‘true’ from the ‘false’ and because of the accidental (and contingent) nature of its promise of insurrection, the potential of performance as critique (as against a scientific History with a capital ‘h’) is also filled with the possibility of ruptures and conflicts, wherein all totalizing intentions are forever in the danger of being subverted. Specifically in relation to the group theatre movement in Bengal, in the period immediately following national Independence, what interests me are its multiform attempts to record and perform a history of ‘struggles’ that rupture the heroic narrative of national progress and stand counter to its objective, uni-linear history (discussed, say, in relation to Sambhu Mitra’s Chandbaniker Pala in Chapter Four). Foucault writes of ‘subjugated knowledges’ that:

49 Also in so far as, in performance, authorship is often difficult to determine; it is a co-constitutive activity formed in a complex space between playwright, performer, director and audience.
50 Especially because, at a sociological level, it might be deemed crucial for a country like India that the politics/pedagogic potential of performance need not be constrained by the needs of literacy.
51 Foucault, Power/ Knowledge, 197.
They were concerned with a *historical knowledge of struggles*. In the specialised areas of erudition as in the disqualified, popular knowledge there lay the memory of hostile encounters which even up to this day have been confined to the margins of knowledge. What emerges out of this is something one might call a genealogy, or rather a multiplicity of genealogical researches, a painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of their conflicts. And these genealogies, that are the combined product of an erudite knowledge and a popular knowledge, were not possible and could not even have been attempted except on one condition, namely that the tyranny of globalising discourses with their hierarchy and all their privileges of a theoretical *avant-garde* was eliminated.\(^5^2\)

In view of all this, it would seem, therefore, that it is no longer possible to begin to write a ‘totalizing’ and unitary history of a cultural ‘movement’ (or a conglomerate of complexly allied performance practices?) so severally-oriented (“incapable of unanimity”) or attempt a complete ‘arborescent’\(^5^3\) knowledge of a time of cultural production marked by such haphazard multiplicity. (By this ‘multiplicity’, however, one means to connote nothing like the multiplicity of the open market or the ‘culture industry’, where, if we were to agree with Adorno\(^5^4\), sameness inevitably underlies every perceived difference. Such is not this cultural field.) Instead, what one could perhaps fruitfully attempt to do is to sift through the available archive for a history of ruptures, excesses and contradictions, focusing on the knots and tangles of the internal logic (if there is one) of this ‘local critique’, as it attempts to hold together as a single ‘movement’, but is constantly pulled in different directions by contradictory forces that effectively disperse its own totalizing tendencies in relation to itself. One then attempts to write a history that could become a critique of a critique. It might be pertinent here to recall Raymond Williams, just as he is cited by Judith Butler in her foundational essay on Foucault ‘What is Critique: An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue?’ I quote from Butler’s essay:

Raymond Williams worried that the notion of criticism has been unduly restricted to the notion of “fault-finding” and proposed that we find a vocabulary for the kinds of responses we have, specifically to cultural works, “which [do] not assume the habit (or right or duty) of judgment.” And what he called for was a more specific kind of

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\(^5^2\) Ibid, 83.
response, one that did not generalize too quickly: “what always needs to be understood,” he wrote, “is the specificity of the response, which is not a judgment, but a practice.\textsuperscript{55}

In discussing the work of Theodor Adorno in the same vein, Butler goes on to write:

For critique to operate as part of a praxis, for Adorno, is for it to apprehend the ways in which categories are themselves instituted, how the field of knowledge is ordered, and how what it suppresses returns, as it were, as its own constitutive occlusion. Judgments operate for both thinkers as ways to subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves.\textsuperscript{56}

My work here attempts to be critical in the above sense, or more specifically, in Butler’s words about Foucault’s critical history, it attempts to characterize for the group theatre movement “what remains ‘unthought’ within its own terms”\textsuperscript{57}. As a critical and selective work of history taking its cue from this tradition, then, the focus of this work rests specifically on those moments in which the cultural ‘movement’ under consideration fails as critique and steps back into a hardening of the episteme. The attempt is to record the failure of certain insurrections, as also the incomplete efforts at insurrection by \textit{other} knowledges, which this ‘movement’ manages to congeal and subjugate, whenever it struggles to consolidate and perform itself as an unitary form of political/cultural knowledge. The point is, however, not to propose a judgement of these failures, but engage in a practice that may unravel the heterogeneous composition of these unitary political and cultural claims, in the light of its own subjugated history of struggles. In my view and as my course of study for this work has shown, moments of rupture, regress and insurrectionary failure are by no means rare within the history of this progressive/radical theatre practice. This work particularly tries to reveal how these moments are often tied to questions of gender, sexuality, women’s labour and political agency. While the issues of women’s empowerment and the impetus towards a radical redefinition of gender/sexual relationships often overlap with the project of a putatively revolutionary politics, as we shall see in the pages to follow, there are significant moments in this history where the imagination of ‘woman’ as an


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 213.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 218.
autonomous political entity appears as undeniably disruptive to the same project. In such penumbral areas, the scenario becomes especially messy and fragile, because genuine moves towards such radical re-imaginings are undertaken. They are abandoned, however, sometimes midway in favour of returns to insipid constitutionalism. More perilously, some of these attempts are forced to encounter a near-total failure through a lapse into a misogynistic disavowal of ‘woman’ as comrade or a denigration of ‘woman’ as enemy to heroic political action. Thus the representation of ‘woman’ in this theatre morphs into the locus of disruptive desire that succeeds in engendering hostility and antagonism in the ascetic male (cultural or political) revolutionary. At the same time, the figure of ‘woman’ is also frequently mobilised in more apparently progressive avatars, as metonymies of ‘nation’ and ‘revolution’ mobilised in the interest of a politics of which ‘woman’ is neither the subject nor object. It might be pertinent here to quote Lata Mani, who writes in a different context:

Tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of woman was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated. What was at stake was not women but tradition. Thus it is no wonder that even reading against the grain of a discourse ostensibly about women, one learns so little about them. To repeat an earlier formulation: neither subject, nor object, but ground – such is the status of women in the discourse on sati.

Even when the cultural and pedagogic debates undertaken on stage appeared to, as we shall see, center on the questions of female political/social agency and the possibilities of radically redefining the same (as for example in Utpal Dutt’s plays, discussed in Chapter Four), I would like to suggest that it would be counterproductive to accept these as uncritically liberatory in content or drive; the point being that this political empowerment cannot be simply understood and evaluated as a positive property in itself. It is no less important to understand in whose interests these female figures (as revolutionary agents or women in authority) were being mobilized. To anticipate what lies ahead, very few of the implications of the major extant representations of women on stage from this period can be seen to have unqualifiedly positive implications for feminist politics. They are, in fact, extremely complex


and ambivalent; especially if one looks at them in tandem with recent studies of women’s roles in radical left movements, for example Susie Tharu, Ke Lalitha and Vasantha Kannabiran’s *We Were Making History* on the Telengana movement and Mallarika Sinha Roy’s recent work on women in the Naxalite movement in Bengal in the 1970s. Theatrical representations of such women which appear at first glance liberatory must be re-read against the grain, to unravel questions about the complex motives that drive the cultural rhetoric of women’s emancipation as a political incentive within radical cultural and political movements. In my understanding, direct engagements with feminist politics and questions of gender inequality *per se* were still rare in Bengali theatre in the period under consideration (1950-1980) in this study, but for rare exceptions like Tripti Mitra’s *Aparajita* in 1971 (written by Nitish Sen and directed/performed by Tripti Mitra, discussed in the Epilogue), so my attempts have been oriented largely towards reading the implications of existing representations for the work of women’s history and the nascent women’s movement in India. To put it simply, as far as feminist politics is concerned, one of the central thrusts of this study has been towards writing a history of frequent absences and incomplete (yet potential) gestures towards the radical.

The tasks of feminist historiography can be several. On the one hand, it may write the history of women’s movements or direct engagements with feminist politics in periods preceding its own. Even here, the dangers of anachronism and imposing feminist claims on subjects/movements, who did not themselves articulate themselves as such, loom large. One may then justify the ‘looking’ in terms of a search for nascent or ‘protofeminist’ impulses. A related task is the reading of dominant or ‘universalist’ histories looking for traces of women’s presence and advancing a systematic critique of patriarchy by exposing the masculinist bases of most ‘universal’ historical claims. Second, it may also be the task of feminist history to assiduously study what has been widely called ‘silence’ or ‘absence’. Writing the history of an ‘absence’ is to write the history of an erasure, to analyse the political forces and structures of power (i.e. patriarchy/capital) that have led to this erasure and account for the absence of women from History, setting against it multiple ‘minor’

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61 Mallarika Sinha Roy, *Gender and Radical Politics in India*.
histories. This would sometimes inadvertently involve extending the field of History, by bringing into relevance what would have heretofore not been considered relevant material for it and thereby somewhat blurring/stretching the rigid borders of the discipline itself. However, this kind of history would still be largely restorative i.e. seeking to plug in the holes in the texture of big History with small histories no longer blind to gender, hoping that the document will one day be ‘complete’. The task this sort of feminist historiography sets itself is revising and restoring, looking for clues within extant dominant histories for readings on gender and women’s lives, as also bringing into scrutiny a lot of material hitherto inadmissible as historical ‘evidence’ i.e. put simply, material that allows the writing of the history of the ‘personal as political’ – autobiographies, diaries, letters and personal memoirs of individual women. One method for this sort of historical and/or ethnographic project is the collection of personal narratives or the study of oral historical sources as an alternative archive of voices and lives that must be brought into bearing for a renewed, gender-sensitive vision of the past. All of these things, in greater or lesser degrees, this study attempts to do in the course of its analyses. But is there anything else feminist historiography may do besides this sort of restorative and revisionist history-writing? Feminist historians like Joan W. Scott and Uma Chakravarti, despite the different subjects of their individual historical projects, both argue: yes. In her much-cited essay ‘Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?’\(^6^3\), Chakravarti tries to move beyond such restorative history-writing and in her monograph *Of Metanarratives and Gendered Paradigms: Sexuality and Reification of Women in Early India*, she directly critiques what she calls the “add women and stir” formula of certain ostensibly gender-sensitive historical works.\(^6^4\) Scott, too, claims that feminist historiography *must* do more than ‘add woman and stir’, if it intends not to keep existing as a ghetto within the larger field of historical writing. Scott writes:

\[\ldots\] the discrepancy between the high quality of recent work in women’s history and its continuing marginal status in the field as a whole (as measured by textbooks, syllabi, and monographic work) points up the limits of descriptive approaches that do not address dominant disciplinary concepts, or at least do not address these concepts in terms that can shake their power and perhaps transform them. It has not been enough for historians of women to prove either that women had a history or


that women participated in the major political upheavals of Western civilization. In the case of women’s history, the response of most non-feminist historians has been acknowledgement and then separation or dismissal (“women had a history separate from men, therefore let feminists do women’s history, which need not concern us”; or “women’s history is about sex and the family and should be done separately from political and economic history”). In the case of women’s participation, the response has been minimal interest at best (“my understanding of the French Revolution is not changed by knowing that women participated in it”). Scott’s answer to “the challenge posed by these responses” is the proposal of and concentration on “gender as an analytical category.” In view of this proposition and in agreement with it, let me now slightly revise the initial claim I had made about the nature of this work at the beginning of this introduction. My attempt in the following chapters has indeed been to write a political history of women in the group theatre movement in Bengal. However, it has also equally been to write a gendered history of the politics (the plural here in ‘politics’ is important, as we have already seen) of this movement, vis-à-vis its announced ideologies, its representational structures, its norms of masculinity and femininity, and its gendered ordering of labour, agency and desire in relation to its own internal modes of organisation. The theoretical point to be reiterated here, following historians like Scott and Chakravarti, is perhaps that gender does not act as a potentially totalizing and regulatory norm outside the space of cultural and political practice (as somewhat peripheral to it and interrupting more important things only when especially oppressive), but that dominant modes of cultural and political practice are gendered. And, more often than not, this gendering involves hierarchies of action and thought. Gender, therefore, is something that orders the very nature of certain kinds of politics and political subject-formation, such that, the disruption of that norm may lead to a partial dismantling of the politics itself. For example, notions of heroic masculinity are central to certain constructions of anti-colonial politics. The single-minded devotion to the project of independent nationhood and national glory that these notions demand often rests on a denial and abhorrence of female desire. Any other way of looking at women, say, as desiring, agentic subjects, would demand a radical reformulation of the political imagination of revolutionary men dedicated to blood and freedom. A failure of the project of heroic masculinity in the nation’s service is,

