Chapter One

The IPTA (1943-55): The Problematic of Desire and Control in Cultural Action

Introduction

The following chapter will do two things: first, it will problematize the popular tendency to see formation of the Indian People’s Theatre Association in May 1943, and the performance of the legendary Nabanno (October 1944), as moments of pure and unquestionably radical cultural action, where art and politics ostensibly came together seamlessly. It will attempt to trace the seeds of the later split in the IPTA to this early perception. It will look briefly at the confusions, lack of definitions and excesses evident in the putatively ‘originary’ moment of radical articulation, leading on to the early 1950s when the ‘cultural front’ (including the IPTA) had allegedly begun to become merely instrumental to the Communist Party. Second, it will attempt to trace how, in the functioning of the IPTA, a move - on the part of those who claim to represent the radical collective - makes sexual desire simultaneously irrelevant and subject to the prescriptive control of the Party. In doing so, this section will take as its case in point, the expulsion of Anil De Silva, a Sri Lankan woman who was one of the founders of the first unit of the IPTA in Bangalore in 1941. The first bulletin of the IPTA lists her name as General Secretary (she held the position between 1942 and 1946). It seems that De Silva had taken on a major organizational role for the cultural front during the first half of the 1940s. In 1946, however, De Silva was summarily removed from her position. It seems difficult to come by any clear explication of the reasons for her dismissal in the documents provided by official histories\textsuperscript{180} of the time. Post 1946, references and stories about her become fragmentary. There are passing mentions of her work here and there, but not much else. It is almost as if a woman with considerable presence was being slowly written out of these authorized narratives. Certain

\textsuperscript{180} By ‘official’ I mean Sudhi Pradhan’s Marxist Cultural Movement in India Vol. I, II and III (1979, 1982 and 1985) and Darshan Chowdhury’s Gananatya Andolan (2001), as opposed to more informal sources like personal anecdotes and memoirs. Pradhan’s history was also, additionally, written with the approval of the then CPI, as we shall see shortly.
autobiographies and memoirs of the time, however, contain fuller accounts of De Silva’s participation in the movement, as also indications of the reasons for her ultimate failure and the relative lack of prominence accorded to her within officially-sanctioned narratives. The reasons for this erasure, as well as what they say about the cultural front’s negotiations with questions of desire and the problematic position of women within the cultural vanguard of the period, is what the second section of my chapter will try to analyse. My interest in these problems will lead on, in the thesis, to an analysis of how these perceptions/rules governing desire continue to determine much of the workings and processes of group formation in the history of later political theatre in Bengal. I will try to argue that rather than gaps that may be filled or corrected in order to create effective systems of really radical cultural action, these are essential indices of the failures of those systems of cultural governance as a whole.

1. Contingent Solidarities: The Formation of the IPTA

The sense of a ‘contingent solidarity’ and the apprehension of multiple (not opposed, but simply differing) voices bubbling up under the surface of it, is what one gets in studying the history of the formation of the Progressive Writers Association (1936) and subsequently, the Indian People’s Theatre Association (1943) in pre-independence India. In the first conference of the Progressive Writers Association (Lucknow, April 1936), a spectrum of creative voices from to ‘anti-fascist’ to ‘anti-imperialist’ to ‘communist’ came together. In 1937, the ‘Indian Committee of the League against Fascism and War’ was started in Calcutta with Rabindranath Tagore as its President. Mulk Raj Anand, one of the founder-members of the PWA, wrote in a lecture delivered at the Second All-India PWA Conference held in Calcutta in 1938:

We, the writers of India, know how the forces of repression and censorship have thwarted the development of a great modern tradition in the literature of our country; we saw the ugly face of Fascism in our country earlier than the writers of the European country (sic), for it was British Imperialism which perfected the method of the concentration camp, torture and bombing for police purposes which Hitler and Mussolini and the Japanese militarists have used so effectively later on.
The sympathy of the world writers, in our task of creating a new culture, in the face of the indirect censorship of which our rulers are masters, is with us.\footnote{Sudhi Pradhan, Vol. I, 21.}

It was the moment of the creation of a ‘united’ cultural front against the oppressive mechanisms of both British imperialism and Fascism, which seemed to be the most pressing concern for both the nationalists and the communists at the First PWA All-India Conference. The voices of the PWA were speaking for a social realism in art to address the ‘real’ concerns of the people of a colonial country, who were equally plagued by the threat of international war and domestic poverty, which imperialist oppression only succeeded in exacerbating to intolerable levels. I quote from the PWA Manifesto:

We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the problem of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and un-reason we reject as reactionary. \textit{All that arouses in us a critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive.}\footnote{Ibid, xiii. [Emphasis mine.]}\footnote{182}

This was, to begin with, roughly, the PWA’s definition of what was ‘progressive’. Some action was deemed necessary on the part of artistes and the PWA took its cue from European precedents, such as the ‘World Congress against Fascism and War’ (1932) that was held in Amsterdam and presided over by Romain Rolland. It was as if in the face of the earth-shaking brutality of international events such as the Spanish Civil War of 1936, subtle ideological differences mattered very little. Inclusiveness and unity seemed more important than theoretical nit-picking; it was a moment of action and anything that could keep one from forming this broad coalition for freedom could, for the moment, be brushed under the carpet. It was necessary to be able to bring all ‘progressive’ voices together to create a \textit{democratic front} for artistes and cultural workers, many of whom \textit{happened} to speak in clear terms of a class struggle. Interestingly, this agenda suddenly came quite close to that adapted at the third congress of the Communist International held in 1921 (the same year that it recognized the Communist Party of India, a year after it was formed by M. N. Roy in Russia) which:

Observing the remote possibility of revolution breaking out in Europe […] accepted the slogan for united action for limited aim in limited sphere. It also set the task for
all communist parties to create a broad democratic front, including intellectuals, against capitalism.\textsuperscript{183}

While Sudhi Pradhan\textsuperscript{184} sees the formation PWA as the one of the originary and defining moments of the Marxist cultural movement in India, he also states categorically that it was not organized exclusively by the Left or from Moscow, as some mainstream newspapers feared. He writes:

From the writings of Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zaheer, two founder-members of the PWA, readers know that the Marxist cultural movement in India received its first impetus from Europe. But there is no reason to believe that the movement was sponsored solely by the Communists.\textsuperscript{185}

However, observations by other historians of the cultural front, like Darshan Chowdhury, contradict this reading. Chowdhury writes: ‘It is clear from the account of events that the establishment and organisation of both the PWA and the IPTA were made possible by the efforts and programme of action undertaken by the Communist Party.’\textsuperscript{186} The IPTA had begun its work as a cultural branch of the Anti Fascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association in 1942 and continued to be publicised as one of its wings until 1945. Performances had begun in Calcutta even before the All-India organisation was formed in 1943. It was at the first national convention of the CPI in Bombay in 1943 that the IPTA was formally constituted. All the leaders of the Party congress were present at both the parallel events: the conference of the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association and at the formation of the IPTA. Therefore, the Party leaders were fully informed about the proceedings at these two congregations. Even so, in the main events of the Party Congress, the ‘cultural front’ was not discussed at all, nor was any definite programme in relation to it formulated. A strange dichotomy seems in evidence here: were the nature and requirements of these front organisations such that they could not be formally recognised as being under the direct control of the Party? Why was this facade maintained (even in the writing of the official history many years later by Sudhi Pradhan), although all facts point towards the undeniable

\textsuperscript{183} Sudhi Pradhan, Vol. I, viii.
\textsuperscript{184} Sudhi Pradhan was an active participant in the IPTA and a CPI party member. In 1979 he compiled and edited the first volume of the book \textit{Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents}. Two other volumes followed in 1982 and 1985 respectively. The books cover a period from 1936 (the inception of the PWA) to 1964.
\textsuperscript{185} Pradhan Vol. I, v.
\textsuperscript{186} Chowdhury, \textit{Gananatya Andolan}, 151. [Translation mine.]
and constant mentoring, support and control of the Party over the cultural front? Chowdhury mentions several of these facts. For example, it was at 46 Dharmatala Road in Calcutta, which was the central office of the regional branch of the CPI, that the ‘progressive’ artistes from all these front organisations continued to meet throughout the 1940s. To quote Chowdhury:

The Communist Party was banned in British India at that time, but progressive people continued to meet at 46 Dharmatala Road under various names. All of these groups had only one address – 46 Dharmatala, which was then the regional office of the CPI. In the ten years between 1930 and 1940, the party was outlawed. It was for this reason and in order to avoid censure by the British government that the Communist Party continued to function under different names and to spread its ideas.\(^ {187} \)

The ban on the CPI (since 1934) was finally lifted by the British government in July 1942, after the Party declared, in December 1941, that the war in Europe was a ‘People’s War’ against international Fascism.\(^ {188} \) Various communist leaders who had been imprisoned were also released at this time. However, in 1943, it seems that it was still essential that the cultural front appear to be a broad democratic front, rather than under the direct command of the Party leadership. This was perhaps the reason why no programme for the cultural front was discussed publicly in the 1943 Party convention, even though all the conferences were happening parallely. The British government, however, did not seem to be under any illusion regarding the nature of this cultural front. Darshan Chowdhury cites the British Home Department’s confidential report on the 1943 CPI congress:

Sideshows to the convention were provided by the conferences of the All India Progressive Writers’ Association and the Indian People’s Theatre Association whose resolutions echoed the C.P.I. policy and contained little of significance and a public exhibition designed mainly to advertise the achievements of the Party?\(^ {189} \)

Coming back to Sudhi Pradhan’s account of this history: while admitting that the cultural and political situation was far more complicated in the colonies fighting imperialism than in Europe (where the sole task was to resist fascism and prevent war), Pradhan also attempts to

\(^{187}\) Chowdhury, 152-153. [Translation mine.]
\(^{188}\) Discussed later in the chapter.
\(^{189}\) Chowdhury, 153.
give a theoretical explanation for why, at this juncture, the struggle for nationalist liberation and Marxist ideology were not at odds:

