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Women in Revolutionary Theatre: IPTA, Labor, and Performance

Prarthana Purkayastha

This essay examines the ways in which theatre and dance offer possibilities to reassess the Indian nation-state's historical failure to recognize women's labor or grant women equal access to civil liberty. It also explores how performance allows for the emergence of women as empowered subjects in South Asia, in spite of the structural limitations of both colonial and anticolonial thought. By analyzing the contribution of women to both Gandhian and communist forms of nationalism, this essay questions previously established scholarship on the binaries of inner/outer or domestic/public within gendered Indian nationalism, and argues for a crucial third domain, that of women's embodied resistance, which negotiated conservative and progressive notions of femininity through the body. The activism of women in the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and their autobiographical narratives are privileged to reflect on the complex interrelationship between nationalism, embodiment, women's unrecognized labor, and women's agency.

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Kolkata, India. July 2013. Seven months after the “Nirbhaya” rape case in the capital city of New Delhi, I am in another Indian metropolitan city gripped by a state of terror. The fear is for women’s safety in public, both during and after daylight hours, triggered by a series of actual and attempted rapes and assaults in the urban metropolis and its fringes. During my stay in Kolkata, newspapers carry daily articles that heatedly debate the degrees of presence of women’s bodies in public spaces. Amid a national and international media frenzy that exposes

misogyny and barbaric acts against women in the Indian nation-state, I interview Sima Das (b. 1938), a septuagenarian who recounts her experiences of being an activist performer in the late 1940s (Das 2013). She is one among a handful of women whose embodied experiences of political activism in independence-era India are still present in the flesh, lived and relived through her body and her memories.

This agency of the female body in performance resonated with me on a deep level. I grew up in Kolkata, and during the 1980s and 1990s trained under two avowedly feminist female choreographers, Ranjabati Sircar (1963–1999) and her mother, Manjusri Chaki Sircar (1934–2000), whose repertoire of performance works critiqued and challenged women’s position within patriarchal and nationalist discourses.¹ In light of the recent turmoil around gender discrimination in India, an urgent reevaluation of the nation-state’s systemic legacy of failure to address issues surrounding women’s “visibility” in civil and political spaces, in spite of the presence of successful acts of women’s self-representation in history, seems all the more necessary.² By revisiting some of the narratives of our female predecessors who inhabited public stages at a critical juncture in India’s political history—the transition from being a colonial subject of the British Empire to its birth as a newly independent nation-state—this essay attempts to address two sets of queries: (1) How does the space of the theatre offer a possibility to reassess the ways in which the Indian nation-state failed to recognize women’s labor or grant women equal access to civil liberty? (2) How does performance allow for the emergence of the category of “women” as empowered subjects in spite of the structural limitations of both colonial and anticolonial thought?

My case study is the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), which has inspired lively scholarship and in-depth research by a number of theatre historians. Several excellent studies, such as those by Rustom Bharucha (1983), Ralph Yarrow (2000), Nandi Bhatia (2004), Vasudha Dalmia (2006), and Bishnupriya Dutt (Dutt and Munsri 2010), have contributed to an understanding of this theatre movement. However, I wish to add to this existing scholarship by accessing two relatively unacknowledged sites of study: first, the dancing bodies that made significant contributions to IPTA’s dance-drama productions and that, in spite of Urmimala Sarkar Munsri’s necessary intervention (Munsri 2010), suggest a lack of focus on embodiment within IPTA scholarship; and second, the autobiographical accounts of IPTA’s women performers, left behind in a 1999 writing by Reba Roy Chowdhury (1925–2007) and shared in 1992 by the late Gul Bardhan (1928–2010) and Sima Das (2010). By privileging these two sites—the dancing bodies and the personal narratives of IPTA’s women performers—this essay aims to

critically examine women's position within both the modern Indian theatre and the modern Indian nation-building processes in the twentieth century.