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
therefore, also often a stepping into, not just dystopia, but an almost-systematic misogyny, where political blame can be squarely allocated to desire and sexuality, with ‘women’ designated as the essential locus of disruption. Hence, the historiographical question in point cannot only be whether feminist historians posit ‘women’ as an unproblematic monolithic category, but that many other kinds of politics have and continue to posit them as such, in the interests of their own masculinist ideologies. So only feminist historians doing away with the use of ‘woman’ as category in their work, will not, with any finality, disperse the need to discuss ‘women’, especially if ‘woman’ continues to be posited as a category, an antagonist, a problem, by other kinds of (nationalist or revolutionary or postcolonial) politics. (I have tried to show this in detail in both Chapter Two and Chapter Four.) However, this work does not only speak of ‘woman’, because it is clear to me that it is impossible to discuss women without also critically analysing masculinity and its dominant cultural constructions. The normative role of gender in cultural and political practice and its very real fall-outs have been the primary interests of this work. ‘Gender as an analytical category’ is the tool that I have tried to use in order to dismantle the totalizing claims of group theatre ideology, to tease out its internal contradictions and to expose the subterranean history of struggles (between man and woman, between labour and desire, between masculine asceticism and women’s agency) within a ‘movement’ that sometimes attempts to fashion itself as pure resistance. Gender has been the lens, viewed through which, the hidden ruptures in the politics of this movement become visible. It is not, indeed, enough to say that ‘women were there’ or ‘women were neglected’ or ‘restore us!’ Because one is saying not just that a movement was at times, in its totalizing impulses, gender-blind – but that this blind-spot is (one of?) the aperia through which the whole texture of some of its ideological claims (as total cultural/political resistance to ‘nation’/’capital’ etcetera) may come unraveled. Put simply, the point is not to plug the holes in the said discourse, but to make them starkly visible in such a way that the political fiction of ‘wholeness’ can no longer be restored to it with ease. This work then is a project of dismantling the oft-proposed ‘wholeness’ of the Bengali group theatre as a ‘movement’ and turning it into contested territory. This study tries to do so by saying first that there is no one such movement. It does so, second, by claiming that gender,

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as a useful analytical category, reveals the ruptures of those cultural narratives that claim to be wholly and clearly formulated projects of progress/resistance/critique, with no history of subjugations underlying its own territory. To return to Joan Scott, she writes:

…we need to replace the notion that social power is unified, coherent and centralized with something like Foucault’s concept of power as dispersed constellations of unequal relationships, discursively constituted in social “fields of force”. […] gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. […] It might be better to say, gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated. […] concepts of power, though they may build on gender, are not always literally about gender itself. […] Established as an objective set of references, concepts of gender structure perception and the concrete and symbolic organisation of all social life. To the extent that these references establish distributions of power (differential control over or access to material and symbolic resources), gender becomes implicated in the conception and construction of power itself.\(^69\)

Scott then asserts that the field of political history has been particularly inimical to the intrusion of questions of gender. She goes on to show us how, contrary to popular assumptions, from as early as the Renaissance in Europe, discussions of political power and figures of political authority, have tended to be deeply preoccupied with the questions of masculinity and femininity. A particularly significant example that Scott provides is Louis de Bonald’s 1816 equation of divorce with “domestic democracy”\(^70\) – a criticism of the vices of one provides the justification for the repeal of the other. And the process works in both directions. Scott writes:

Attention to gender is often not explicit, but it is nonetheless a crucial part of the organisation of equality or inequality. Hierarchical structures rely on generalized understandings of the so-called natural relationship between male and female. The concept of class in the nineteenth century relied on gender for its articulation. When middle-class reformers in France, for example, depicted workers in terms coded as feminine (subordinated, weak, sexually exploited like prostitutes), labor and socialist leaders replied by insisting on the masculine position of the working class (producers, strong, protectors of their women and children).\(^71\)

\(^{69}\) Ibid, 1067-1069.
\(^{70}\) Ibid, 1071.
\(^{71}\) Ibid, 1073.
It will not be difficult to see the corollaries of this in the colonial and postcolonial contexts vis-à-vis India, as has been amply demonstrated in the work of scholars like Robert Young, Ashish Nandy, Indira Chowdhury and Mrinalini Sinha. Scott’s argument is, then, that gender is woven into the very fabric of social existence and also, as is not easily accepted, even into the textures of political practice. It exists as a norm, as a modality of description and as ‘normalised’ perceptions of hierarchies written into the very structures of languages and organisations of power, so ‘naturalised’ as to be, if not entirely invisible, certainly unobtrusive. So if we could imagine political discourse as a fabric: hidden within its very texture would be perceptions of sexual difference and gender, simultaneously denied legitimate existence and mobilised at will as useful metaphor. Only an unweaving of the whole fabric of a discourse such as this, then, it would seem, would effectively reveal these hidden threads. It would also mean saying that this historical fabric cannot be ‘corrected’ while preserving its wholeness, but that every little thread must be examined before a new history can be proposed. Indeed, the metaphor of weaving/and unweaving, textures and threads, cloth and fabric, ruptures and wholeness, return insistently in the writing of various theorists of women’s history. Perhaps for a good reason. But can the creation of ruptures or simply unravelling be the tasks of a legitimate historiography? Where would one go then to find the correctly comprehensive whole of history? Lisa Jardine gives us an answer in her essay on feminist historiography in Performance Studies. In ‘Unpicking a Tapestry: The Scholar of Women’s Studies as Penelope among her Suitors’, she quite clearly defines the problem such as it is:

The scholar of women’s history is perceived by the historians (who are not innocently ungendered) as writing truth (in a historical subdiscipline) when her narrative can be accommodated to the incrementalist version of ‘changing history’; as writing fiction when that narrative contributes to ‘a breakdown of previously accepted understanding’ – when it ‘ruptures the social fabric’. In the terms of my title: Penelope’s suitors accept her women’s labour as long as they believe she is completing one continuously produced tapestry. When it becomes clear that she has

repeatedly unwoven that tapestry and rewoven a different one – it is not the tapestry they thought it was, her project was not theirs, but a tactical reweaving – their support turns to anger. [...] when her work produces an account in which once familiar events no longer make sense, we may judge that something more gravely disruptive of traditional history is taking place.\textsuperscript{76}

Feminist historian Bonnie Smith is also deeply concerned with the question of the possibility of a history of ruptures. She effectively overturns the question at hand. Instead of asking whether a ‘women’s history’ is possible, she, in what one might call an effective genealogical turn in the Foucauldian sense, goes back to studying the very roots of the historical construction what we now understand as History, as a specifically masculinist discipline constructed in nineteenth century Europe. Like Hayden White, her object is to historicise History, but this time, we are looking at how ‘modern scientific methodology, epistemology, professional practice and writing has been closely tied to evolving definitions of masculinity and femininity.’\textsuperscript{77} She dispels both the notion of History as a ‘value-free science’ that accompanies much ‘professionalism’\textsuperscript{78} and the objective paradigm of ‘ungendered’ history. In writing of the life of French republican historian Germaine de Stael and her historical and fictional work during the early part of the nineteenth century, Smith speaks of how ‘indeterminacy’ and ‘incommensurability’ inexorably marked the female ‘amateur’ historian’s ‘erotic’ and ‘narcotic’ road to the past, blocked as her way was to professional practice, but providing an important historiographical counterpoint to the emerging male ‘professional’ historian’s obsession with determinate facts and coherent narratives. One is here, of course, not at all attempting to write a deliberately ‘amateur’ history, even in the de Staelian sense. However, the perception of incommensurabilities, as well as inseparable Janus-like dualities joined at base, indeterminate ends and ruptures seem inescapable in the cultural history of the period I am attempting to address in this work.


\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
Methodological Concerns and Literature Review

I have found it useful not to separate these two sections, which are traditionally written independently of each other, because it is my methodological concerns that have finally shaped the kind of material I have chosen to use and/or critically survey in this work. Writing a history of the moments of rupture and ambivalence in the Bengali group theatre could also be read, in Partha Chatterjee’s terms, as a contest between its problematic and its thematic – the assertions it makes for itself and the body of moral/ethical justifications it employs in support of these assertions. Say, for example, one could argue that the group theatre’s antagonistic positions vis-a-vis nation, even when directly conflictual with dominant nationalist rhetoric, often still draw on the heroic modes of masculinity and femininity fashioned by the discourse of nationalism. Looking at this history through the lens of gender and feminist theory, however, has meant primarily a two-pronged approach methodologically: looking at women as both ‘portrait’ and ‘proxy’ (to borrow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s terms) i.e. both in terms of their representations on stage and in terms of the politics of their actual participation in the group theatre movement, as (legitimate or illegitimate) representatives of a larger bodies of women (whether ‘bhadramabila’ or subaltern) and as political ‘actors’ within a leftist cultural movement. The separation and contradictions that exist between the ‘portrait’ and the ‘proxy’ in this respect, i.e. between the aesthetic representations (which often aim at an egalitarian and radical re- visioning of gender politics, and often not) and the status of women in the actual workings of the groups in question (where gender hierarchies and silences continue to be perpetuated, in a way in which women’s concerns are often made unintelligible within its rhetoric), allow me one of the primary entry points into a gendered critique of this history.