The class war preached by Marx was meant to prevent for all time the imperialist effort of exploitation at home and slavery abroad. *Thus the demand for the right of nationalist self-determination is the direct outcome of and supplementary to the Marxist slogan ‘workers of the world unite’.*

This was, then, the CPI’s way of reconciling the nationalist and communist agenda. This is the truth, Pradhan claims, that the mainstream propaganda was trying to obscure by creating the ‘bogey of communism’ as detrimental to nationalism. The British Government’s fear of the Indian communists was long-standing and is corroborated by other cultural historians who chronicle the time. Rustom Bharucha writes in his book *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal*:

The influence of the Soviet Union on this party (CPI) was so perceptible that in 1929 the British Indian government accused a number of Communists of conspiring to overthrow the Raj with a Communist regime based on the Soviet model. [...] Jawaharlal Nehru protested that the government was using the bogey of communism to suppress the labour movement in India. If anything the Meerut Conspiracy Case\(^\text{191}\) intensified anti-British sentiments and enhanced the image of the Communist Party of India.\(^\text{192}\)

The idea of an anti-imperialist united front persisted for a time after the formation of the PWA in 1936. However, as political events unfolded during the next few years and the build-up towards the Second World War began, significant differences arose in the agenda of the Communist Party and that of the mainstream nationalist movement. The war began in 1939. In 1940, Hitler invaded France and some days later, bombings on England were started. In spite of nationalist protests against the ‘imperialist war’, India, as one of the primary colonies

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\(^{190}\) Pradhan Vol. I, vi. [Emphasis mine.]

\(^{191}\) Still seen by some as the biggest political trial to be ever held in India, the Meerut Trial started on March 15, 1929 and ended in 1933, and involved the trial of 33 persons (three of them Englishmen). The arrests were fallout of the wave of workers’ strikes that happened in India in 1928 and 1929, on the railroads, the ironworks and the textile industry. The numbers and organization of trade unions had grown rapidly during this period, and the British Government constituted a committee headed by Sir Charles Fawcett. Prominent trade unionists and socialists were arrested and indicted under Section 121A of the Indian Penal Code, which was the charge of attempting ‘to deprive the King of the sovereignty of India or any part thereof.’ The charges were justified with the allegation that many of the trade union leaders arrested were Communists and aligned to the Communist International. The charge was that they wished ultimately to make India a Soviet Republic subordinate. This trial was of immense importance for the workers movement in India at that time.

\(^{192}\) Rustom Bharucha, *Rehearsals of Revolution*, 35.
of Britain and more importantly, one of its major suppliers of raw material, was drawn into the war. Initially, all national political parties, including the Congress and the Communist Party, expressed their dissension. As Manikuntala Sen writes in her political memoirs Shediner Katha, the Communist Party of India wanted, at this point, to have a ‘united front’ against war with the direct involvement of the masses. The party wanted to call for strikes and mass Satyagraha to protest against the war and India’s forced involvement in it. The Congress, under Gandhi’s leadership, decided against a mass movement and on ‘personal Satyagraha’. The Communists went ahead with mass meetings and propaganda against the war. The Party line and the mainstream nationalist position were similar at this point, though differing in degrees and methods. The slogan was: ‘Not one paisa for this war, not a single man.’\(^{193}\) The British Government came down severely on the activities of the already-banned Party; the levels of state repression against the CPI increased exponentially. Party activists and leaders had to, according to Darshan Chowdhury, leave the city of Calcutta or go into hiding. However, the cultural activities of the Party were not entirely stalled. Chowdhury informs us that the leftist student groups of the Calcutta University kept the cultural movement alive through organisations like the Students’ Federation (SF) and the Youth Cultural Institute (YCI), even though the former increasingly saw the activities the latter as essentially elitist and urban-oriented. However, Chowdhury makes it clear that it was the Communist party that was the moving force behind all of these student and cultural organisations.\(^{194}\)

What happened next, however, put the Communist Party of India in a far more ideologically difficult position vis-à-vis the nationalists, as well as their own earlier stand. In 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union and the Party changed its official line under directions from Moscow. The war was now a ‘People’s War’ and it was the work of all nations to resist aggressive Fascism at all costs, even if it meant aiding one’s colonial rulers temporarily. This was a complete turnaround; many party-workers who were actually involved in the anti-war propaganda felt significant discomfort and embarrassment at this sudden change of stance, finding it difficult to defend it against popular attacks. One such account is found in Manikuntala Sen’s Shediner Katha:

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\(^{193}\) Manikuntala Sen, Shediner Katha (Calcutta: Nabapatra Prakashan, 1982), 58. [Translation mine.]

\(^{194}\) Chowdhury, 125-135.
In 1941, the new Party Line arrived. This war is a People’s War. It is the War of all the nations of the world against Fascism. Therefore, in this war, we could no longer attack the British imperialists the way we used to. A new booklet called ‘Advance towards Freedom’ was distributed to inform us of the new Party Line. The Line that this book contained put us into trouble. […] We were in the greatest difficulty. At least I was. I am not capable of analysing or criticising the Party Line in its entirety, but in my heart I was unable to accept it as right. We bitterly saw criticized Subhash Bose’s visit to Germany and thence in 1942 to Japan. Thereafter, the Party’s newspaper *Janajuddha* published a cartoon of Bose. What we got from the public for this was only hatred and rejection. […] We had a really difficult time trying to explain to the people this international situation and our justification for the Anti-Fascist struggle. Only yesterday, we had said: ‘not one life for this war, not even one paisa’. How could we now assert that this was the ‘People's War’? ”

Manikuntala Sen left the CPI when it was divided (in 1964); she writes here (in 1982) from the position of an outsider long exiled from active politics. It is interesting to note, in contrast, how Sudhi Pradhan maps the same events in creating the official history of the Marxist cultural movement, connecting them directly ‘to the foundation of the Anti-Fascist Writers’ And Artists’ Association, the revival of the PWA and the formation of the People’s Theatre Association as an All-India Organization in 1943’. This is how Pradhan explains ‘The People’s War Line’ that was taken up by Marxists after the Soviet Union was attacked by Germany:

The People’s War Line […] assumed that the freedom movement in India would be strengthened, if the movement against Fascism in Europe and Asia succeeded. […] It was on the basis of the People’s War Line that the communists opposed the abortive ‘Quit India’ movement launched by the Congress at a time when German and Japanese Fascism were threatening respectively the Stalingrad Front and the Burma Front. This movement was foisted by the Congress leaders without previous planning on an unprepared people and by misleading their pent-up spontaneous anti-imperialist feelings, merely served to expose them to the most brutal imperialist backlash. On the other hand, the Indian big bourgeoisie which had grown fat on war contracts and had, in cahoots with imperialism, created the Bengal Famine of 1943,

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196 In the preface to the second volume of his book *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents (1947-1958)*, Pradhan writes: “Thanks for the success for the first volume must go to the CPI(M) leaders E.M.S. Namboodripad, Samar Mukherji, Abdullah Rasul and Sunil Basu, and the CPI leaders Professor Hiren Mukherjee, the late Gangadhar Adhikari and Chinmohan Sehanobis, since the active interest they took in the book from its very inception helped its readership to be aware of its importance when the book was first launched.” [Pradhan, 5.] It could be said that the work was, if not an officially commissioned, then an officially approved history of the inception of ‘Marxist culture’ in India. I would like to suggest that what actually took place might have been slightly more complex than what this version of the history suggests.
197 Pradhan Vol. II, 8.
branded the communists, through their hired press, as traitors to the country. The Communists needed a platform for fighting these false allegations. It was this that led to the foundation of the Anti-Fascist Writers’ And Artists’ Association, the revival of the PWA and the formation of the People’s Theatre Association as an All-India Organization in 1943.198

This is a clear statement of causation. There seems to be no doubt about the fact that it was the crisis that the Communist Party of India was faced with post-1941 that served as the direct impetus for the creation of a communist cultural front, in order to fight ‘false allegations’ that were being levelled at it by the ‘national bourgeoisie’, the Congress and the British Government. If this were indeed so, then a much narrower lens is now being placed on the history of the time, which is in sharp contrast to what Pradhan writes of the history of the formation of the PWA: ‘there was no reason to believe that the movement was sponsored solely by the communists’199. The talk then had been about a united democratic cultural front, and the bringing together of all progressive voices – the word ‘progressive’ being defined as broadly as possible. In February 1936, on the eve of the creation of the PWA, communists R. Palme Dutt and Ben Bradley had published ‘The Anti-Imperialist People’s Front in India’, an article which spoke for the unity of all anti-imperialist forces working in India. It was perhaps in this announced spirit of inclusiveness that Sajjad Zaheer, General Secretary of the PWA, had written in his preface to ‘Towards Progressive Literature’ in 1940:

[...] we defined at this conference our creed in the manifesto which gave a minimum basis of unity for all those writers, who though differing in many ways, were united as far as the progressive writers’ movement was concerned. The conception of progress, it was admitted, was different for different people; it would change according to place and time. In our manifesto we pointed out our conception of progress as far as Indian literature today was concerned. Those who refused to accept our Manifesto we could not treat as one of us. Some of us who differ from us today will, we are certain, join us at a later date, because they are true artistes; others, the rabid reactionaries, we shall have to fight in order to eliminate their pernicious influence on the Indian mind. The fact that Prem Chand […] a great humanist, presided over our first conference was a guarantee of the fact that our definition of ‘progress’ was neither narrow nor sectarian.200