To lay out the problem in further detail would also be to point out that, in many ways, between the 1950s and 1980s, the status of the Bengali group theatre director in Calcutta (mostly bhadralok male) is comparable to the status of the postcolonial intellectual (that

79 Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, 38.
Spivak speaks of), who is constantly attempting to turn himself transparent in relation to the subaltern ‘masses’. In this ‘masquerade’ (in Spivak’s terms, again) that involves an invisibilisation of his own cultural and class position, it could be argued that the bhadralok male ventriloquises the voice of the ‘people’ in an attempt to imagine his theatre ‘for the people’ as also a theatre ‘of’ and ‘by’ them. In the same way, the ‘act’ of ‘re-presenting’ the ‘reality’ of women’s voices and concerns on stage often obscures the fact that women were, in fact, mostly being spoken for in these aesthetic re-presentations by male directors and playwrights, while their voices as political actors and cultural activists in the actual functioning of the groups were often effectively silenced. Of course, the co-optation of the peasant/proletarian woman’s voice, on occasion, by the re-presenting bhadramahila actress must also be considered here, as also the question of the female actor’s autonomous agency in performance that may have over-spilt the constraints of both text and director. However, for the latter sort of analysis, one needs a different kind of archive, on that is largely unavailable from this period i.e. a record of performance texts and actual performances, both of which are difficult to come by vis-à-vis the plays discussed in this work. But more on this later. To come back to the question of representation: both the notion of aesthetic re-presentation and that of political representation are important in this discussion. And especially so are the gaps between them. Spivak writes:

The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage. [...] Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as ‘speaking for’, as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation’, as in art or philosophy. [...] The two senses of representation – within state formation and the law, on the one hand, and in subject-predication, on the other – are related but irreducibly discontinuous. [...] Are those who act and struggle mute, as opposed to those who act and speak?  

A number of questions are worth considering here. What sort of work is the theatre? Is it speaking or acting or struggle? Is not the Bengali political theatre, fashioned as it was after the IPTA, a cultural enterprise that attempts to merge all these notions of political activity in some way, in so far as acting on stage connotes both aesthetically ‘re-presenting’ the reality of the other/the ‘people’ and ‘speaking for’ them politically to the state and its hegemonic

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81 Ibid, 292.
82 Ibid, 275.
institutions? One must also consider here, not just the re-presented struggle of ‘the people’ on stage, but the struggle of the group theatre itself to survive non-commercially in a world where relations of production remain unchanged, where cultural production is still governed by market forces. In this sense, the actors in the group theatre are cultural re-presenters as well as political ‘actors’ speaking for ‘others’, as also ‘strugglers’ in their own fight for survival. Within this first level of complexity must lay our second level of analysis vis-a-vis representation. This level would involve the tensions existing between middle-class women re-presenting themselves and ‘others’ on stage (which would involve, say, ‘speaking for’ the subaltern woman, on occasion, by acting her part, claiming to speak in her voice and literally ventriloquising her absent presence), as well as representing (standing in for) other women of their class within a cultural movement where women were still a minority – while all the time being ‘spoken for’, both on stage and in real life, by men who remain both the institutional heads and the creative decision-makers of the groups. Within this complex interface of many levels of re-presentation and representation, the study of middle-class women in the Calcutta group theatre must rest.

I will attempt to outline the methodological implications of this complexity, beginning with those that are specific to the discipline of Performance Studies and the interdisciplinary nature of this work. The first step would be to make an admission about the gaps in the available archive. The gap or absence that hits closest to home in a project such as this is the absence of actual recordings of live performances, which would allow a far richer level of analysis and criticism. Sometimes audio recordings are available, as in the case of the very popular audio version of Utpal Dutt’s Tiner Talowar (1971) and some audio recordings of Sambhu Mitra’s productions like Raktakarabi (1964). In some cases, there are later video re-workings of earlier productions, say, for example, for a television programme, as in the 1980s re-production of Nandikar’s original Antigone (1975) with different actors, which must have involved a significant amount of re-direction for the purposes of the television medium. Also, often these later video recordings of productions originally performed in the 1970s, are of performances organised specifically for the occasion of recording – either for the television or in the interests of a documentary filmmaker, which I believe would significantly alter the tone and nature of the performance. The status of the recording as archival material for Performance Studies is, to begin with, problematic. If
‘performance’ is something that can never be replicated exactly for each subsequent occasion and the elusive quality of ‘liveness’ is something that is formed uniquely at every instance of performance in a network of temporary, brief, contractual but social relationships, between the performers and the particular audience that night, then the hope that a recording (especially of a performance that is not produced for a live audience) will contain the qualities of a complete archival document for analysis and ‘thick description’ seems inadequately founded. In referring to Ryle’s discussion of ‘thick description’, Clifford Geertz writes:

Consider, he says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, “phenomenalistic” observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way […]

Anyone who has attempted to do performance ethnography of any sort will know the importance of this passage by Geertz for their work. But even in non-ethnographic performance analysis, ‘thick description’ is an imperative for understanding the crucial differences between the ‘wink’ and the ‘twitch’. This difference is often encoded in the network of social relationships that form themselves around the event of live performance: the interactions of performer and audience, those between members of the audience and the reactions of the audience as a body that forms a temporary community. All of these things are difficult, if not impossible, to capture within the framed, edited and recorded event of performance that lacks the crucial element of ‘liveness’. Peggy Phelan describes this particular, but essential characteristic of performance effectively as the specific ‘ontology of performance’ in her book Unmarked: The Politics of Performance:

Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s being, like the

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ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance. The pressures brought to bear on performance to succumb to the laws of the reproductive economy are enormous. For only rarely in this culture is the “now” to which performance addresses its deepest questions valued. (This is why the now is supplemented and buttressed by the documenting camera, the video archive.) Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as “different.” The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.\(^{84}\)

But even this ‘spur to memory’ is notably absent in the period in Bengal’s performance history that I am looking at. This has often meant a reliance on anecdotal evidence to retrieve traces of the live performance, as we shall go on to see in Chapter Two, where the printed text of Sambhu Mitra’s *Putul Khela* \(^{85}\) (an adaptation of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*) ends in a way that completely belies the actual effects of the live performance and its ending. This discrepancy, captured in memory by a sensitive witness, points the way towards a substantially different ideological conclusion. The memory of the live performance and its affective connotations can only be retrieved from anecdotal and critical material, recounted by those who had actually witnessed the performance. In this case it happens to be the able commentary of performance theorist Professor Samik Bandyopadhyay, who, in a spoken lecture, describes the structure of the sets and the final composition to make a crucial ideological point about the politics of this event of performance. However, even so, the status of memory and anecdote as historical evidence, like most oral sources, are contested by those who would champion the cause of an ‘objective’ historiography based on more conventional and concrete archival material. But given the particular, unique ontology of performance as an unrepeatable event (as Peggy Phelan marks out in her book), the work of memory in relation to performance is particularly indispensable. The play as literary text is only one source of the performance and its interpretation in a particular production creates only a source performance text that is re-produced, but never repeated, at every instance of its performance. Therefore, a single theatrical production could contain within it the possibility of potentially multiple performance texts, each drawing on the same literary text. And since, as we will see in Chapter Two, the ends of a performance text might be in complete

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opposition to what has been indicated merely in print in the source literary text, it is a futile exercise to try and locate the one definitive performance text that might serve as the corollary of the authentic historical archival document. Hence, performance analysis, even in the presence of recorded reproductions (as Phelan shows us) or ethnographic notes of live performances, always carries an element of indefiniteness and multiplicity about it. Perhaps a dismissal of performance analysis as inadequate History is in order, or perhaps a revision of the demand for the complete and water-tight accuracy of historical facticity from events of performance is required. The performance event witnessed is necessarily multiple because its witnesses are multiple. Recorded evidence and even more so the literary text, might only give minor indications of what the live event might have entailed or communicated, of what was indeed a ‘wink’ and what happened to have been a ‘twitch’.

However, in the work that follows, in the absence of recorded material that could constitute a performance archive per se or a spur to memory as Phelan calls it, I have had to rely somewhat heavily on the literary texts of the plays discussed. However, some of the justification for this has been that in most of the plays analysed, the playwright has also been the director of the theatrical production concerned (or at least the author of the particular adaptation), and has written, fortunately for me, a substantial body of supporting theoretical material that elaborates his own particular philosophy of the theatre. In the case of both Utpal Dutt and Sambhu Mitra, for example, this hold true. Therefore, methodologically, one has had the privilege of setting the literary text of the play against the extensive body of writings on the theatre and commentaries on the specific productions discussed by each of these playwright-directors. One has been further able to buttress this analysis with anecdotal information from other sources – such as oral interviews/ newspaper reviews/ lectures by actual witnesses (for example, as mentioned earlier, the accounts of Professor Samik Bandyopadhyay vis-à-vis Mitra’s 1958 production of Putul Khela, discussed in Chapter Two) as well as personal memoirs by both the directors themselves and from actors/actresses who worked with them in the groups. In some cases, an extensive and detailed analysis of the stage directions of a certain play has allowed one to envision how it may have been performed or planned for performance – especially, for example, in the strange case such as that of a play like Mitra’s Chandhaniker Pala (1978) which was never actually performed on stage by Baburnipi. But the text, analysed in Chapter Four, gives ample evidence of how the
playwright, who would also have been its director if the play had been performed, writes equally as both the former and the latter, so that the text carries a rich cartography of the stage envisioned, the scenography, the lighting and even the performances. In a play such as this, particularly, as I hope Chapter Four will show, the literary text becomes a potential palimpsest that carries within it substantial mappings of what the performance text might look like.

How does all of this connect to the question of gender and of ‘woman as category?’ In looking at the history of women in the Bengali group theatre movement and in writing a gendered history of the politics of the group theatre, I have tried to look at ‘woman’ in several different ways, and this has determined the nature of the material I have chosen to use as my primary sources. As mentioned before, I have attempted to look at ‘women’ in terms of their representations on stage, their actual participation as cultural activists in the movement and as the ideological/metaphorical ground over which various other political debates and contestations are conducted. Further, I have attempted to look at gender as a thread woven into certain modalities of cultural action and political language, the unraveling of which, at times, opens the way towards a dismantling of the hegemony of the overarching political discourse. Gender, as a useful analytical category, allows us to see the complicity of certain kinds of ostensibly oppositional politico-cultural discourse with each other. It does so by exposing the imbrications of these political projects in each other and their reciprocal indebtedness, at least in so for us hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity go. The place and period under consideration are, of course, West Bengal between the 1950s and 1980s. However, the major transitions of national-level politics in India, in the three decades immediately following independence, also come into discussion at several junctures in this work. This is expressly in order to set Bengal politics in context, especially vis-a-vis its contestations with Nehruvian socialism and Congress politics at the centre. This is discussed at length in the chapter plan at the end of this introduction.

The material that has proved useful to me in this project is necessarily, given the interdisciplinary nature of the work (studying the interfaces of culture and politics, as well as reading gender from ‘absences’ and ‘subjugations’ from disparate sources) of several kinds. First, of course, are the texts of the plays that, in my view, addressed my theoretical
objectives. Primary amongst these are Sambhu Mitra’s *Putul Khela* (1958) and *Chandhaniker Pala* (1977), Utpal Dutt’s *Angar* (1959), *Kallo* (1965) and *Teer* (1967), as well as Nandikar’s *Antigone* (1975). While these are analysed in great detail, several other plays come into discussion in tangential ways. Second are the large bodies of essays and critical writings in Bengali (and occasionally English) that discuss the ideological and aesthetic underpinnings of the project of group theatre. Some of these are written by directors and practitioners themselves, for example those by Utpal Dutt, Sambhu Mitra and Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, others by theatre critics and reviewers like Samik Bandyopadhyay, Dharani Ghosh and Pabitra Sarkar. There are also long and engaged interviews with these directors and critics that are available in print at present.  

86 Utpal Dutt’s *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre* (1981), for example, is a foundational book that charts the course of his theatrical and political career from his first associations with the IPTA in the years 1950-1951 till the days of later, directly revolutionary work at the time of the Naxalite revolutionary movement (1967) and the national Emergency (1975-1977). But rather than being a straightforward autobiography, this work (written originally in English) deftly weaves into its fold Dutt’s journey towards defining his own conception of revolutionary theatre. It discusses at length, and with considerable critical precision, several of his theoretical concerns regarding the connections of culture and politics, including extensive accounts of the influences of certain foundational thinkers on his work, whether it be Antonio Gramsci, Bertolt Brecht or Erwin Piscator. Sambhu Mitra’s *Sanmargar Saparja* (1989), on the other hand, is a collection of brief essays written at different periods in his life from the 1950s onwards, and collated and published in 1989. *Sanmargo* manages to give its reader a different sense of intellectual trajectory, mapping the changes in Mitra’s thoughts on theatre, national culture and organisational structures of what he initially envisions as the project of *Nabanatya*. A large percentage of such material is in Bengali – collections of essays on the theatre by practitioners and directors, mostly published in little magazines or journals (like *Bahurupi*, *Epic Theatre* or *Chaturanga*) at first and later printed in book form.

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Related to this category are a number of directly autobiographical writings and personal memoirs, mostly by actresses of the time (for example, Tripti Mitra, Keya Chakraborty and Sova Sen) which differ somewhat from the work of the male practitioners in admitting a larger body of personal material. A collection of articles by Tripti Mitra, some in the nature of personal memoirs and others short essays on theatre, for example, was printed by the theatre group Sudraka in a commemorative volume published in 1992, three years after her death in 1989. Rather than serving as a complete or comprehensive autobiography, these scattered pieces of writing, collated from various magazines and journals and some unpublished manuscripts, serve to provide brief but tantalising insights into Tripti Mitra’s early life and career. The strikingly personal tone of many of these pieces, and the sense of having been written in an occasional and haphazard manner, set them apart from the much more formal tone of Sambhu Mitra’s essays. They give the reader a sense that Tripti Mitra herself did not, for most of her career, consider writing her life or recording her thoughts on the theatre as a necessary serious activity or perhaps that her self-fashioning vis-à-vis the theatre was far less self-consciously undertaken than her husband’s. Similar things could be said about the fragments of the later actress Keya’s Chakraborty’s writings – which include, once again haphazardly, a stray short story, some translations and one essay collected and published by her theatre group Nandikar as a commemorative volume titled Keyar Boi (“Keya’s Book”), several years after her death in 1981. These fragments of writing, including some occasional interviews for little magazines, allow a more fluid relationship to exist, in the writing, between memories of theatre work and private musings. Some other interesting sources of information and insight in these commemorative volumes are essays and brief musings that record the memories of others who knew the actress in question in professional and personal capacities. This makes for an extensive and heterogeneous body of miscellaneous material – from friends, admirers, colleagues – anecdotes, tidbits, personal memories of particular performances which come together to give a strange richness and roundedness to the figure of these women. Interestingly, these differ from the commemorative collections published on male actor-directors (for example, Utpal Dutt) which seem primarily concerned with their ‘professional’

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89 Debashish Majumdar ed., *Tripti Mitra.*
91 Sova Sen, *Smarane Bismarane.*
lives, their methods of work and politics. Along with these, are more conventional archival sources like reports (for example the first bulletins of the IPTA from the 1940s), reviews of plays and interviews also published in journals, little magazines and local newspapers. [The two primary archives I have worked at in relation to this category of material are the Natyashodh Theatre Archives in Kolkata and the P.C. Joshi Archives located at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi].

Besides this, I have also used an extensive body of material – journalistic, documentary and sometimes personal - concerning the political history of Bengal in the decades relevant to the project. Much of this material is in Bengali, some are journalistic reportage (for example, journalist’s musings on 1960s Bengali politics\textsuperscript{92}) and some of it, for example the political memoirs and works written about the national Emergency in the late 1970s (by journalists like Kuldip Nayar\textsuperscript{93} or social workers like Primila Lewis\textsuperscript{94}), is in English. I would hold this category of material as separate from the later, more theoretical and academic work on the political history of India (for example, the work of Partha Chatterjee\textsuperscript{95} or Sudipta Kaviraj\textsuperscript{96}), the latter having often allowed me to place many of my own analytical frames in context. Most of the material listed above, on the other hand, I have looked at mainly as primary texts, which reveal their internal complexities and ambivalences when theoretically unpacked and juxtaposed against each other. One of the major reasons for grouping them together as such is that most of them are written, if not published, in the period between the 1950s and 1980s or are direct reminiscences of that period i.e. roughly the span of theatrical history in Bengal that I am examining. I have also frequently tried to look back and forth between cultural and 'historical' texts from this period, in order to tease out what the aesthetic and the documentary seem to say about each other. In addition to the above, let me include in this group of material, the couple of films from the period that I have used as primary texts in order to elaborate on certain historical problematics vis-à-vis

\textsuperscript{95} Partha Chatterjee, \textit{A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
gender and performance. In Chapter Two, I discuss *Komal Gandhar* (1961)\(^7\) by Ritwik Ghatak in relation to the narratives of nation and revolution that militate against each other in the group theatre of the time. The film, about a theatre group in Kolkata in the late 1940s or early 1950s, draws heavily on Ghatak’s own experiences with the IPTA and his trenchant critique of the narrative of national ‘progress’ in the face of what he sees as the unhealable breach of the Partition in 1947. In Chapter Three, I discuss Satyajit Ray’s 1963 classic *Mahanagar*\(^8\), in relation to the questions of women’s labour and professional work discussed in the chapter. The film is incisive in its analysis of the frustrations of the urban middle classes with the growing failure of the dreams of Nehruvian socialism and the rising unemployment that forces lower middle class women to come into the workforce. In many ways, both these films are indicative of the complexities of their times and allow me both to set the tone for and tease out of the internal contradictions of the discourses I am trying to address and critique in the chapters concerned.

Amongst the other material that I have used are the several available histories of the Bengali theatre, which variously address the group theatre movement. Though there are significant differences here between one text and the other, most of these are in the nature of compendiums which function as useful sources of information. Sandhya Dey’s recent work *Anyadharar Theatre: Utsa theke Ujaan*\(^9\), published in 2007, could be included in this category, especially for its encyclopaedic breadth and the range of information it offers. Starting with two introductory sections on the commercial stage and the IPTA in Bengal, the book goes on to offer short sections that describe the work of most of the important theatre groups that have operated within the city of Calcutta in the post-Independence period in a roughly chronological order. A separate section of the book engages in a similar exercise of meticulously listing and summarizing the work of the key theatre groups working in the small towns of West Bengal, divided according to their locations. As a valuable fund of information, this book manages to do vital work for the future of theatre research on the subject. Other books in Bengali on more specific aspects of Bengali theatre include for example, Bishnu Basu’s *Babu Theatre* (1986)\(^{10}\) on the theatre that developed around the

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\(^7\) Ritwik Ghatak, *Komal Gandhar* (Calcutta: Maxtech Entertainment, 2007), 133 min.
\(^9\) Sandhya Dey, *Anyadharar Theatre*.
\(^{10}\) Bishnu Basu, *Babu Theatre* (Calcutta: Protibhash, 1986)
private houses of rich Bengali babus in the late nineteenth century. Books on Bengali theatre in the twentieth century comprise a wealth of published material on the IPTA, including Darshan Chowdhury’s *Gananatya Andolan* (1982)\(^{101}\), Sajal Roy Chowdhury’s *Gananatya Katha* (1990)\(^{102}\) and Sudhi Pradhan’s *Nabanna: Projojona O Probhab* (1989)\(^{103}\). Pradhan’s three-volume compendium\(^{104}\) of documents (in English) on and from the Marxist cultural movement in India has especially been of immense help in setting the context for the group theatre movement in Bengal. Swapan Majumdar’s *Bahurupi: 1948-1988* (1988)\(^{105}\) is a largely eulogistic official history of the *Bahurupi* in its first four decades, but has been an extremely useful source of information. Some important sources of biographical information on prominent figures of the group theatre are also to be found in the Bengali language, including Shaoli Mitra’s collection of essays *Didriksha* (1983)\(^{106}\), which includes interesting anecdotal information about the personal and professional lives of the author’s parents – Sambhu and Tripti Mitra. Mitra’s recent biography of her father *Sambhu Mitra 1915-1997: Bichitro Jibon Parikrama* (2010)\(^{107}\) is also a vital fund of facts, anecdotes and personal memories. As mentioned earlier, Sudraka’s memorial collection on the life of Tripti Mitra, as well as the recent biography by Debashish Roy Chowdhury, *Tripti Mitra: Shilpe O Jibone* (2010)\(^{108}\), provides significant biographical and analytical material on the actress’ life and work. Also worth mentioning is Arup Mukhopadhyay’s biography of Utpal Dutt titled *Utpal Dutt: Jibon O Srishti* (2010)\(^{109}\). Further, it will be of primary importance here to acknowledge the contribution of theatre critics and scholars like Samik Bandyopadhyay, whose numerous articles, scholarly essays and interviews aid the work of contemporary researchers no end. Bandyopadhyay’s own biography of sorts, as a critic and observer of Bengali theatre for many decades, was published recently as a book-length interview with Debashish Majumdar and Pabitra Sarkar. The book edited by Sekhar and Mili Samaddar and titled *Theatrer Jawlhawaye* (2007)\(^{110}\) takes us through the history of Bengali political theatre in the second half

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\(^{108}\) Debashish Roy Chowdhury, *Tripti Mitra: Shilpe O Jibone*.

\(^{109}\) Arup Mukhopadhyay, *Utpal Dutt: Jibon O Srishti*.

\(^{110}\) Samik Bandyopadhyay, *Theatrer Jawlhawaye*. 
of the twentieth century through an engaged analytical description of Bandyopadhyay’s own experiences as critic and witness. It is also necessary to consider here the work of the *Seagull Theatre Quarterly* and its many impressive volumes on the shape of contemporary theatre. However, the volume I have found especially helpful for my work is Issue 27/28 published in December 2008\(^{111}\) which compiles two important colloquiums organised by Seagull expressly for the purposes of this publication. The first was a colloquium of directors of the Bengali language theatre and the second of women in the group theatre. Both colloquiums are valuable sources for a close encounter with the opinions, life experiences and perspectives of contemporary practitioners and have proved undeniably useful to my work.