There are several things worth noting in this passage. Most of these ran under the surface of the broadly progressive and optimistic rhetoric, perhaps escaping and existing in excess of the conscious intentions of the passage. Firstly, the desire for ‘a minimum basis of unity’

takins us back to our initial idea of a contingent solidarity, where many (once again - not opposed, but differing) voices come together to meet the what is called ‘the pressing need of the hour’ – to act, to protest, to bring bodies into the public space in order to create a public discourse. A new kind of group formation at this historical juncture seemed essential; it is then done on the basis of contingent needs and by hoping and aiming to find what Zaheer calls ‘a minimum basis of unity.’ Secondly, there is a simultaneous desire to draw limits/close ranks/designate the enemy (‘the rabid reactionaries’ whose ‘pernicious influence’ must be fought), and to open borders to widen participation and accept multiplicity (‘who though differing in many ways’, ‘the conception of progress is different for different people’). Thirdly, there is the expression of a self-evident assumption that: all true artistes will come around, in the end, to the right politics. The corollary assumption, therefore, is that those who do not come around, even with time, are not true artistes and fall into the other group – ‘rabid reactionaries’ whose ‘pernicious influence’ must be obliterated. This extremist tone seems completely contrary to the ‘progressive’ generosity and inclusiveness of the passage, but I would like to argue the seeds exist for both possibilities in the same arrangement of words. Fourthly, Prem Chand is invoked as the great humanist guarantee against narrow sectarianism. Once again, this is a gesture towards the broad humanist basis of the PWA’s programme and a reassurance that no one need be afraid; this was a united front and not a Party platform. To come back to Pradhan’s assertions about the foundation of AFWAA, the revival of PWA and the formation of IPTA post-1941: these were formed, according to him, because the party needed a cultural front to defend itself. But if the CPI perceived this as a shift from an united front to a party front, no statement about this was made, as far as one aware, in the public documents of the time. Darshan Chowdhury corroborates this reading in his history of the IPTA:

The IPTA began to function as a cultural wing of the Communist Party of India. However, this fact was never admitted in any of their bulletins, pamphlets or public notifications. Rather, it was said that the IPTA was only a cultural wing of the PWA and the AFWAA. It was also stated that any intellectual, artiste or writer could join this organisation. Anyone could join who had the right to speak on behalf of human beings. But there was no reason why the nature of the IPTA’s ideology should have been unclear to anyone; it was more than evident in their work and in the identities of the people involved.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Chowdhury, Gananatya Andolan, 118. [Translation and emphasis mine.]
The other possibility is that the party saw it as self-evident that the interests of all progressive voices that spoke against Imperialism and Fascism and the agenda of the party were one and the same. What the party needed was identical to what all the progressive forces needed, or if there were subtle differences, the party would continue to allow space for this multiplicity. Elsewhere in the same introduction, Pradhan states:

A careful reader of the IPTA bulletins would find declarations to the effect that the IPTA was not a party organization. [...] the first executive committee on it had all the top communist leaders of the working class, kisan, cultural and student fronts. Of course, there were some non-party men but they were all close sympathisers of the Communist Party. [...] the political line of the C.P.I. during 1942-1947 [...] formed the keynote of all IPTA programme. 202

The IPTA was, therefore, according to Pradhan, not a Party organization, but was dominated by Party members and sympathizers. Its course of action was determined by the official Party line. From a front for ‘all progressive voices against Imperialism/Fascism’ to ‘all voices which are sympathetic to the Party line’ is a jump, an elision that demands close attention. Was it no longer a ‘broad democratic’ and ‘humanist’ cultural front that we were looking at? Was it now a specifically ‘communist’ front under direction from the party line in Moscow? When did this happen? We do not find a clear statement that explicates this shift, if indeed there was one. The need for action was so strong, it seemed that concern for these ideological and theoretical niceties could be elided for the moment. It is my argument that it is in these seemingly small elisions that the seeds for the later split in the cultural front can be found. Some understood the politics, some knew the Party line, others neither knew nor understood – they were there to meet the visceral ‘needs of the hour’ and launch a broad humanist protest. It is this confusion at the so-called ‘moment of origin’ that Darshan Chowdhury, too, points towards in explicating the fragmentation of the IPTA in the late forties:

At the inception of the IPTA movement (1943), a lot of communist leaders were still under cover. The ban on the party by the British government had just been lifted. In this initial period, many intellectuals – both radical and liberal – joined the organisation. There were not many peasants or workers. Salil Chowdhury, who had been deeply involved with the IPTA at this time, felt that it was a middle class movement. In his view, songs of peasants or labourers in their voice were like handicrafts in middle class living rooms. People came from different places – some

with the passion to do something new, others ideologically motivated, still others on personal request…

There are sections in his introduction to *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents (Vol. I)*, where Pradhan recognizes these how the contingent needs of the hour and the sense of palpable, immediate crisis affected the participation of artistes in the IPTA in comparison to earlier leftist organizations:

 [...] most of the traditional writers and artists did not like to associate themselves directly with any organization where men with extreme political views were in control. Earlier manifestos and declarations had used stronger words against Fascism – compared to those used against British misdeeds in India, as if imperialist repression is too obvious to be mentioned time and again. As for the IPTA manifesto, no such difficulty was to be faced. In the face of Japanese attack and famine, sensible people rallied behind the Marxists in service of the suffering people.

I go back to what Zaheer says about the formation of the PWA in his piece:

It was a consciousness, in many cases vague and undefined, of these things (*the poverty and misery of the Indian people, among other things*) which led to the formation of the Progressive Writers Association.

Now again, in 1942-43, the force of events created a consciousness in most ‘sensible people’ that they must protest, take action, come into the public space. It would not, perhaps, be wrong to say that it was the severe famine of 1943-44 (in Bengal and Bihar) that was, to a great extent, the impetus for the *Gananatya* movement in Bengal. The famine was the result of the dual causes of international war caused by Fascist forces and British imperialism. It was a ‘man-made’ famine made possible by *kalobajari* (black marketeering) and war-contracts. It was not as if food was not there; it was only there for the war-contracts and the rich. Multitudes of poor farmers plagued by starvation arrived in the city, taking their place on the streets and the pavements – altering the urban space forever, entirely. Young middle-class students and artistes in Kolkata witnessed for the first time severe hunger and death at such close proximity. The *Gananatya Sangha’s* unprecedentedly successful *Nabanno* (1943) brought together, inseparably for their time, the questions of national well being and socialism, anti-

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203 Chowdhury, 281. [Translation mine.]
204 Pradhan, Vol. I, xii.
205 Pradhan, Vol. I, 2. [Emphasis mine.]
colonial resistance and anti-fascism. *Nabanno* was first performed at Srirangam theatre on the 24th of October, 1944. Like other IPTA productions, the costs for staging *Nabanno* were bourne by the People’s Relief Committee (a branch of the AFWAA) on the understanding that the proceeds from the shows would be delivered to their fund. Ideologically, this marked for the CPI the beginning of a ‘people’s theatre’, which had at, its origins, an uncompromisingly political idea. It was Rolland’s demand for ‘truth over beauty’, which influenced the young artistes of the IPTA in 1942/43, along with the experiences of the Soviet People’s Theatre and the Chinese People’s Theatre, news of which reached the cultural front in India through various sources. Rolland had written in 1903: ‘A nation might conceivably do without beauty, but it ought not, it cannot, dispense with truth.’ Later, of course, the aesthetics vs. politics debate would become the primary bone of contention between artistes and party workers in the IPTA. Malini Bhattacharya neatly sums up the impetus for this new movement in her study, ‘The IPTA in Bengal’:

The first bulletin of the IPTA brought out in 1943 is headed by the epigraph: ‘People’s theatre stars the people.’ The specific application of the term ‘people’ is not made very clear in the bulletin. But from the work of the IPTA, one may infer that the term 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 […] it was resolved on this basis to build up a theatre not only for the people, but also of the people and by the people […]

Many of the reactions to the famine and its impact on the Calcutta of the time later recorded by people then involved in the IPTA seem to be largely visceral. Tripti Mitra writes:

There were days when I could not eat after coming back from the langarkhana. Was it because I was sad for them? No, that was perhaps not the whole truth. We saw them becoming inhuman for food. They would not bathe. They did not want to. All they thought of was where and how they could find some food. So when they came to the langarkhana in droves, there was this strange smell. That smell, it was as if […] All the people who saw *Nabanno* and even the reviews in the papers expressed surprise

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206 Chowdhury, 118-125.
208 This would be the official theoretical explanation for the split in the organization, with both parties seeking to critique each other’s ‘hypocritical’ intentions. It is my belief that these allegations of hypocrisy and personal moral failure can easily be unravelled as failures of political understanding that existed from the very inception of the group.
at how all these educated urbane young people suddenly turned into rustic beggars on stage. Indeed, how had we done it! All the people in the play were all involved in this sort of work. These destitute people on the streets had taken over our hearts and our consciousness. That is perhaps why at rehearsals it seemed easy to become one with them.\footnote{Debashish Majumdar ed., \textit{Tripti Mitra}, (Calcutta: Sudraka, 1992), 15. [Translation and emphasis mine.]} There is a certain failure of language one witnesses here, which stands in stark contrast to the felicity of expression found in the rest of Mitra’s reminiscences. There is, in the passage, a feeling of being taken over by the unprecedented, dehumanizing brutality of an experience and an account of a collective reaction that seems to follow almost spontaneously, through a certain logic of natural causation. The passage seems to suggest that Mitra feels, in the act of looking back, that the actors in \textit{Nabanno} could not help turning into ‘them’ on stage. ‘Becoming them’ was something that happened, not something that the actors did through conscious artistic labour or practice. This, of course, is suspect as an objective reading of how a path-breaking piece of artistic representation was created. However, it cannot be entirely dispensed with either; especially because this account of an almost magical ‘spontaneous transformation’ is sharply contrasted with how Mitra describes the painstaking preparation for her roles in later plays - as always extremely laborious and demanding, never easy. If we go back to the Malini Bhattacharya’s piece on the IPTA now, it would not be difficult to imagine that ‘the people’ that the IPTA bulletin fails to define clearly are the same as the ‘them’ that Tripti Mitra finds hard to put a name to. These were simply the people who were dying every day on the streets – lacking definition – but hard to escape from, a presence undeniably visible everywhere in the city. Perhaps at the time when the bulletin was written the question of who ‘the people’ were was so self-evident as to require little elaboration; ‘they’ were part of the everyday empirical reality of everyone who performed and watched \textit{Nabanno}. The need for theoretical definitions, perhaps, came later. In fact, the emotional tone of this piece is not far from Manikuntala Sen’s recorded experience of the famine and her work during the time. She lived at this time in a commune with a few other female full-time members of the CPI, who were all working to aid the starving people. Rice had become extremely expensive and these women had little money to buy food themselves:

There were many days when no food was cooked at our place. On one or two days, after everyone had eaten at the public canteen, we divided what little was left between us and ate it. But every one of us felt bad about it. We all felt it was better not to eat
than do this [...] many nights I returned at ten, having managed to buy one chapatti on the way home.\textsuperscript{211}

The sense of collective guilt at eating even the leftovers of their food – the food that rightfully belonged to the people – is crucial. This is perhaps not a reaction that can be explained entirely rationally in hindsight, but it is nonetheless portrayed as a collective reaction. It is something that, the passage claims, ‘everyone felt’ spontaneously. Here, Sen herself seems to have forgotten the numerous confusions and doubts about the Party line that had existed in her mind before the famine. It was a time of contingency; the Party needed her unswerving loyalty. Sen, who played a small role in Nabanno, writes about the play in her memoirs:

It is something to be proud of that most of the female artistes who were stepping onto the stage for the first time that day and are now famous, were part of the women’s mass movement at that juncture. It was because they were associated directly with struggle and had seen what they were portraying from such close quarters, that they were able to put such life into their characters.\textsuperscript{212}

This is not very different from what Tripti Mitra had to say in her narrative about the creation of Nabanno. The moment being described, in both cases, seems to be one in which art and politics had come together seamlessly; a moment that was, according to most recorded evidence, not repeated with comparable perfection ever again. In each of these narratives and memoirs, Nabanno is apparently a moment of spontaneous coherence that never seems to have come back. It is my argument that it is the ostensible magical coherence of this putatively ‘originary’ moment that makes the later split inevitable. For example, Mitra writes:

For many of us, then, coming to work in the theatre was from the feeling that we were doing something for the country. It was not at all for theatre \textit{per se}. It had never occurred to me that theatre would become my life.\textsuperscript{213}

In other words, for some of the participants of that originary seamless moment, art took over. Others, like Manikuntala, remained with politics and wrote later of those who were ‘now famous’ as individual artistes. Traditional analyses\textsuperscript{214} of the reasons for the split in the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Sen, Shediner Katha, 70. [Translation and emphasis mine.]
\item Ibid, 114. [Translation and emphasis mine.]
\item Majumdar ed., Tripti Mitra, 8. (translation mine)
\item For example, Sudhi Pradhan in his books \textit{Gana-Naba-Shat-Goshthi Natyakatha} [Pustak Bipani: Calcutta, 1989] and \textit{Nabanna: Projojona O Probhab} [Pustak Bipani: Calcutta, 1989] places the blame for
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
IPTA follow two very clear stands. The first speaks of the growing ‘control’ of the Party over the artistic decisions and activities of the workers of the cultural front and thereby the need for the split in order to preserve ‘artistic integrity’. The second and clearly contradictory strand speaks of the ‘egotistic needs’ of some particular cultural front workers to satisfy individual desires for fame and personal recognition in the name of ‘artistic integrity’, thereby sacrificing the needs of the collective and their own ‘political commitment’. In some cases, this strand proceeds to extent designating these ‘deserters’ as ‘reactionary’ and ‘hypocritical (hence not ‘true artistes’); reminding us inevitably of our earlier analysis of Sajjad Zaheer’s introductory piece at the moment of the inception of the PWA. (Those who do not come around are never true artistes). With either of these strands, in the best possible scenario, the argument does not proceed very far. In the worst, it descends to the level of individual allegations and mud-slinging. Sudhi Pradhan, for example, writes:

I am ear-marked as the leader of the pro-Party group as opposite to Sambhu Mitra and others […] Mitra and his associates claimed that they were the only people who knew what was people’s art, although in the Party and Anti-Fascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association there were many who could claim so with much greater justification. Thirdly, the democratic method to arrive at decisions would never have been accepted by Mitra. Lastly, Charuprakash could not cite a single example to prove that the Party was enforcing anything on them.

In contrast to this, Tripti Mitra writes of the same time frame:

the ideological tussle within the IPTA squarely on the shoulders of Sambhu Mitra and his personal egotism. Darshan Choudhury in his book Gananatya Andolan [Anushtup: Calcutta, 2009] seems to reinforce this viewpoint. He writes: “The IPTA began to show cracks in its organisation within one year of independence. All the artistes with middle-class sensibilities who had gathered here were now (post-Independence), given their class positions, naturally in a dilemma. […] This dilemma loosened the structure of the organisation. […] After this, when the national government banned the communist party, a lot of people were in a soup. While it was a question of doing theatre, getting applause, showing off one’s finesse in acting, it was all very good. But when it came to doing this for a banned political organisation, it was a question of risking one’s life.” [Chowdhury, 306]. Sajal Roy Chowdhury in his book Gananatya Katha [Mitra and Ghosh: Calcutta, 1990] posits the debate as one primarily between rural and urban-centric drama, a conflict between a more sophisticated metropolitan aesthetics and the political imperative of propaganda to travel far and wide. Roy Chowdhury seems concerned not to enter into oft-repeated petty and vicious debates, and so largely steers clear of the issue by quoting the writing of more senior IPTA leaders. He refers to Muhammad Abdullah Rasul, who in his book Prasanga Gananatya, cites the banning of the Communist Party of India after independence as the primary cause of the crumbling of the IPTA. [Roy Chowdhury, 53]. Swapan Majumdar in his rather informative history but largely hagiographic of the Bahurupi, on the other hand, speaks quite scathingly of the interference and even oppression of the Party on the artistes and of the systematic curbing of artistic freedom. (Swapan Majumdar, Bahurupi 1948-1988 [Bahurupi: Calcutta, 1988, 9-12]. This last book could, in fact, be called an ‘official’ history of the Bahurupi, just as Pradhan’s could be designated as the official version of IPTA’s history.

When we came back to Calcutta\textsuperscript{216}, we saw that the IPTA had changed character. Neither the atmosphere nor the space remained for the kind of new experimental theatre that Sambhu Mitra had so enthusiastically planned to do. It was like an unkempt garden, but ironically, it was being tended by a rather strict gardener. A very strong fence had been put up around it to protect it from animals, but there was no corresponding effort to nourish or water the plants in it. [...] Discussion could not solve anything. All of our proposals for new plays began to get rejected. Then, one day, it was Maharshi Manoranjan Bhattacharya who said: ‘No, nothing can happen here … nothing.’\textsuperscript{217}

The rather ‘flowery’ metaphor of the ‘garden’ and the ‘strict gardener’ allows Mitra to avoid naming any names, but it is clear that the alleged growing and unwelcome control of the Party that these artistes ostensibly found stifling is being referred to. The Party’s answer to this is, of course, the allegation of egotism on the part of the same artistes. A more astute analysis of the situation and what it foretold for the subsequent history of the Bengal group theatre movement is found in a later essay by director Arun Mukherjee. Mukherjee’s argument states clearly that an initial optimism and enthusiasm allowed the \textit{Gananatya} (and later the \textit{Nabanatya}) movement to forget interior differences. Even after the split in the IPTA, the actual political problems that were plaguing the movement were not spelt out by either party, both of which remained trapped in an endless and circular argument. And since the confusion of this early split was never rightly resolved, Mukherjee argues, the stated intentions of the groups that emerged from it remained couched in a vague rhetoric that only sought to hide a lack of clarity in both political and artistic purpose. Though Mukherjee does not take the argument so far, it seems as if he is implying that: this is the reason why the pattern of ‘splits and new collectives’ has repeated itself \textit{ad nauseam} through the history of the Bengali group theatre. I quote:

> ‘Art for the People’ – even before the significance of this slogan could be understood properly let alone be realized by practitioners, things started falling apart. Some of the people who came out of the control of the IPTA wished to stick to the same ideology, although they had scientifically analysed neither the circumstances nor the situation. They wished to somehow fulfil their responsibility by just riding the wave that had already been created. Another group saw their responsibility to the art form as primary and started their own practice of theatre. [...] There has never been any clear guideline to what qualifies as ‘group theatre’. What are the parameters that define it? \textit{Is it defined by radicalism? Or by the standard of good art?} It is possible that

\textsuperscript{216} This was 1947. Both Sambhu and Tripti Mitra, according to the latter’s memoirs, had just returned from a visit to Bombay for the shooting of a film.