Amongst the publications in English on the subject of Bengali theatre, is Sushil Kumar Mukherjee’s *The Story of Calcutta Theatres (1753-1980)* is a much earlier and more critically-oriented history of Bengali theatre that includes three short chapters on the Calcutta group theatre. The first, introductory, chapter discusses the origins and rationale of the group theatre, as well as the history of its emergence and differences from the IPTA (laying out a brief map for the distinctions between ‘*Gananatya*’ and ‘*Nabanatya*’). Writing in 1982, Mukherjee gives us a simple but succinct overview of what he considers to be the current state of the group theatre in Bengal and its particular problems:

> Obviously, money is needed to run a theatre group. Unlike in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, there are no theatre patrons (then called ‘captain’) today, ready to finance a drama-club, a common enough organisation in those days, in exchange for the ‘hero’s’ role in the club’s play. The members of the group theatres come from the middle or low-income groups – educated young men and women, some employed, some in search of employment, some still students, but all with a passion for the theatre, and a large number ‘committed’ to ‘leftism’ and eager to use the stage as a platform to propagate certain ideals in which they believe. Hence the group theatres sell tickets to keep their respective units alive, and not for the gains of the individual members.\(^{112}\)

The second chapter on group theatre in Mukherjee’s book lists what he considers the most prominent groups in the movement and names their major productions, and a third short chapter delineates the ideological divergences of the ‘new theatre’ from the IPTA and its

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investment in what Mukherjee sees as a broader view of life. Other volumes in this category would include Bengali Theatre: 200 years, a collection of essays by several writers edited by Utpal Kumar Banerjee and published in 1999. The essays cover as wide-ranging as the early commercial theatres of Calcutta to puppet theatre in Bengal, but also include several essays on political theatre and the group theatre movement. Published in the same year, Kuntal Mukhopadhyay’s book Theatre and Politics: A Study of Group Theatre Movement of Bengal (1948-1987) is considerably different in intention and approach. Mukhopadhyay spells out clearly his intention to study the relationship between theatre and politics from the point of view of a ‘social scientist’ and uses methods like sample surveys to map the relationship (hierarchical or ‘friendly’) between the directors of the groups and their members. It is interesting, however, that along with an outline of how theatre groups in Bengal have responded to external political events (like elections) and an analysis of the content of some significant plays like Bijon Bhattacharya’s Debigarjan, Mukhopadhyay also deems the study of the internal organisations of the groups themselves as relevant to its larger politics in the public sphere. Mukhopadhyay bases a large part of his study on interviews and surveys. The politics of gender, however, does not, at any juncture, appear to be part of his analytical concerns. Of the other books in this group is Kironmoy Raha’s Bengali Theatre first published in 1978, which charts the history of Bengali theatre from the late nineteenth century to contemporary times. It has two chapters on what we have been calling the Bengali ‘group theatre’: the first is called ‘The Other Theatre’ and traces the genesis of the modern urban theatre in Calcutta from the IPTA onwards. The second is called ‘Contemporary Trends’ and describes the developments (and the perceived degeneration) in Bengali theatre from the mid to late 1980s onwards. Rustom Bharucha and Himani Banerjee’s books stand apart from these other books in their more intensive theoretical focus. Bharucha’s Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal is a cogent analysis of the development of leftist political theatre in Bengal, dwelling at length on the genesis of the IPTA and later, on Utpal Dutt’s work. While the book provides information on an impressive breadth of material, intensive analysis of ambivalences and contradictions within the movement, especially around issues of gender, appears to have been neglected.

114 Bharucha, Rehearsals of Revolution.
There are very few books written on theatre specifically from the perspective of gender or simply even on the figure of the ‘actress’ in colonial and postcolonial India. I will attempt to provide brief outlines of the few that exist. Himani Bannerji’s chief theoretical engagement is with the question of class in Bengali theatre. However, in her book *Mirror of Class: Essays on the Political Theatre of Bengal*\(^\text{15}\), while engaging in a fascinating analysis of class questions and their representational complexities in Bengali theatre, she also includes a single, brief but effective chapter on women in the group theatre. It is called ‘One Woman, Two Women, Without Women’. In explaining the title Banerjee writes:

> If one were to thumb through the pages of Bengali theatre magazines (and these magazines are the expressions of progressive/alternative/left theatre producers, critics and theatre-lovers), one would come across these curious lines. They would be found in advertisements announcing the publication of new, often revolutionary plays. They are an appeal to theatre groups who buy plays, to consider staging them, so they would not be put through the difficult task of finding women for the cast. The groups, it should be clear from this, are mostly male – with a few women dotting their compositions – therefore ‘one woman, two women, without women’ is the safety code, the no risk sign.\(^\text{16}\)

This chapter goes to the heart of the issue of ‘representation’ at its most empirical level, showing how in the modern Bengali urban theatre ‘proxy’ and ‘portrait’ cannot but be inevitably tied to each other. Banerjee, in this very short chapter, proceeds to give us a brief history of the actress in Bengal from the nineteenth century onwards and dwelling on the iconic figure of Binodini Dasi. The core of this chapter consists in a long and engaged interview with the actress Sova Sen, which allows Banerjee to discuss, somewhat at length, Sen’s work in the political theatre both during her participation in the IPTA (she was one of the actresses in *Nabanno*) and during her prolonged partnership as an actress with her husband and director Utpal Dutt.\(^\text{17}\) Other, more extensive, histories of women in Bengali theatre have, of course, been written but they have concentrated mostly on the nineteenth century or on the IPTA before national Independence. Amit Maitra’s 2004 book *Rangalaye Banganati*\(^\text{18}\) is a thorough and sensitive history of women on the professional Bengali stage during the first six decades of Bengali theatre which he takes to be between 1872 and 1931.

\(^{15}\) Bannerji, *Mirror of Class*.

\(^{16}\) Ibid, 144.

\(^{17}\) See Chapter Four.

Having set the period in context, Maitra then goes on to provide detailed biographies of more than a hundred actresses from this period (including Golap Sundari Binodini Dasi, Prabha Debi and Rajlakshmi Debi), wherein the scope of the meticulous research and the felicity of his style are both admirable. However, though Maitra provides us a solid foundation for looking into the pre-history of the bhadramabila actress in post-Independence Bengal, he does not extend his research much further beyond the first half of the twentieth century and limits himself to the workings of the commercial stage. Rabin Bandyopadhyay’s *Abidyaparar Abhinetri* is a work in a similar vein, also concentrating on biographies of actresses covering much of the same ground that Maitra’s book does but grouping the actresses according to their locations in the urban geography of Calcutta in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He also includes the life stories of certain Anglo-Indian actresses of early twentieth century Calcutta like Patience Cooper and Merle Oberon.

Moving on to publications in the English language, Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsi’s recent book *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity* provides a map of actresses working in the city from the early nineteenth century in the public theatre of Calcutta, going on to a detailed analysis of the advent of the ‘new’ kind of actress with the coming of the IPTA. Dutt and Sarkar Munsi write:

> The Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), when it was formed in 1942, was very equivocal in pointing out the induction of a new breed of actresses, who had no contact with actresses of the ‘colonial’ or previous theatre. Very conscious of the new ‘respectable’ actresses, it would be taken as a crucial reference point and often emphasised as ‘without any background in the theatre.’[…] For its first theatrical project, *Nabanna*, two actresses were inducted, trained and subsequently staged as the publicized ‘different’ actresses: Tripti Mitra and Sova Sen. Motivation outside monetary considerations and a political and ideological commitment were the criteria of the actresses who came to the IPTA.

The chapter titled ‘The People’s Actress: A Journey to Modernity’ provides an important analysis of the processes that mark the transition from the IPTA to the first years of the group theatre movement, laying out especially the history of the emergence of the

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120 These issues will be elaborated on in Chapter One.
‘respectable’, middle-class and educated actress, whose driving force in the theatre was announced as ‘politics’ and ‘art’, rather than mere financial survival. Tutun Mukherjee’s book *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation* brings ‘gender’ into the history of theatre in a markedly different way. In her Introduction to this collection of plays by women translated from various vernaculars, she engages at length with the debates around the distinctions between ‘feminist’ theatre and ‘women’s’ theatre – defining one as the sphere of ‘cultural politics’ and the other as the sphere of ‘art or performance’.

Mukherjee seeks to highlight the work of women playwrights from India, selecting plays that map various levels of oppression that mark women’s everyday lives and the range of strategies of resistance they adopt in response to it. Mukherjee includes separate sections on women in Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu theatre, bringing together the work of playwrights like Tripurari Sharma, Malatibai Bedekar and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury. *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre* edited by Lakshmi Subramanyam and published in 2002, is a slightly earlier book that engages critically, and at length, with the questions of gender and women’s participation in Indian theatre. In the Introduction, Subramanyam writes that the book ‘focuses on the image of women in post Independence Indian theatre’, the first interrogating ‘this image in the written or dramatic text in some mainstream male playwrights’ and the second articulating ‘the diverse voices of the female practitioners’.

The book collates several important essays including Maya Pandit’s essay on the gender politics of G. P. Deshpande’s plays, H. S. Shivaprkash’s article on the representations of women in modern Kannada theatre and G. J. V. Prasad’s piece on female characters in Badal Sircar’s plays. As a compilation of essays, including interviews with Mahesh Dattani, Anuradha Kapur, Vidya Rao and B. Jayashree, this book is a valuable source for a wide-ranging, yet incisive, perspective on the workings of gender in ‘Indian’ theatrical texts and performances. Furthermore, it provides, for the purposes of the present study, an effective critical background in successfully capturing the complex, varied and often contradictory forces shaping the ‘national’ context of theatrical culture and politics, within which my particular analysis of a ‘regional’ theatre is located.

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123 Ibid.
125 Ibid, 13.
Next, it is important to briefly outline a number of recent publications on the histories and debates in ‘Indian’ theatre since the colonial times till after Independence. While many of these are monographs, like Aparna Dharwadkar and Sudipto Chatterjee’s books, many are also collections of essays edited by principal theatre scholars from India. Most of these books are published after the year 2000 and are perhaps witness to the now rapid growth of Performance Studies as a discipline in India. However, before going on to this spate of fresh publications, it would be appropriate to look briefly at a much earlier book on ‘Indian’ theatre, written by an American scholar and director (as well as the purported ‘founder’ of the discipline of Performance Studies in the United States) – Richard Schechner. Schechner’s book *Performative Circumstance from the Avant Garde to Ramlila* was published in 1983, the same year as Bharucha’s *Rehearsals of Revolution*. Schechner extends, with definitive vigour and in the now-identifiable Schechnerian vein, the sphere of mere ‘theatre’ to include the widest range of Indian ‘performance’ practices, including several kinds of folk and ritual performance. He begins his book with what reads like an anthropologist’s personal diary: detailed descriptions of Calcutta in 1971 (just after the Indo-Pakistan war and the huge influx of refugees across the border into Calcutta) and its ‘serious’ (always in quotation marks for Schechner) theatre. The book ends with another anthropological narrative: a story about the Ramlila of Ramnagar.