\textsuperscript{217} Majumdar ed., \textit{Tripti Mitra}, 21. [Translation mine.]
those who started had a clear intention, but all of that has become confused now. Therefore, one must make do with such a vague definition\(^\text{218}\) as ‘it is to do good plays in a good way’.\(^\text{219}\)

The standards of ‘political radicalism’ and ‘good aesthetics’ appear again here, albeit in a less simplistic way. These categories seem to be at odds in most writing on the theatre movement in Bengal produced about the split in the IPTA, in sharp contrast to the assertions we had found in the PWA Manifesto. In truth, these debates within the IPTA fitted within a much larger context of international debates on what constituted the right kind of Marxist Aesthetics at the time. Several of these debates were influential in the Indian context, as scholars such as Darshan Chowdhury point out\(^\text{220}\). In 1946, for example, poet Anna Akhmatova and satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko were put on trial by the Soviet government. There were prolonged debates in these trials on the socialist responsibility of artistes and they ended with a speech by Andrei Zdhanov, the then Governor of Leningrad and leader of the post Second World War purges against artistes/intellectuals in the Soviet Union. Zdhanov had been, in the first place, the cause of the attacks on the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*, where the works of Akhmatova and Zoshchenko had been published. The post-war cultural policy in the Soviet Union was far more opposed to ‘cosmopolitan’ values and far less in favour of internationalism than before, writes Kees Boterbloem in *The Life and Times of Andrei Zhdanov*\(^\text{221}\). Zhdanov’s speech on importance of Marxism for literature and the arts was delivered at the end of the Akhmatova-Zoshchenko trial on the 21\(^\text{st}\) of September, 1946. Akhmatova and Zoshchenko were both convicted and punished for their offences. Zhdanov’s speech was to form the basis of the kind of coercive and statist cultural policy that came to be known as ‘Zhdanovism’. Boterbloem writes:

\(^{218}\) This was Bahurupi’s announced motto since its inception after the split from the IPTA. Swapan Majumdar, in his book *Bahurupi 1948-1988*, quotes from an interview that Sambhu Mitra gave to Ashok Majumdar for the Natyashodh Archives: “If we have to do something new, then the group’s formation and basis cannot follow the usual methods of professional companies, because in that case, in the interests of profit, one would have to only do plays that the audience would fancy. If we continue to follow these methods then we would only be able to create some sort of facile glamour which would only be able to create some occasional excitement for the audience. We would never be able to do good plays in a good way.” [Majumdar, 15. Translation and emphasis mine.]

\(^{219}\) Arun Mukherjee, ‘Group Theatre Bhangche’: *Natyansweshi*, 175. [Translation and emphasis mine].

\(^{220}\) Chowdhury, 283-286.

The postwar campaigns reiterated the condemnation of experimentation with form, artistic introspection, a preoccupation with the emotional turmoil of the individual, and reinforced sexual prudery in the arts.\textsuperscript{222}

There was a ‘renewed pressure’ to conform to the tenets of socialist realism that had been laid down by Maxim Gorky and Zhdanov himself in the 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress\textsuperscript{223}. It is also interesting to note, for our purposes, that this period of rapid internal change in Soviet cultural policy was accompanied by a marked retrogression in the policies on gender relations and sexual freedoms. To quote Boterbloem:

Even if Stalin’s domestic policy made concessions to popular traditions, they were minor, such as the reaffirmation of traditional gender differences by ending coeducation (in 1943) and emphasizing the importance of family and domestic life centred around the mother.\textsuperscript{224}

Zhdanovism advocated absolute adherence to party policy or the ‘spirit’ of the party, and showed complete intolerance of internal criticism, or of any leanings towards ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘individualistic’ values. Other celebrated international debates, the shadows of which determined the tenor of the tussles regarding culture inside the CPI in 1946 were, most notably, those between Roger Garaudy/Pierre Herve and Louis Aragon, intellectuals who were members of the French Communist Party (PCF). In this case, the former argued against strict party controls in the matter of culture and the latter in favour of them.

Between 1946 and 1947, according to Chowdhury, there were numerous meetings in the progressive writers’ and artistes’ camps in India in order to discuss these issues.\textsuperscript{225} Writing almost six years after the IPTA split, in 1954, Ritwik Ghatak seems to be the first to attempt a larger theoretical analysis of the situation in a document called \textit{On the Cultural Front}. This document has an interesting history. According to Rathin Chakraborty, who translates and writes the preface to the 2003 edition of the book:

This document is, at the same time, a history. It is a history of the position and circumstances biggest leftist force in our country at a certain time period. It was written in the year 1954 in English. But before 1996, neither the general population nor the cultural workers had had a chance to read it. There would not have been

\textsuperscript{222} Boterbloem, 254.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid, 256.
\textsuperscript{225} Chowdhury, 285.
unless Buddhadeb Bhattacharya had rescued it and the Ritwik Memorial Trust had taken on the responsibility of publishing it.\textsuperscript{226}

Between 1955 (when Ghatak was expelled from the CPI) and 1993 (when Bhattacharya discovered it amongst some old files in the party archives), hardly anyone had heard of this piece of work. According to Surama Ghatak, Ritwik’s wife and close witness to the events that took place between 1951 and 1955, Ghatak’s expulsion from the Party was brought about primarily because of his radical ideas on the nature of a leftist party’s role on the cultural front and his criticism of the CPI’s official cultural line (or lack thereof). The relationship between a radical political party and its cultural wing, the role of the cultural workers of a communist organization and the definition of culture vis-à-vis politics were issues that had long been troubling Ghatak. According to Surama Ghatak, in 1951, the IPTA’s Regional Report Committee asked Ghatak to prepare a draft report on what the IPTA’s political and cultural ideology should be in West Bengal. Later, in 1954, Ritwik announced to his friends that he was going to write a document on the CPI’s cultural line. When it was finished Ritwik, Surama and a friend signed on this document; it was sent to many committees of the CPI across the country. Surama Ghatak writes:

Soon we discovered that a secret propaganda against Ritwik had been started, primarily because of his opinions and perspective on the cultural line. Some of the members of the South Squad of the IPTA asked me to put an end to my friendship with Ritwik.\textsuperscript{227} Because rumours started that Ritwik would be expelled from the Party. I was threatened with the same fate unless I stopped associating with him.\textsuperscript{228}

What was it about this document that had provoked such reactions from the CPI? An indication might be found in the following lines from the preface by the translator:

The kind of theoretical thinking that Ritwik had engaged with in this document written fifty years ago was unknown in his time. It is, even today, as people are afraid to think like this for various reasons. In the field of culture, in our country even today, such discussions are hard to come by, whether in theory or in practice.\textsuperscript{229}


\textsuperscript{227} The italicized lines should be kept in mind as they will come back in a different context later in the discussion.

\textsuperscript{228} Ghatak, \textit{On the Cultural Front}, 14. [Translation and emphasis mine.]

\textsuperscript{229} Ibid., 8. [Translation mine.]
It would also be important to remember here that Ritwik Ghatak’s association with the IPTA took place at a time when the circumstances of political existence for the CPI as well as its party line had changed significantly. These factors had obvious influences on the question of ‘culture’. The leadership of the Party in independent India had passed from the hands of P.C. Joshi (who had begun to be seen as largely conformist and pro-Nehru) to the more orthodox B. T. Ranadive. The Telengana and Tebhaga peasants’ movements had acquired unprecedented force; the Ranadive line openly advocated armed revolt on the part of the peasants and the slogan \textit{‘yeh azaadi jhootha hai’} (‘this freedom is a lie’) was coined at this time. The Congress government responded by banning the CPI and the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876 – a draconian and archaic colonial law – was applied against most IPTA productions. As for the Party, the new line on culture suggested that there was no way forward for art and literature but to become part of the mass struggle against oppression; however, interpretations of this directive varied. Stronger amongst these interpretations was the sense that there must be no difference in the role of the artiste and the peasant/worker in this struggle; if art suffered for a couple of years as a result of this participation, it would only emerge the richer at the end of this experience.\footnote{Chowdhury, 284.} In many ways, this was perhaps a forceful way of addressing the ultimately urban-centred nature of the cultural movement in the \textit{Nabanno} phase and to counter the reluctance of many urban artistes (witnessed between 1944 and 1947) to travel to rural areas in order to perform. It is also true that part of the ‘changed conditions’ in the IPTA that Tripti Mitra mentions in her memoirs was the fact that the organisation was now illegal and its activists severely victimised by the Congress government of independent India. Scholars like Darshan Chowdury state this increased risk and the fear of being arrested as one of the reasons why many artistes of ‘middle class mentalities’ left the movement at this stage. In the midst of the euphoria surrounding independence, the claims of ‘false freedom’ had also managed to isolate the party from its urban mass base. The political situation for the CPI continued to be unstable until its participation in the General Elections in 1952. It must be remembered that it is within this political context that Ghatak writes his document on the CPI’s cultural front.

What then was the crux of Ritwik’s mapping of the problems on the cultural front? What caused his expulsion from the party and the disappearance of a document such as this
from the public eye for almost four decades? Ghatak begins his argument by criticism that resembles what we have heard from other voices before. He says that in the preceding four years the Party’s cultural front has not been able to produce any work of art worth its salt and those who are true artistes have begun to leave the Party. This is a repetition of the story of the aesthetics/politics split; except in this case, the split explains nothing, but is the result of deeper causes that need to be explicated themselves. On the third page of this document, when Ghatak begins to elucidate the possible reasons for this state of being, he writes clearly:

There are only two ways in which the Party sees the cultural front. One, as a ‘money-making machine’ (maybe this is being too harsh, but there is no other way); and two, as the instrument for getting people to come to meetings and processions […] If we wish to draw the Party’s attention towards some work we wish to do, we have to prove first and foremost how useful it will be to the Party at large. How useful it will be for culture, does not seem to be a question at all.\textsuperscript{231}

In addition to this, according to Ghatak, the Party seemed to have stated in a strangely contradictory way and at its convenience that it has no ‘official line’ as far as culture was concerned. Ghatak suggests that in this attitude towards the cultural front, there was a simultaneous expression of indifference and a desire to control. The Party often ‘shrugged its shoulders’, refusing to engage itself in cultural questions and citing more pressing ‘political’ concerns as the reason for this lack of engagement. This effectively put the ‘issue of culture’ on the backburner, making it seem slightly irrelevant in the face of the ‘real’ problems of the people. Simultaneously, this same rhetorical move made the cultural front only an \textit{useful occasional instrument} for tackling the Party’s ‘real and pressing political problems’ – thus, laying it open for prescriptive control. Hence, periodically, culture was either invisible or prescriptively instrumental for the Party – an incredibly convenient position for the artistes who wished to engage directly with communist politics. Inconvenient because this position involved, quite simply, some occasional duties at mass meetings and such like, but no rights whatsoever. This was primarily since the artistes demands were seen as demands that could wait. In the face of this, Ghatak makes his demands as a cultural worker of the Party extremely clear. He writes:

\textsuperscript{231} Ghatak, \textit{On the Cultural Front}, 22-23. [Translation mine.]
We demand, as cultural workers, our rightful and proper place, within the body of the Party. We also demand a part of its rights and duties.\textsuperscript{232} Ghatak makes an astute argument for why the Party needs the cultural front for reasons bigger than getting an audience at mass meetings and why any move towards a revolutionary process must work primarily through culture. He writes that two primary factors determine the Communist Party’s official line: ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’. The ‘objective’ is that which is specific to a particular geographical location – its historical context and the particularities of its socio-economic reality. In order to explain the ‘subjective’, he quotes Lenin and Engels. He writes that the ‘subjective’ is that which is the ‘expression of the people’ – their larger aspiration for an ultimately classless society. But this ‘subjective’ expression is a part of the ‘objective’ reality of the time, contained within and determined by it – not an absolute standing by itself.\textsuperscript{233} Ghatak asserts that the only thing that can mediate between the ‘objective reality’ of a historically specific space/time and ‘subjective’ expression of the people in it – is ‘culture’. At different stages of the revolutionary process, different ‘basic tasks’ for the cultural front will emerge – but all of these will move the Party closer towards the achievement of the ‘subjective’. Occasional tasks such as those at mass meetings and processions, are aspects of this larger process but certainly not the whole task – and this is what, Ghatak insists, must not be lost sight of. Here he quotes from Lenin:

\begin{quote}
In matters of culture, haste and sweeping measures are the worst possible things. Many of our young writers and communists should get this into their heads. (‘Better fewer, but better’, in Selected Words, Vol. II, pp. 844)\textsuperscript{234}
\end{quote}

Ghatak is clearly making a case for ‘culture’ as that which is neither incidental nor instrumental to the revolutionary process, but \textit{essential} to it – in fact, its mainstay. He is also asserting that culture cannot be hurried. This analysis therefore (whether or not we agree with it), poses the problem of the ostensible split between ‘art’ and ‘politics’ rather differently. It allows us to look back on the split in the IPTA as not really the question of the ‘individual egotism’ of ‘false artistes’ versus ‘the true political concerns of the collective’ (as Sudhi Pradhan tends to see it). We have to see it, instead, as the result of a serious \textit{political slip} whereby the Party (the representative, by its own assertion, of this alleged ‘collective’) loses

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid, 24. [Translation mine.]
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid, 31-39.
\textsuperscript{234} Cited in Ghatak, \textit{On the Cultural Front}, 33.
sight of the essential role of culture in its announced revolutionary process. Ghatak based his argument largely on the works of Lenin and Engels, thus making it difficult for the CPI to escape its obvious departure from them – which is perhaps the primary reason why this document was suppressed and Ghatak expelled. This ‘representative collective’ seems to have been, in Ghatak’s view, constituted by individuals who, in making ‘culture’ secondary to the occasional tasks of party-building, made a grievous political error that would have serious effects in the long term. The split was, therefore, not really between individual artistes and the Party. It was, in Ghatak’s analysis, a political split between the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ determinants of the revolutionary Party Line, because the essential mediation between the two was lost; culture was marginalized as merely instrumental to political process.


In his introduction to the first volume of *The Marxist Cultural Movement in India*, while discussing the functioning of the IPTA in 1946-47, Sudhi Pradhan suddenly digresses into a long quotation of an anecdote by Hiren Mukherjee that appears to be entirely out of place. It is a story about the first General Secretary of the IPTA – Anil De Silva. It seems to me that it would be fruitful to quote the next passage in full:

About the first general secretary of the IPTA, Anil De Silva, *who was relieved of her position in 1946*, Hiren Mukherjee, has narrated *his interesting experience* which I am quoting here from his book ‘Tori Hote Tir’ (From the Boat on to the Shore): “I have already mentioned about the self-willed spontaneous behaviour of this Ceylonese girl. She was quite uninhibited when she narrated to me various intimate episodes of her life. One day she showed me a number of pencil portraits, done by a famous scientist with whom she had continued an affair for a long period and whom she found inadequate in the physical demands of the role. She had averred out of jest, that had she not liked my wife whom she met in Calcutta, she might not have spared me as well. As if my opinion in the matter was of little consequence, and it all depended on how she wished things to happen. I have earlier mentioned the jesting remark of P. C. Joshi, that had it been anybody other than me Anil’s hospitality might have induced the Party to expel
the recipient. True, things I came to know amused me, but they astounded me as well. A front ranking leader was once over head and ears in infatuation for Anil. His enraged wife had lodged a complaint. The matter was ultimately put to rest when that leader, wayward at times, but of real capabilities, had to sail abroad on an urgent job. Anil showed me letters from him. I abstain from naming him, but the incident is true."

Happily, I had no such experience with Anil. Perhaps she liked to play pranks with the big guns of the Party. I have already mentioned that her observations, printed in the 1946 report of the IPTA were quite factual and sound. And Anil wrote a book on the virtues of Chinese women and presented me with a copy of the same.  

In the preface to the second edition of the book, written in 1985, Pradhan attempts to provide an explanation about the intentions behind the narration of this anecdote - the appearance of which seems bizarre in the midst of a discussion on the gap between urban intellectuals and rural party workers.

Some friends had expostulated with me on the use of Hiren Mukherjee’s reminiscences of Anil de Silva. My intention was to raise an issue about the participation of women in cultural work sponsored by the Party, particularly in the context of the semi-feudal values and practices in the area. Precisely because of existing prejudices a standard of decency and morality is important here. Everything must be above board in the personal lives of front-ranking cultural activists.

It would seem rather strange, if this was indeed Pradhan’s intention in the first place, that he starts the earlier passage by saying that he is quoting Hiren Mukherjee’s ‘interesting experience’ with Anil De Silva. Here he seems to be striking a note of clear digression, speaking in a voice that is informal, personal, even gossipy - markedly different from his earlier, rather formal, persona of the pan-faced chronicler. Moreover, nothing that goes before or after this passage has the slightest connection to it. Right after he has finished telling us ‘the story of the interesting experiences with Anil De Silva, Pradhan moves right along to the chronicling of the events of 1946. His next sentence (after the quoted anecdotal passage) is: ‘K. A. Abbas was chosen the next General Secretary of the IPTA. This is back to the pan-face, as if De Silva never happened. There is also, of course, no discussion, or even mention, of the role and ‘participation of women in cultural work sponsored by the Party.’ If this was indeed the concern and the larger political point in the subtext, there is no

236 Ibid, xxi – xxii.  
237 Ibid, p. ii. [Emphasis mine.]  
indication of this in the language of passage. There is, in fact, no single use of the words ‘woman’ or ‘women’ in this passage, except for the mention of De Silva’s book on ‘Chinese women’. It seems to be the re-telling of an ‘interesting’ personal experience of a party worker with a female comrade, told quite unashamedly for its gossip value. The need to justify this in the Preface to the Second Edition complicates matters. When we attempt to read between the lines, what is happening under the surface of these passages appears rather interesting. We have already identified Pradhan’s work as representing, more than any other we have discussed, the officially-sanctioned (read CPI) history of the ‘Marxist cultural movement’ in India. It would perhaps be useful to keep this in mind as we read and attempt to analyse the above passages. In the first passage we are told that Anil De Silva ‘was relieved of her position in 1946’. Instead of stating this and going straight on to the next event to be chronicled (i.e. ‘K. A. Abbas was chosen the next General Secretary of the IPTA.’), as Pradhan usually does – except when he is justifying the contingent actions of the Party – he, rather unlike himself, digresses. We are not told why it is that De Silva ‘was relieved of her duties’ as General Secretary. Instead of a statement of the official reasons for her removal, we find a little piece of apocryphal gossip. Read in tandem with the statement found in the second edition Preface, it would seem as if it was De Silva’s various liaisons with the ‘big guns of the Party’ that caused a situation that was both reprehensible and unmanageable, leading to her removal from the position. If this was indeed the reason, one wonders why it must be stated in such a back-handed way.

There could be only one explanation: De Silva’s personal life was never officially stated as the reason for her dismissal and that there was, in terms of her official functioning as a cultural worker of the Party, nothing that could be found faulty. If indeed there was, there is no reason why it should not have been mentioned by Pradhan as an instance of an ‘official lapse’ or a ‘failure to perform’, as many others are. After her dismissal, of course, De Silva disappears entirely from the scene of this particular history. We find, however, a clearer, more detailed, account of this time in Neloufer de Mel’s book Women and the Nation’s Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka. In her work, De Mel closely engages with the growing stress on ‘respectability’ and ‘restraint’ vis-à-vis expressions of

female sexuality within discourses of Sri Lankan nationalism in the early twentieth century. She demonstrates how this preoccupation with ‘respectability’ permeated both left and right-wing rhetoric on the subject equally. According to de Mel, Anil De Silva, who had felt increasingly alienated from the Sri Lankan nationalist movement on account of its its rigid insistence on ‘spiritual’ codes of conduct as well as ethnic purity, might have, on first arriving in Bombay, felt a sense of empathy with the Indian nationalist movement, which appeared to her to be comparatively free of such narrowness. De Mel tells us that it is likely that Anil found the apparent ‘eclecticism’ of the CPI and the cosmopolitanism of Bombay as a city ‘refreshing’ after the orthodox casteism and racial prejudice she had experienced in her own country. However, in writing of De Silva’s experiences with the Indian Communist party in the period that we are examining, De Mel cites an important source: one that provides interesting insights into the ‘disruptions’ De Silva had allegedly caused within the organisation. Raj Thapar’s memoir All These Years contains an autobiographical account (similar to Hiren Mukherjee’s) of De Silva’s connections with the CPI and shows the ‘same outraged sense of respectability that permeates the writing on Anil within the Indian Communist Party and its sympathisers’. De Mel quotes Raj Thapar:

(Anil) kept me entertained with tales of sex, beginning with her experience in the Communist Party - the Indian one. She had applied for membership formally and, as was the rule then, she had to be on probation for three months. So, emancipated as she was, she moved into the commune which was overflowing with an assortment of all manner of males, all dedicated to the cause of the working class and all starved of women. In between intense discussions on the nature of the class structure, they would suddenly find themselves staring into Anil's rather gu-gu eyes. This obviously panicked them, threw them off guard. "They looked so sorry for themselves, they had nothing else except their work, so what could I possibly do?" It was all in the plural and I could just about picture the kind of havoc she must have wrought in PHQ with her mere presence. The plurality finally zeroed in on Dange, the leader with the greatest personal charm, but his influence couldn't guarantee her membership and she had to finally leave. Mulk pulled her away from Dange but the two men bore each other a grudge for the rest of their lives.