Of the recent critical anthologies and monographs on ‘Indian’ theatre and performance, I would like to begin with Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar’s book *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947* published in 2005. Dharwadkar sees national political Independence as ‘the beginning of a highly self-conscious, self-reflexive period in Indian theatre during which most practitioners are

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128 In many ways, my work would diverge from what I see as the Schechnerian anthropological/ethnographic approach (with his focus on ‘ritual’) to theatre and performance studies here, towards a more politically-oriented study of the historical and material conditions of cultural production of the same theatre.
129 ‘Indian’ is used here for the want of a better word to classify this group of recent publications, but with a full critical awareness of the problematic nature of such a classification and many of the writers discussed have themselves acknowledged and debated.
engaged in creating a ‘new’ theatre for the new nation, whether they locate the sources of novelty in the precolonial past or in the postcolonial present.\footnote{Dharwadkar, \textit{Theatres of Independence}, 13.} Dharwadkar, fortunately, does not attempt to provide us with a ‘survey’\footnote{Ibid, 2.} of this new post-Independence theatre. Rather she deals with the dramatic and theatrical material at hand through certain critical frames that allow the reader the richness of an intricate theoretical engagement with issues of ‘authorship, production, reception and criticism.’\footnote{Ibid, 3.} This leads her towards a methodologically varied approach which, in my opinion, becomes a fundamentally productive force for this study, as opposed to much of what she calls the ‘ahistorical, fragmentary or neo-orientalist methods’\footnote{Ibid, 5.} of much ‘international scholarship and criticism’\footnote{Ibid.} on theatre in the subcontinent. In Chapter Eight, ‘Realism and the Edifice of Home’, Dharwadkar deals briefly but cogently with the question of gender, pointing towards some of the imbrications of patriarchy, family and nation that I will attempt to discuss and critique in Chapter Two of the present work. Dharwadkar writes:

> The critique of patriarchy in both plays\footnote{The two plays are Cyrus Mistry’s \textit{Doongaji House} and Mahesh Elkunchwar’s \textit{Wada Chirebandi}.} extends to the nation as a male conception – the analogy is between home as a male possession and material construct (something deliberately put together) and the nation as an imagined community. The disintegration of the home points to a fundamental conceptual flaw which destroys the nation.\footnote{Dharwadkar, \textit{Theatres of Independence}, 307.}

But other than in this section, it does not appear to be Dharwadkar’s intention to allow gender to emerge as a dominant critical frame for analysis within her book along with other her more primary concerns: the nation, modernity and the postcolonial condition. Amongst the other recent books on the subject of theatre and performance in India are \textit{Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader} edited by Nandi Bhatia (2009)\footnote{Nandi Bhatia ed., \textit{Modern Indian Theatre: A Reader} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).} and \textit{Theatre in Colonial India: Play-House of Power} edited by Lata Singh (2009)\footnote{Lata Singh, \textit{Theatre in Colonial India: Play-House of Power} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009).}. While nation and the nature of postcolonial theatre, along with discussions on Indian theatre historiography surface as important thematic
concerns in Bhatia’s book, ‘gender’ appears as the principal problematic in only one essay that deals with women in pre-Independence Marathi theatre: Neera Adarkar’s ‘In Search of Women in History of Marathi Theatre, 1843-1933’. Adarkar’s essay provides a historical and archival account of the first entry of women into Marathi theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lata Singh’s book has, in contrast, one of its two sections dedicated to gender, ‘Theatre and Gender: Re-scribing Patriarchy’, containing seven separate essays by scholars like Sudhanva Deshpande, Bishnupriya Dutt and Nandi Bhatia. All of these essays attempt to put ‘women’ back into the history of Indian theatre, looking both at dramatic texts from the time and at biographies of individual actresses. However, the subject of most of these pieces is women in the theatre of colonial India i.e. pre-1947. Many of the thematics explored in these essays (for example, the tussle between respectability and performance, between desire and political action as laid out in Deshpande’s essay ‘Excluding the Petty and the Grotesque: Depicting Women in Early Twentieth Century Marathi Theatre’) are those that continue to determine the moral/ideological imperatives that govern the lives of actresses in post-Independence India. Nevertheless, these essays, understandably, do not address the diverse politico-cultural strands that begin to militate against each other in the complex topography of India after 1947 and reshape significantly the operations of gender within cultural and political discourse. Also, these books have allowed me a broader understanding of the various regional theatres in India, against which I could test the specificity of the framing of Bengali group theatre within its particular ‘bhadralok’ culture. However, since a comparative analysis was beyond the scope of this work, I have not attempted to include references to regional theatres in other languages primarily because of my apprehension that such an attempt would be both superficial and tokenistic. Of the other books in this group, Vasudha Dalmia’s Poetics, Plays and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre (2008) employs, once again, ‘the nation’ as the primary frame of reference and analysis, concentrating, among other things, on the development of a tradition of Hindi drama, its development and imbrications in the project of creating a ‘national’ theatrical canon. In the Introduction, Dalmia explains her project thus:

139 Bhatia, Modern Indian Theatre, 200-232.
140 Singh, Playhouse of Power, 173-339.
They (the essays) are still concerned with tracing the genealogy of modern Hindi theatre; Brecht’s theatre is still a presence, though it now plays a different role; it is part of an extended essay on the changing relationship of urban theatre makers to folk-traditional theatre through more than a century of rejection, discovery, and fresh appropriation of ‘folk’. The overall focus of the volume is on the politics of modern Indian theatre, particularly the action and reaction inspired by official policy making in the capital of the country, and, in an essay devoted to just that, its international representation.\(^{143}\)

Erin B. Mee’s 2007 book *Theatre of the Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*\(^{144}\), which engages with the ‘Theatre of the Roots’ movement in India as she understands it in its various manifestations through the work of three important director/playwrights – K.M. Panikkar, Girish Karnad and Ratan Thiyam, has little or no engagement with the question of gender in modern Indian theatre. Sudipto Chatterjee’s recent book *The Colonial Staged: Theatre in Colonial Calcutta*\(^{145}\) (2007) deals with the subject of late nineteenth century theatre in Bengal. *The Colonial Staged* devotes a complete and much nuanced chapter to an engaged discussion of the position of women in colonial Calcutta theatre, highlighting especially the emergence and coalescing of the identities of the Bengali ‘babu’ and ‘bhadralok’ at this time and their implications for the birth of the ‘actress’ in commercial theatre. The contradictory pulls of the dual imperatives of respectability and commercial success defined the emerging shape of Bengali theatre in the colonial metropolis; the actress stood at the vortex of these forces, the ostensible subject of prolonged debates and controversies none of which were ultimately about her subjectivity and/or identity, as the story of Binodini’s betrayal written into the history of Star Theatre undoubtedly goes to show. Chatterjee writes:

\[\ldots\] the theatre was not simply performance for the babus, it was also by and of the babus. Allowing prostitutes on the stage would mean that ‘respectable’ men would now have to consort with ‘unrespectable’ women as co-professionals. It was one thing to witness, but quite another to participate. The theatre had long been depicted as a playground of moral instruction, an instrument of social change and improvement. The entrance of prostitutes would sully its edifying function. \[\ldots\] But the social reality of theatre as a profession and industry that employed and fed those who worked in it could not support that theoretical function. The reality was that theatre practitioners had to survive as professionals and eke out a living. The

\(^{143}\) Ibid, 4.
\(^{145}\) Chatterjee, *Colonial Staged*. 
presence of actresses was a major element in the question of theatre’s viability as an industry.\textsuperscript{146}

Rimli Bhattacharya’s introduction to Binodini Dasi’s autobiographies \textit{My Story and My Life as an Actress} (1998)\textsuperscript{147} is also a useful ur-source for my work, as she makes similar points about the patriarchal and genteel frames of morality within which actresses of nineteenth century Bengal had to eke out their lives.

Besides works on the history of Indian theatre \textit{per se}, it has been theoretically crucial and immensely productive for me to study histories of women in radical political movements in India. These have provided ideas on several of the analytical frames and corollaries that have existed between political and cultural movements on the margins of mainstream national history. These have proved of vital importance to me because of the obvious parallels that exist between the objectives of these studies and the work that the present project seeks to undertake: put simply, to study marginal politico-cultural movements for the further marginalized status of women within them. The differences and divergences are also, of course, several; yet it would be inappropriate not to acknowledge my profound debt to these works. It would be important to name in this context, Renu Chakravartty’s \textit{Communists in the Indian Women’s Movement: 1940-1950} (1980),\textsuperscript{148} Susie Tharu, K. Lalita and Vasantha Kannabiran’s \textit{We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telengana People’s Struggle} (1989),\textsuperscript{149} Sarmistha Dutta Gupta’s \textit{Identities and Histories: Women’s Writing and Politics in Bengal} (2010)\textsuperscript{150} and Mallarika Sinha Roy’s \textit{Gender and Radical Politics in India} (2011).\textsuperscript{151} One extremely helpful essay that is important to mention in this connection is Srila Roy’s ‘Revolutionary Marriage: On the Politics of Sexual Stories in Naxalbari’ published in the \textit{Feminist Review}, Volume 83 in 2006.\textsuperscript{152} Of the other decisive books that have helped me frame this work within the larger context of Indian feminism and gender studies are Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid, 178
\textsuperscript{147} Rimli Bhattacharya, \textit{My Story and My Life as an Actress} (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).
\textsuperscript{149} Tharu, Lalita and Kannabiran, \textit{We Were Making History}.
\textsuperscript{150} Sarmistha Dutta Gupta’s \textit{Identities and Histories: Women’s Writing and Politics in Bengal} (Calcutta: Stree, 2010).
\textsuperscript{151} Sinha Roy, \textit{Gender and Radical Politics in India}.
Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism (1993)\textsuperscript{153} and The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India (2003)\textsuperscript{154}. Mary. E. John and Janaki Nair’s edited collection A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India (1998)\textsuperscript{155} has also been useful in providing several crucial essays including Susie Tharu’s ‘Citizenship and its Discontents’ and V. Geetha’s ‘On Love and Bodily Hurt’. Also valuable in understanding the colonial underpinnings of contemporary gender politics in India have been books like Indira Chowdhury’s The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal (1998)\textsuperscript{156} and Mrinalini Sinha’s The Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire (2006)\textsuperscript{157}. Informative and diverse perspectives on feminist studies in India have been provided by works like Feminism in India (2004)\textsuperscript{158} edited by Maitrayee Chaudhuri, Indian Women: Myth and Reality (1995)\textsuperscript{159} edited by Jasodhara Bagchi and Ratna Kapur’s Subversive Sites: Feminist Engagements with Law in India (1996)\textsuperscript{160}. Important sources of information and critique on Marxist politics and the Marxist cultural movement in India have come in both Bengali and English, in both academic and journalistic guises, including Sanjay Seth’s very cogent and well-researched Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India (1995)\textsuperscript{161} which very productively lays out the overlaps, imbrications and divergences of Marxist and nationalist politics in pre-Independence India. As we shall go on to see, I consider this split down the middle as one of the ruptures that continue to plague the internal politics of the group theatre movement in Bengal. Besides this is Shipra Sircar and Anamitra Das edited collection in Bengali Bangalir Samyabad Chara (1998)\textsuperscript{162} which brings together several essays, articles, documents and chronicles of Bengali writing on the subject.

\textsuperscript{153} Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism (London and New York, Routledge, 1993).
\textsuperscript{155} Mary. E. John and Janaki Nair, A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000).
\textsuperscript{156} Chowdhury, Frail Hero and Virile History.
\textsuperscript{157} Sinha, The Specters of Mother India.
\textsuperscript{158} Maitrayee Chaudhuri ed., Feminism in India (New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004).
\textsuperscript{160} Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman, Subversive Sites: Feminist Engagements with Law in India (New Delhi: Sage, 2006).
\textsuperscript{161} Sanjay Seth, Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India (New Delhi: Sage, 1995).
of Marxist theory and politics. Monobina Gupta’s recent book *Left politics in Bengal: Time Travels Among Bhadralok Marxists* (2010)\(^\text{163}\) provides interesting reportage on the nature and development of leftist politics in Bengal in the post Independence era. Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay’s *The Naxalites: Through the Eyes of the Police: Select Notifications from the Calcutta Police Gazette 1967-1975* (2006)\(^\text{164}\) is an important source of information on the Naxalite period in the politics of West Bengal, the introduction especially having provided me with some interesting anecdotes about the nature of the urban landscape of the Calcutta of the time, reflections of which, as we shall see in Chapter Five, are to be found in Bengali theatre of the 1970s. However, as mentioned earlier, far more influential for me theoretically has been Rajarshi Dasgupta’s work on the modalities of leftist culture and politics in West Bengal, deriving both from his unpublished thesis *Marxism and Middle Class Intelligentsia: Politics and Culture in the Late Colonial Bengal* (2003) and his essays on the ‘ascetic modality’ of masculine self-fashioning within the frames of communist political discourse in Bengal. It might also be important here to mention the work of Sumanta Banerjee in *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*\(^\text{165}\) because of its engagement with a certain critical interface of culture and politics, as well as a extended analytical laying out of the intensely problematic relationship between elite and popular culture in the history of colonial Bengal which continues to influence the contours of *bhadralok* culture in the period I wish to examine in this study.