Set against the passage by Mukherjee, it appears that the framing of the modalities and causes of disruption is almost identical in both narratives. However, it is worth noting that it is nothing De Silva initially did, but ‘her mere presence’ that Thapar considers to have been

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240 De Mel, Women and the Nation’s Narrative, 125.
241 Ibid. [Emphasis mine.]
disruptive. Both male narrators exist firmly outside the story of female sexual misdemeanours, as indirect witnesses to incidents they record with both amusement and shock. It seems of primary importance to establish the narrator's innocence and lack of involvement in these sordid affairs, as well as his identity as a passive recipient of information that he had not himself actively sought. De Mel writes:

It is clear from this passage that it is Anil who is accused of causing "havoc" with party discipline. The responsibility for the breakdown of respectability is placed firmly on her shoulders while the men are excused on the grounds of the lack of availability of women. Anil is the vamp, and depicted as being self-consciously so. It is significant that in the entire memoir, Raj Thapar's description of Anil remains framed within the "trangressive" ethics of her sexual conduct. No other character in the memoir is foregrounded in this way.

The last sentence is also exactly true of Sudhi Pradhan's work, with addition to the fact that Pradhan's is not a memoir. The first level of transgression on the part of De Silva, of course, appears to be her telling 'tales of sex' to her male comrades some of whom were, from Thapar's own admission, 'starved of women'. As we will go on to see, this verbal transgressiveness of De Silva was no less threatening than her sexual 'spontaneity'; her ability to articulate both her desires/disapprovals and directions to male comrades, exposed the limits of the purported acceptance of women as 'comrades' within the movement. What level of articulation and decisive power was to be allowed a woman? How could a woman be accepted as leader when she was also an object of desire to her comrades? The discomfort is palpable in the language of both passages, as it is in Pradhan's framing of Mukherjee's anecdote. The only way in which one could even write an account of a woman such as this was to forcibly infantilize her ('Anil’s rather gu-gu eyes') and turn her into an object of derision and ridicule ('Perhaps she liked to play pranks...'). The framing of 'self-willed spontaneity' as the locus of unbridled desire, in addition to being fundamentally antagonistic to radical cultural action, is a construction that we will encounter repeatedly in the course of this study, within both the discourses of nationalism and the rhetoric of leftist politics. I would like to quote here, before we move on towards an analysis of De Silva's dismissal and the political logic working behind it, Carol Vance from her essay 'Pleasure and Danger: Toward A Politics of Sexuality':

242 Ibid, 126.
The cultural mythology surrounding sexual violence provided a unique and powerful route for it to work its way into the heart of female desire. A rag-bag of myths and folk-knowledge that the contemporary feminist movement opposed depicted male lust as intrinsic, uncontrollable, and easily aroused by any show of sexuality and desire. [...] If female desire triggers male attack, it cannot be freely or spontaneously shown, either in public or in private. [...] Through a culturally dictated chain of reasoning, women become the moral custodians of male behaviour, which they are perceived as instigating and eliciting.

It is interesting that there is no mention whatsoever of what was done about the ‘big guns’ with whom De Silva ‘played her pranks’. Mukherjee does not even think it justifiable to name the men concerned; the sense is that there is the need to observe some code of conduct, some unwritten condition of anonymity in ‘telling private stories’ about the Party workers. But this code of conduct seems to be only applicable to the male comrades and interestingly, Mukherjee does not think twice about recording, in a public document, things that De Silva must have shared with him as a friend in a private capacity. Neither does Pradhan think it necessary to impose any condition of anonymity, as far as De Silva is concerned, in quoting Mukherjee’s stories. Even here, both male chroniclers add riders to the telling of their tales that absolve them categorically of any involvement with De Silva whatsoever. They, in fact even the wayward ‘big gun’ of the Party, appear as victims to the ‘self-willed’ eccentricities of a ‘spontaneous’ Ceylonese girl (exotically foreign and an outsider to start with). It is not clear which is deemed worse: the fact that De Silva was ‘self-willed’ or that she was ‘spontaneous’ (a word which appears, in this context, almost as a synonym to ‘wanton’). Mukherjee expresses a sense of moral indignation and astonishment at De Silva’s behaviour, while admitting rather apologetically that he was also amused by the goings-on. It is not clear what it is about De Silva’s behaviour that is especially disruptive, or what it is that sets it apart from the behaviour of the ‘famous scientist’ or the ‘front-ranking Party leader.’ (We find from De Mel’s work that these were Homi Bhabha and S.A Dange respectively, followed by Mulk Raj Anand with whom De Silva spent most of her later years in India.) However, De Silva appears to be the focal point from which corruption and disruptive behaviour emanates; as also the point where the excessive and unruly desires of many ‘cultural activists’

converge. As the vortex of these desires, De Silva appears as an enigmatic and simultaneously comic figure, whose ‘strangeness’ is responsible for the ‘moral deviations’ of her male comrades. She evokes amusement, derision and horror simultaneously, perhaps primarily because she shows no desire, as a woman, to be the custodian of the ‘moral (read sexual) conduct’ of the men around her. But her lack of inhibition makes her ‘not the right kind of woman’ for radical cultural activism.

Two more things need to be analyzed in relation to this incident. One, Pradhan’s statement in the Second Preface that states: ‘Precisely because of existing prejudices a standard of decency and morality is important here. Everything must be above board in the personal lives of front-ranking cultural activists.’ Here, Pradhan shows a desire to distinguish the Party’s ‘moral’/sexual codes of conduct from the existing ‘semi-feudal values and practices’. This is a statement that seeks to clarify that in judging De Silva the way it did, the Party was in no way replicating the regressive and patriarchal ‘moral’ structures of feudalism. His rather convoluted logic in support of the Party’s actions is that: it is because of the marginalized location of any radical cultural movement, operating within a society saturated with feudal values, that it is already seen as ‘morally’ suspect and potentially libertarian. Hence, it becomes doubly important to maintain a clean record for Party members in sexual matters, as not doing so may alienate them from the people around them and leave them open to attacks. The idea, therefore, seems to be that in order to be effectively ‘radical’ politically in a society determined by residual feudal values, one must at least be ‘conservative’ and ‘above board’ sexually. And, quite obviously, the responsibility of keeping the record clean rests on the women who choose to participate in this cultural activism i.e. who willingly put out their bodies in the public spaces of the Party to be desired (privately) and denounced (publicly) by their male comrades. De Mel writes on the subject that this was:

[...] as Romila Thapar sees it, "the strong streak of puritanism that attends all revolutionary parties". The debate within the CPI was on whether a revolution could be attained without strong controls on sexual desire. What we see here is the absolute impregnation of bourgeois standards of respectability into socialist thought.

244 De Mel, 123.
However, Neloufer de Mel adds another level to the historical analysis of the sexual conservatism of the CPI, stating that often it was pragmatic considerations about ‘security’ that forced the party to direct its members to be careful in their selection of partners. We have already learnt from De Mel’s work, and her citation of Raj Thapar’s memoirs, that Mulk Raj Anand was one of the ‘big guns’ of the party with whom De Silva had had a prolonged affair. They lived together openly in the Bombay of the 1940s and this, of course, caused quite a stir within the party circles. De Mel writes:

Mulk Raj Anand was a member of the Indian Communist Party in Bombay which, in the 1940s - the war years - was an underground party, hounded by the British colonial government for its anti-imperialist stance. Its members and their associates were regularly spied upon by the secret police. Theatre performances of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), affiliated to the Communist Party, were banned by the British, including by the interim government of which Nehru was vice president. This persecution was used by the Communist Party to delineate strict rules about security, which included being selective about partners. Anil was, after all, an outsider, and considered a potential security risk. The gossip about her and the Party hierarchy was deemed damaging both to its security and morale.245

To return to Pradhan, the greater political concern that (according to him) determined the tenor of his statements about De Silva was the question of the ‘participation of women’ in the Party’s cultural work. Here, there is a clear equation between disruptive desire and the very presence of female bodies in the arena of cultural activism; the sexual play of De Silva’s ‘pranks’ is set up quite clearly against (and as disruptive to) the ‘serious work’ of leftist cultural activism. The logic behind this formulation is perhaps something like ‘if they choose to be present, they must conduct themselves right’. ‘Right’ would perhaps be defined as neither ‘self-willed’ nor ‘spontaneous’ as De Silva was, but rather effectively desexualised in some way. De Silva’s conscious refusal to do so was perhaps what finally cost her her position in it. De Mel writes:

She always dressed exotically with a view to stressing the sensuous and feminised in her personality. Uzra Bhatt, an actress with IPTA, noted how Anil always wore georgette saris in exquisite colours. Quite often she would also wear a flower in her hair. Her beauty and personality were always remarked upon. Raj Thapar described her as ”rather remarkable and attractive”.246