It would be impossible to completely cover all the diverse sources of theory and information this work may have drawn upon. A particular cause of this diversity of material has been my individual tendency to look upon Bengali group theatre as a political as well as a cultural movement, or more fittingly perhaps, one that is located at a particularly fraught interface between the putatively separate and separable spheres of culture and politics in Bengal. Some of the theoretical and analytical frames made use of in my analysis will become evident in the course of the work itself. For now, it will have to suffice to say that the material and analytical structures chosen have been driven by my dual methodological

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imperatives: the desire to study ‘representation’ in both its cultural/aesthetic and political
sense.

A Few Further Theoretical Concerns and the Place(s) of my Intervention

Louis Althusser had written in *Reading Capital*:

[… we] must completely reorganize the idea we have of knowledge, we must abandon
the mirror myths of immediate vision and reading, and conceive knowledge as a
production. What made the mistake of political economy possible does indeed affect the
*transformation of the object* of its oversight. […] Why is political economy necessarily blind
to what it produces and to its work of production? Because its eyes are still fixed on *the
old question,* and it continues to relate its new answer to its old question; because it is still
concentrating on the old 'horizon' (Capital, T.II, p. 210) within which the new problem 'is
not visible'. (Ibid)

If we were to take from Althusser the idea about knowledge as production and posit the
work of Bengali group theatre between 1950 and 1980 as a kind of complex knowledge
production through performance, vis-à-vis the spheres of both ‘nation’ and radical left
politics, we would then be able imaginatively envision what ‘the old question’ posed by this
multifaceted cultural enterprise might have been. Could we say it would have broadly been
something like this: ‘how to perform and sustain a political theatre, representative of the
masses, that is outside the realm of control of both partisan forces and the hegemonic
institutions of the state, yet not subject to the commercial imperatives of market economy?’
The old answer would have been: ‘Let us form dedicated groups of such artistes
(representers), who will be both cultural and political activists and will pledge their loyalty to
the sole cause of political art outside mere monetary concerns.’ The objects of ‘oversight’ in
the old question are, in my opinion, three: one, the problematic nature of the word and work

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167 Where both the words ‘political’ and the ‘masses’ were understood and inflected differently by different
group but always with the lowest common denominator that it was theatre committed to more than just
‘entertainment’.
of ‘representation’ (vis-à-vis both the gender and class identity of the ‘representers’ and the people often sought to be represented); two, the hierarchical structures operating within the social groups (for theatre groups are indeed also ‘social’ bodies, in the nature of associations or gesellschaften) formed to carry out this work of representation, especially vis-à-vis the differential power of representation allowed to male and female social actors; and three, the differential economic and social status of the representers in the society outside the groups concerned, especially because of their genders, which make both financial and social subsistence more difficult for one than the other. My contention would roughly be this: the work of representation could not but be affected by the internal politics of the representing group, and these internal political structures were fraught with silences, oppressions and ambivalences that allowed the group theatre to ‘affect the transformation of its object of oversight’. This work has been an attempt to shift the horizon of the ‘old question’ slightly, in order to make the new problem a little more visible. Perhaps one aspect of the problem was also the continual falling back of the groups in question into the sphere of the familial; to put it more simply, the masquerading of the gesellschaft as a gemeinschaft, the demands made by it on its members as a result of this masquerade and imbrications of its politico-cultural project in another such immense masquerading body – ‘the nation’ (even as it preached ‘revolution’), as we shall see in both Chapter Two and Chapter Three.

It would, however, be important for me to stress at this juncture, for the object of this study, that the ‘women’ referred to in the title have, at all times when I have addressed biographical material, been those who could rightfully be called ‘bhadramahila’, i.e. educated, mostly urban, mostly middle-class women. The ‘subaltern’ and/or working class woman has appeared but rarely and then only in discussions of their representations (perhaps often inadequate) on stage. Therefore, it is imperative that I specify at the very start, that the

168 Caste, too, is an important category that has remained more-or-less completely invisible with the Bengali group theatre movement. The near-total absence of caste as a frame of reference in the textual, performative and biographical material I have encountered in the course of this study, perhaps explains its lack as in the analyses undertaken here. However, it has also been a conscious decision. To engage with caste as one of the ‘oversights’ of the ‘old horizon’ of group theatre would be the object of another study, since it would have been impossible to adequately address this lacuna within the scope of the present work. What one may do, for the moment, is to honestly acknowledge this absence and not attempt a tokenistic representation or a shallow engagement with the caste question in Bengali theatre.


subject of this study is the *bhadramabila* actress in post-Independence Calcutta and very rarely, and peripherally, other classes woman she is sometimes made to represent. No real affinity or association between women across classes is noticeable in the theatre of this period, except perhaps for the ability to occasionally convince the working class woman that her narrative was being enacted on stage\(^{171}\). Whether or not such a moment could be said to contain the potential for a future collective, it is not in itself so. No actual imperative to declass in the interest of politics is noticed amongst the *bhadramabila* actresses at this time (for all the group theatre’s vanguardist ambitions), unless one were ready to accept that an arguably successful representation on stage is a kind of performative declassing.

But perhaps another way of looking at theatrical representation and its political potentiality is in order. What kind of place is the theatre? What exactly happens in it during the process of representation? And what is the political efficacy, if any, of this representational site? The political is, of course, always complexly refracted through the cultural. But it is not enough to say just that. My conjecture is that it is not always enough to ask: ‘How did theatre reflect or influence politics?’, even though it is often possible to give positive answers to this ‘old question’ (say, as a direct empirical example, it is possible to cite the case of Utpal Dutt’s *Kallol* [1965], the unprecedented protests around which gave Bengal one of its most enduring political slogans for street marches and processions, one that is widely used till date\(^{172}\)). Perhaps it is also necessary to ask: *how did theatre perform its politics in conditions where politics had become impossible?* Did it record and resist in ways that have become visible in hindsight, but perhaps not within the structural fields defined by the ‘old horizons’? These are questions I have attempted to answer in a somewhat roundabout way in my last chapter. However, for the time being, I would like to return to Foucault in order to look for

\(^{171}\) A particularly poignant anecdote related to this discussion is provided by the poet Sankha Ghosh in his memorial piece on the death of the actress Keya Chakraborty. I quote: ‘On the day after Keya died, a maidservant had come to work at one of the households we knew. She told her mistress: ‘Have you heard? Keya Chakraborty has died?’ The lady of the house said: ‘We have heard, but how did you people find out?’ The maid servant was quite surprised at this question. She said: ‘Why won’t we know? When the people in our slum found out, they all cried their hearts out. She was our person. And we won’t know?”’ [Keyar Boi (Calcutta: Nandikar, 1981), 399. Translation mine.] My conjecture is that this might have been the result of Keya’s long standing and very popular performance in the play *Bhalomanush* (1974), for which *Nandikar* had taken over the commercial theatre hall *Rangana* and sold tickets for Re. 1/- precisely so that the play might be accessible to poor people and students. This has been discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

\(^{172}\) The slogan was “*Kallol cholchhe, cholbe!*” meaning “*Kallol* is running, and will continue to run!”
a provisional answer to this question vis-à-vis the theatre. Foucault writes in his essay “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias” in 1967:

[...] among all these sites, I am interested in certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect. These spaces, as it were, which are linked with all the others, which however contradict all the other sites, are of two main types. First there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.\textsuperscript{173}

Foucault himself makes a case for theatre as a kind of ‘heterotopia’. He writes:

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; [...]\textsuperscript{174}

I would like to then argue for the place of Bengali group theatre as an occasional and potential heterotopia: a site that is always capable of representing ‘a whole series of places that are foreign to one another’ and differentially able to transform into a site where, on occasion, ‘all other real sites’ can be ‘simultaneously represented, contested and inverted’. This is the space of resistance, subversion and simultaneously (and paradoxically), representation that the theatre offers. And it is within this differential and occasional potentiality of the theatre as a possible ‘heterotopia’ that our judgement of Bengali group theatre as a political site must rest.

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid, 233.
The Chapters

In this section, I want to present a brief outline of the five chapters included in the present work. The first chapter is called ‘The IPTA in Bengal (1943-55): The Problematic of Desire and Control in Cultural Action’ and is a largely historical piece of work on the shape of political theatre in Bengal in the 1940s, wherein I have tried to map the ground on which the problematic position of women performers in the political theatre of Bengal rests. The chapter begins in the mid 1930s with the formation of the Progressive Writers’ Association in 1936 and goes on to trace the history of the inception of the Indian People’s Theatre Association in 1943. The chapter goes on to explore how the formation of the PWA and the IPTA were necessitated and made possible by a variety of social and political forces coming together. The creation of this ‘united front’ meant that a lot of initial differences between the groups of people who came together for the PWA were brushed under the carpet for the moment in favour of a broader ‘progressive’ coalition. This section of the chapter proceeds to explore how this idea of the ‘united front’ began to become more and more fraught with complexities as time went on. International political events made the split between the nationalists and communists progressively more difficult to ignore. It also attempts to analyse what the fall-out of this was on the anti-Fascist cultural movement and whether, how and when it may have begun to be co-opted into the specifically Marxist cultural movement. The section ends with a close reading of Ritwik Ghatak’s analysis of the problems the workers on ‘the cultural front’ were facing in the early 1950s in their dealings with the Party (the Communist Party of India). Ghatak talks about how cultural questions had begun to be made simultaneously slightly irrelevant to ‘political’ action and subject to prescriptive control by the party. The ‘instrumental’ nature of cultural work in the eyes of those who were at the helm of political decision-making seemed to have increasingly alienated artistes like Ghatak and led towards a gradual unraveling of the apparently seamless coherence of politics and art that the performance of Nabanna in 1943 had brought about.