245 Ibid. [Emphasis mine.]
246 Ibid, 121.
Writing much later, in 1982, Utpal Dutt, in his book *Towards A Revolutionary Theatre*, harshly critiques this puritanical strand within the Party, connecting it also to the tendency of prescriptive cultural control; he lists Pradhan’s ‘slander’ of De Silva as one its most obscene manifestations. What needs to be analyzed in this context, however, is the precise nature of the Party’s role in prescribing the limits of legitimate desire, whatever its multiple and ostensible causes/manifestations. It is clear from Pradhan’s statements, as also if we look back to Surama Ghatak’s reminiscences earlier in the chapter, that it was usual procedure for the Party to threaten to expel people for their personal sexual conduct or romantic partnerships. While this is problematic in itself, what appears to be even stranger is that this sort of ‘prescriptive control’ seemed to work outside the ‘official text’ of the Party history. In the case of the Surama Ghatak, her crime was her personal involvement with Ritwik Ghatak and not any objectionable political statements she had herself made. In threatening to expel her, the Party was holding her personal life as accountable to it. But the interesting thing is that this threat was communicated to her not officially but personally by friends and acquaintances from the Party. Just as the Party had no official line on ‘culture’, it seems to have had no official line on sex – which left things delightfully vague and conducive to random contingent judgements on the matter. Hence, the official reasons for De Silva’s dismissal are nowhere to be found. In operating like this the Party, once again, shows a simultaneous desire to control and keep its hands clean of the ‘dirty work’ of sexual regimentation. It seems relevant here to quote Srila Roy, when she writes:

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248 This sort of duality is not something that is new or simply local in the history of the Communist Party. If we go back to the works of Alexandra Kollontai, we find the operation of the same sort of duality – or rather, a single move that manages to make the erotic sphere both irrelevant to politics and deserving of regulatory control. This is what Kollontai writes in the ‘Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations’, sitting in Russia in 1921: ‘Once relations between the sexes cease to perform the economic and social function of the former family, they are no longer the concern of the workers’ collective. It is not the relationships between the sexes but the result – the child – that concerns the collective. The workers’ state […] does not recognise the couple as a legal unit separate from the workers’ collective. The decrees on marriage issued by the workers’ republic establishing the mutual rights of the married couple (the right to demand material support from the partner for yourself or the child), and thus giving legal encouragement to the separation of this unit and its interests from the general interests of the workers’ social collective (the right of wives to be transferred to the town or village where their husbands are working), are survivals of the past; they contradict the interests of the collective and weaken its bonds and should therefore be reviewed and changed.’ Alexandra Kollontai, ‘Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations’, in *Alexandra Kollontai, Selected Writings*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison & Busby, 1977). First published in *Komunistka*, Nos. 12-12, 1921, [http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/theses-morality.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/theses-morality.htm).
In the case of both organizational and radical politics, the personal is negotiated in contradictory ways - relegated, at times, outside the domain of the political while constituting, at other times, the very object of a disciplinary gaze.\textsuperscript{249}

Although debates about the regulation of sexuality have had a long history within international communist movements, with the ascension to power of Stalin, De Mel writes, an implicit and unquestioned understanding between socialist and bourgeois morality was reestablished.\textsuperscript{250} It is interesting to note the evolution of ideas about women and family life in the public speeches and writings of some of the Soviet thinkers/leaders from 1917 onwards. In 1920, in her article ‘Communism and the Family’ published in \textit{Komunistka} (No.2, 1920), Alexandra Kollontai had spoken fervently of the dissolution of the family as it was commonly known. She wrote in a section titled ‘The Dawn of Collective Housekeeping’:

\begin{quote}

The individual household has passed its zenith. It is being replaced more and more by collective housekeeping. The working woman will sooner or later need to take care of her dwelling no longer; in the communist society of tomorrow this work will be carried on by a special category of working women who will do nothing else.\textsuperscript{251}
\end{quote}

Kollontai also advocated the passing on of the duties of maternal care for infants and the education/upbringing of older children to public nurseries and state-run institutions. From this, to Stalin’s policies in the 1940s was an immense transition. Stalin’s speech to the Central Committee of the Communist Party on the occasion of the ‘International Women’s Day’ in 1949, included the following statement:

\begin{quote}

The education of the children is the honourable social duty of mothers. Motherhood and the rearing of children in the U.S.S.R. are honoured and respected. The Soviet State assigns enormous funds to aid mothers with large families and unmarried mothers: 2,500,000 mothers have been awarded the Order "Motherhood Glory" and the "Motherhood Medal". The title "Mother Heroine" has been conferred on 28,500 women.\textsuperscript{252}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{250} De Mel, 124-125.
\textsuperscript{251} Alexandra Kollontai, ‘Communism and the Family’ in \textit{Alexandra Kollontai, Selected Writings}, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison & Busby, 1977). First published in \textit{Komunistka} No. 2 (1920) and in English in \textit{The Worker} (1920), \url{http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/communism-family.htm}.
If such was the change in the familial role imagined for women within communist society, it is no surprise that the ideas of female sexual liberation propounded by Kollontai in the early 1920s would have long been left behind. De Mel writes that:

The Communist Party of India was no different. It witnessed a similar debate between proponents who wished to control and silence sexual desire and those who opposed its restrictions. Although the reality was that love affairs were going on all around them, the official version of party discipline reflected, in Romila Thapar’s words, “a straightlaced puritanism as compared to other political parties which were not so secret and closed and were more relaxed about sexuality.”

But what about the question of De Silva’s organisational leadership? A few pages before the appearance of the anecdote we have discussed at length, De Silva is introduced by Pradhan as such:

The name Indian People’s Theatre Association must have been suggested on the basis of Romain Rolland’s famous book ‘People’s Theatre’ either by Dr. H. Bhaba, the great scientist or by Anil De Silva, a Ceylonese lady and first secretary of the Bangalore unit of the IPTA formed in 1941. Her statement in the annual report of 1946 that she was the general secretary from 1941 to 1945 is misleading. The All India Organization was formed in 1943. Anil left Bangalore and came to Bombay where she helped to form the Bombay Branch of the IPTA in 1942.

The work of both Darshan Chowdhury and Neloufer de Mel suggest that not just the naming, but the very formation of an organisation such as the IPTA may have been De Silva’s idea. In her address to the third convention of the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association, which took place parallel with the first congress of the CPI in Bombay, May 1943, De Silva proposed the formation of the IPTA. She said: ‘It is essential that this spontaneous movement should be organised and coordinated into All India People’s Theatre movement.’ Whatever the details and intricacies of the changes in her official position might have been, De Silva seems to have been, during the period between 1941 and 1947, incredibly active as one of the founder-members of the IPTA. She seems to have taken on several administrative duties, as well as spear-headed and assisted many organisational plans. In spite of this, of course, De Silva is not one of the better-known names in the history of the

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253 De Mel, 124.
255 De Mel, 109.
256 Chowdhury, 150.
IPTA or the Marxist cultural movement in India in the 1940s. The picture of her we are able to piece together is rather incomplete, depending primarily (to leave out De Mel’s recent detailed study) on Pradhan and Chowdhury’s sparing mention of her work in their formal histories, passing anecdotal information in the autobiographies of colleagues, one or two quotations from her letters to the other workers and her Annual Report of 1946. But even as this incomplete picture emerges from the fragmentary documents available to us, De Silva is set apart from the other women in IPTA in her time by her identification of herself as an organiser and not an artiste, as well as the evidence of her exceptional ability to assume control of operations, to give and not just receive orders. I quote from a passage from one of De Silva’s letters about reorganization of the Bengal Committee of the IPTA, written on July 29th, 1943 to ‘Comrade Benoy’:

1) You must do the following immediately: Please send to Chinu the complete list of the songs chosen for the song book […] 2) Look out for the Kisan boys or others who will be suitable for our Kisan units. […] 3) You must positively do this when you return. Please consider this as an urgent job and do not attend to anything else until you have done this one your return. 257

Her tone of voice as she writes to her comrades is distinctly different from Tripti Mitra’s, for example, when she speaks of the events taking place in the IPTA around the same time. In Mitra’s (then, Bhaduri) tone there is a sense of watching from a distance the big games that the real activists are playing, a sense of awe and deference, along with a readiness to follow orders, to be dutiful in her commitment to ‘the cause’. What the limits and confines of this cause were, of course, predetermined and unquestionable - defined as the domain the leaders of radical cultural action, who tended to be men. Theatre and art were, under this formulation, ‘serious work’ – work that adult male members of the collective tended to perform, as the women played at their frivolities till the orders arrived. There is, of course, nowhere in Mitra’s work, any direct statement of such a practice of infantilization of women – but her writing communicates again and again the sense of a watcher recording events that she feels she does not understand very well in their entirety. This appears clearly in a passage in Mitra’s reminiscences that was written about her visit to Bombay for a period of work on a film in which Balraj Sahni, Hamid Bhatt and Sambhu Mitra were involved (circa 1944-45).

257 Pradhan, Vol. 1, 190.
The group was staying at K. A. Abbas’s (the same Abbas who takes over in 1946 from De Silva) apartment in Bombay. Mitra writes:

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas’s flat was on the beach. That is where we were staying. Usha had been staying there since a while earlier. And there was Abbas’s wife Mujji, his sister-in-law Chhadi. The place was always full of things and people. Discussions on the script began. The script was prepared based on Jabanbandi, Nabanno and parts of Krishan Chandar’s novel Annadata.

*When all this work was going on, we had endless leisure.* Therefore Usha, Nur Bano (from the Bombay IPTA) and I would spend our time collecting seashells from the beach. Usha grew tired of this after a few days. But Nur and I never tired. […] Mujji used to say: ‘Tripti, what will you do with all these shells?’ But we never stopped. 258

Unlike De Silva’s ‘pranks’ which made her involvement with the actual work of activism irrelevant to the Party, ‘collecting seashells on the Bombay beach’ was seen as an infinitely more legitimate and safe space of play. What I mean to point towards in the above passage is the kind of division of labour that the members of the cultural front of the Party seemed to be comfortable with. The women here play like children, while they wait for their orders and the final script of cultural action to arrive. They are almost as safe and non-threatening as infants; and as long as they continued to ‘play safely’ on the margins of cultural action, they were not liable to be ‘relieved of their duties’ as De Silva was.

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