The second section of this chapter is called ‘Mapping Women: the Performance of History and Desire (1943-50)’. It attempts to study how like ‘culture’ in the CPI, the questions of gender and sexuality within the IPTA had become by the late 1940s

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175 Like the Second World War and the stand each party took with regard to it.
simultaneously invisible and subject to regulation. This section studies first the initial change in gender roles in theatre that was seen with the formation of the IPTA. Thereafter, it analyses how, if at all, the position of women in the IPTA was different from the status of earlier actresses in Bengali commercial theatre. Did this moment, in some way, signal the coming of the ‘bhadramahila’ into Bengali theatre as a whole? This section then goes on to take up the case of Anil De Silva, who was the first General Secretary of the IPTA and who was to quote Sudhi Pradhan ‘relieved of her position in 1946.\footnote{Pradhan, xxii.} In analyzing the reasons for this dismissal – reasons which were never officially stated or recorded – I have tried to understand the IPTA’s problematic position vis-à-vis the question of desire and sexuality in radical political action. It would seem, in reading the more-or-less official histories of the Marxist Cultural Movement in India at this time, that the desire to ‘keep a clean slate’ with sexual morality would often put the burden of ‘moral action’ on women as they were perceived to be the locus of both desire and disruption. A woman perceived to be disruptive sexually (this could even mean simply being attractive enough to arouse the sexual interest of more than one party member) was liable to be dismissed, no matter how efficient. The IPTA needed ‘good’ women, it seemed; the men were efficient enough for the work that needed to be done. This thread of discomfort with female sexuality and expressions of desire is important to analyse and understand because it is a trait that survived in the group theatres that emerged out of the IPTA (whatever their political and aesthetic leanings) and has survived till date. The chapter ends with a look at how gender roles had begun to be fixed in the world of Bengali theatre in the late 1940s and early 1950s; how clear lines had begun to be drawn, imperceptibly but rather definitely, between the infantile/sexual and the intellectual, between play and work, between the domestic and the artistic; and how women were more often than not in a position of disadvantage in these clearly gendered binaries.

The second chapter, called ‘Father Figures- Paternalism and the Emerging Model of the Group Theatres in the Nineteen Fifties’ (1948-60), looks at how the emergent group theatres in Bengal in the 1950s leave behind their connections to the IPTA and gradually shape themselves in a form that models itself on the ‘ideal family’ rather than on the ‘ideal party’ or the ‘ideal commune’. These families (or ‘sampraday’s, as they are sometimes called) are led by the star actor-director who is usually the ethical and creative figurehead of the group. He lays
down the law and determines what the processes of democratic action for the group will be. He is the disciplinarian father-figure, albeit with a chip on his shoulder i.e. the task of establishing theatre as ‘work’ – work that contributes to the solemn task of ‘nation-building’ in the fifties – and not play. The duality of the word ‘play’ in this context is interesting and teasing out the possibilities of this word yields interesting insights into the subject. In ruling out ‘play’, the ‘father’ director also often rules out desire and ‘ordinary’ domesticity – thereby making things difficult for the woman in the group, who finds her concerns made not just irrelevant, but unintelligible. The desire is to establish group theatre as a genteel, ‘bhadralok’ enterprise set distinctly apart from the facile games of the commercial stage. Who pays the price for this ascetic artistic labour, is what this chapter sets out to explore; while simultaneously bringing into discussion the plays performed at this time – the choice and performance of which reveal a sense of a much deeper, more complex and subtle politics than the life-practices of the groups themselves seem to indicate. I have also attempted to explore questions about a woman who is also a ‘citizen-subject’ in a newly-formed ‘liberal democratic’ state and whether the early faith in the nation’s promise of liberal democratic rights in the 1950s had somewhat held in check the more radical tendencies of the Indian women’s movement, which emerged during the 1970s.  

I have tried to analyse, through popular representations of the figure of Tripti Mitra the hyphenated identity of the ‘artiste-wife’, an appellation (attributed to her by prominent newspaper reviewers and cultural critics of the time) where the apostrophe is just barely missing and forever lurking in the background (i.e. the artiste’s wife). I have also tried, in this chapter, to place in context the avant-garde artiste in the 1950s, where he is sometimes, rather strangely, a sort of spokesman for the nascent nation-state, while also simultaneously trying to articulate the internal struggles and contradictions of the ‘republic’. In this strange dual role, and in negotiating the simultaneous pressures of seeking approval from the centre and keeping one’s stance as ‘radical thinking artiste’, the Mitra couple take on a complex position as the leaders of Bahurupi, the leading Indian theatre group of the time. Again and again, through the fifties, Bahurupi begins to mirror constructions of state-hood in forming its own ‘constitution’ (sambidhan) and making its own rules/rituals for ‘democratic action’ within the group. It

seems of primary importance to preserve the ‘unity and integrity’ of the group and perhaps somewhat more urgently, the image of this integrity to outsiders. The crucial question for my work in this chapter has been to analyse the effects of this desired ‘unity’ on those who are often simply ‘included’ in it; and in a more difficult way, perhaps, in the person of the ‘artiste-wife’ expected to represent and bear responsibility for it. Through the life-practices of the Mitra couple, as found in memoirs and interviews, I have also tried to look at prominent debates of the time about women’s work and the status of domestic labour, along with the limits of the ‘progressive’ articulation of gender questions in text, on stage and in everyday practice. Methodologically, this chapter has included both the analysis of biographical material, as well as a close reading of the text (and clues about the possible performance text) of Baburup’s 1958 production Putul Khela, an adaptation of the Ibsen classic A Doll’s House (1879). The chapter also analyses, in the context of nation and citizenship, Ritwik Ghatak’s 1961 film Komal Gandhar, which perhaps reflects on his experiences in the IPTA in the early 1950s.

The third chapter is titled ‘The Politics of the Labouring Body and an Emerging Feminist Consciousness (1960-1977): Keya Chakraborty and Nandikar’. This chapter attempts to examine what it meant to be a full time and/or ‘professional’ actress in the group theatre in the Calcutta of the 1960s and 1970s, through a study of the life and work of the leading contemporary actress Keya Chakraborty, who was a part of the theatre group Nandikar from the beginning of her acting life. In doing so, this chapter’s broader aim has been to grapple with the question of ‘women’s labour’, a severely contentious issue in contemporary India. The emergent figure of the ‘woman professional’ was still largely a complicated, controversial, difficult-to-digest entity in the middle class urban world of Calcutta. In the post-independence era, while certain moves towards cultural change and modernization seemed essential, sometimes for economic reasons, there was widespread confusion about the terms on which these changes were to be accepted. The bhadramahila therefore, when she took to the public space for employment, was a potent bearer of contradictory cultural significations – she could simultaneously mean progress and corruption, development and degeneration, citizenship and moral selfishness. The figure of the newly-employed woman professional stood at a difficult juncture between residual and emergent societal mores, in a complex between patriarchal home and paternalist state,
fighting it out for space and being cut down to size, on occasion, in its attempt to resist the contradictory claims of differing ideologies. This chapter attempts to determine what really happens at this time, when another difficult word is added to this already tortured phrase – the ‘woman professional artiste’. Of course, one needs to keep in mind here the added inflections of dubious respectability when the ‘artiste’ happened to be an ‘actress’. Methodologically, this chapter concentrates chiefly on biographical and memorial material, looking only briefly at Satyajit Ray’s 1963 film *Mahanagar* in setting the issue of women’s labour within the larger context of the 1960s, growing unemployment and the increasing frustration of the middle class with the project of Nehruvian socialism.

Chapter Four is titled ‘Spectacles of Freedom and Misogyny: Representations of Women in Bengali Political Theatre Developing around the Emergency in India (1965-1978)’. This chapter, in contrast to the previous one, concentrates primarily on aesthetic representations of women on stage rather than biographical material on actresses of the time. It examines the build-up to the period of the national Emergency in India (June 1975 to March 1977) in Bengal. It looks, in this context, at the work of Utpal Dutt and Sambhu Mitra in this period, examining three of Utpal Dutt’s plays (*Angar* [1959], *Kallol* [1965] and *Teer* [1967]) and Sambhu Mitra’s never to be performed play *Chandhaniker Pala* (1978). Both these playwrights imagine in their texts vicious militations between notions of the ‘ideal nation’ and the dystopic visions of the then current form of the nation-state. In both the cases, gender relations and concepts of exemplary ‘womanhood’ form intrinsic rather than peripheral aspects (sometimes in the form of misogynistic spectacles and at others in representations of heroic femininity) of the unravelling narrative of national politics and revolutionary masculinity. The plays bring out into the open the self deceptions as well as the strengths of heroic political action, which is somehow by default culturally gendered male. In setting these playwrights and their texts in conjunction with each other, this chapter tries to explore how masculinity and femininity emerge as complex representational tropes and features of political language in the cultural products of a postcolonial state that is locked in a near-fatal struggle with its own emergent repressive visage.

Further, in this chapter and the next, through a study of iconic representations of female political leadership in Bengali theatre at a time in India when female leadership in the
realpolitik had come to be identified with repressive authoritarianism, I have also attempted to reexamine the frequently encountered binary of agency versus victimhood in feminist and gender studies. As has been argued by various scholars, it is no longer possible to look at female ‘agency’ as a simple category as certain strands of liberal feminist theory have attempted to do, both in India and in the Anglo-American context. This is especially in view of the varied, complex and ambivalent roles that women have played in the political world, especially in the three decades of the twentieth century that we are looking at in this work.

One of the unresolved questions on my mind as I have explored the political and theatrical material I had at hand has concerned different ways of looking at female political agency more critically, especially vis-à-vis its conjunctions with violence and repressive state machineries – where agency becomes difficult to categorize as simply liberatory. It is the straightforward activist notion of agency that sometimes appears in the construction of certain kinds of liberal feminism, envisioned ultimately as constitutional and progressive projects, that I have attempted to complicate here. As a corollary and theoretical parallel to this, in the fifth and last chapter, titled ‘Nandikar’s Antigone: Agency, Autonomy or Sacrifice? (1975-1977), I have tried to look at ‘pain’ differently, to explore whether it could be read as something other than victimhood, to see whether, in some cases, there is the potential to read ‘pain’ as agentic or political and significant of an intense engagement with what one could perhaps call ‘non-instrumental politics’ and a distinctive figuration of a new kind of feminist political agency. In this, I have been especially influenced by the theoretical work of Talal Asad in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*" and Saba Mahmood’s work in *Politics of piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*" and their ways of rethinking subjectivity, freedom, modernity, agency and suffering. A parallel concern has been how to relate the above questions to Performance Studies, especially if we try to look at ‘acting’ on stage as a different kind of action, where one simultaneously ‘acts’ and ‘suffers’ is simultaneously agent and victim, both empowering and disempowering oneself at every moment. This last chapter stands in contrast to all the previous ones, in undertaking a prolonged textual engagement with two dramatic versions of the same mythical narrative and

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thereafter, situating it within the immediate political context of Calcutta during the Emergency. It attempts a comparative theoretical and political reading of the two texts of *Antigone* by Sophocles and Jean Anouilh that seeks to arrive at an analysis of what counts as political action in a situation of complete state repression, the imbrications of this ‘action’ in the politics of gender and the implications of this for the performance by *Nandikar* of Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* in 1975.

The Conclusion attempts to tie the various theoretical and argumentative threads together, along with marking the reasons for ending the work at the year 1980. It also tries to look forward at the fundamental transformations that take place within the Bengali group theatre in the 1980s and 1990s, vis-à-vis the rapidly changing political, economic and global cultural scenarios. The Conclusion points towards some of the ways in which this research could be extended and taken forward, demarcating some areas that might prove to be of interest to future researchers. I conclude this thesis with an Epilogue that takes a brief look at the directorial and organisational work of Tripti Mitra within and outside *Bahurupi* between 1970 and 1989 (the year of her death). Here, I briefly raise some questions about the abortive possibilities for women that both took shape and failed during this period vis-à-vis the organisational structures of the group theatre. It appears to me that these possibilities never came into their own at this time; neither Tripti Mitra’s work as a director (quite prolific in the 1970s), nor her position as the President of *Bahurupi* during her last years in the organisation, ever managed to make a mark deep enough to supersede her identity as an actress. The Epilogue attempts to analyse why this was so.