Beginning with a mapping of women's bodies in the era of Indian nationalism, this essay examines women's participation in public life during the anticolonial era through various modes of political performances. By analyzing the contribution of women to both Gandhian and communist forms of nationalism, this essay notices how women's performances in either movement negotiated conservative and progressive notions of femininity. The essay then moves on to discuss the social and political background against which the Indian People's Theatre Association emerged, with a particular focus on women's performance as a form of informal and unrecognized labor. Next, the essay revisits the past as remembered by IPTA's women performers, noticing how their lived experiences and protest performances offer a critique of colonial structures of power and gendered social relations and the possibility for female subjectivities to emerge. With its focus on performance, labor, and gender, this essay intends to trouble certain commonly held perceptions about Marxism, nationalism, and feminism in the specific context of South Asia.

Women and Anticolonial Resistance in India

The Indian nationalist movement spawned both violent and nonviolent forms of agitation against British imperialism, which gained momentum by the beginning of the 1930s. Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930 introduced a wave of anti-imperial nonviolent protests on the one hand, while the Communist Party of India (CPI), with its active resistance to British imperialism, emerged as one of the Congress Party's most vociferous opponents. Efforts to create an Anti-Imperialist United National Front in 1936, so as to bring the Congress socialists and the communists together in a pact against the British colonial government, were thwarted by the outbreak of World War II. Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 complicated allegiances: the CPI's support for the Soviet Union was, in effect, extended to the Allied Forces of Britain and America, and the CPI's anti-fascist "People's War" splintered from the Congress's anti-British line of thought. The founding of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) on 25 May 1943 was one of the attempts made by the CPI to fight for democracy by uniting the fragmented left-wing outfits across India through an organized nationwide cultural movement (M. Chatterjee 2004; Datta Gupta 2006).

What roles did Indian women play in these turbulent times of political and social upheaval? In his celebrated book *The Nation and*

Its Fragments (1993), postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee puts forward his notion of the twin domains of Indian nationalism: the “outer domain” of political contest (which included economy, statecraft, science, and technology) and the “inner domain” of national culture (which included the vernacular language, the printing press, literary and performance genres, visual arts, educational institutions, the family, and the position of women both within the family and in society). The resolution of “the woman question,” according to Chatterjee, occurred to a large degree in the inner domain of culture by the end of the nineteenth century, where “nationalism launches its most powerful, creative and historically significant project; to fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western” (P. Chatterjee 1993: 6).

Geraldine Forbes (1996), on the other hand, highlights women’s active participation in the outer political life of India even during colonial rule. She carefully excavates the material culture of Indian women that remained largely buried under patriarchal and colonial structures of power during the nation-building processes following India’s independence in 1947. Sumit Sarkar (2002) also suggests that women’s participation in the political life of the country occurred through several agitation movements that were enacted outside the domestic sphere and within a very public realm. Finally, Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert (2006) offers through her oral historical research a fascinating glimpse into the lives of ordinary (as opposed to elite) women from the northern province of Uttar Pradesh who were actively involved in the anticolonial Indian nationalist movement. Through a meticulous process of excavating real life yet unknown and unarchived stories of women, Thapar-Bjorkert shows how the public sphere was domesticized by women’s active participation in the freedom struggle and how in turn the domestic sphere was politicized through the entry of nationalist politics.

The scholarship and research of Partha Chatterjee (1993), Forbes (1996), Sarkar (2002), and Thapar-Bjorkert (2006) suggest that women, who constantly negotiated the binaries of public and private, the inner and the outer domains, significantly shaped anticolonial resistance in India. Certainly by 1942, a violent, virile, and aggressively masculine form of nationalism contrasted the effeminate body of Gandhi and his nonviolent Quit India Movement, which increased the visibility of thousands of women in public who were also engaged in passive protest. However, Ketu Katrak (2006) suggests that Gandhi co-opted and colluded with patriarchal and Victorian structures of thought when it came to thinking about women’s place in society, essentializing and legitimizing female virtues such as “chastity, purity, self-sacrifice, suffer-

ing” (p. 87). Furthermore, women’s sexuality (alongside men’s) was completely negated within the Gandhian worldview. Katrak posits:

According to Gandhi, a woman could only be pure and noble if she renounced sex altogether. This problematic denial of female sexuality, equating sexual abstinence with nobility and national service is a projection of Gandhi’s personal conflicts between sex and service, between personal passion and public work. As he himself had done, a woman who is “pure and noble” will make the necessary sacrifice—after all, women’s “nature” according to Gandhi was supremely suited to sacrifice. Such an analysis could offer only unfair either/or choices to women: be a wife and a sexual being or remain unmarried and sexually abstinent. (p. 88)

Richard G. Fox suggests that Gandhian nationalism may have kept women in their place, but his “essentialist understanding of gender, however, proved liberatory rather than restrictive” (1996: 37). Fox posits that the notion of “affirmative” rather than “pejorative” essentialisms (p. 41) complicate any straightforward assumption about Gandhi’s failure to address the gender question.

While writers such as Fox and Madhu Kishwar (1985) rightly alert us to the impossibility of ignoring Gandhi’s contribution to women’s appearance in the public sphere, Katrak’s research sounds warning bells that are impossible to dismiss. Certainly, reading the semiotics of Gandhi’s frail body and its association with femininity (as he himself suggested) reinforces and perpetuates the highly problematic alliance between women and fragility. Moreover, the denial of “the female body,” its urges, its desires, and its power, makes it very difficult for a truly feminist politics to reside comfortably within a Gandhian world, even though his protest acts (such as the Salt March of 1930, or his Quit India movement in 1942) were inclusive of female bodies.

I would argue, however, that Gandhian passive revolution and chauvinistic nationalism in the realm of the outside, and the domesticated but politicized inner realm, do not offer a complete picture of women’s participation in civic and political space. Apart from the inner/outer or private/public binary, there seems to have been a third domain within Indian nationalism, too, which I call the domain of embodied resistance. This third domain was carved out of the processes of anticolonial resistance, too, but it allowed women to revolt against the British Empire while simultaneously rejecting both chauvinistic and passive forms of Indian nationalism, and it embraced protest as a bodily act of performing agency. Within this domain, the female body was not rendered invisible to the outside eye (as it happened with the inner domain of national culture), nor was it denied

its physical power or energy (as it occurred within Gandhian revolution). Women in India who occupied this third domain of embodied resistance were in between chauvinistic or passive forms of anticolonial revolution and nationalism. They negotiated the contradictory pulls and fissures in between the inner domain of domesticity and the outer domain of political revolution through both modes of doing and being and the labor of their performance. In the process, these women created altogether new opportunities and experiences for female bodies that belonged neither to mainstream Indian nationalist movements nor to colonial networks of activities. The works of the IPTA reveal how women who belonged to this Marxist ideology-driven organization used makeshift stages and their performing bodies to challenge gendered colonial practices and social relations. It is therefore useful to revisit the ethos and ideology of the Indian People's Theatre Association in order to notice how and in what ways women found a space here to practice their autonomy as active agents of change and transformation, or indeed the ways in which their agency was compromised or marginalized.

IPTA and the Gendered Labor of Performance

As the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, IPTA embodied both domestic conflict (between Indian nationalism and British imperialism) and international tensions (between the Soviet Union and Nazi fascism). With a pan-Indian reach, its agenda was to rediscover and revive indigenous performing art forms, associating them with contemporary sociopolitical events and making them accessible for the masses in both urban and rural contexts. As Aparna Dharwadker (2005) suggests:

The IPTA's traditionalism was the first major modern reaction against two deeply entrenched colonial practices: a century-long denigration of "corrupt" indigenous forms by the colonial and the Indian urban elite, and the thorough commercialization of urban proscenium theatre by bourgeois Parsi entrepreneurs. Folk theatre thus answered the need for *non-commercial* forms that were already familiar and appealing to "the people," and could become the basis of meaningful socio-political fictions about their lives. By speaking to both kinds of oppressed "folk"—urban industrial workers and peasants caught in pre-industrial agrarian economies—folk forms could also attempt to bridge the problematic urban-rural divide, and sustain a mass theatre movement of the kind envisioned by the IPTA. (pp. 10–11)

The IPTA movement paralleled the twentieth-century Indian nationalist reconstruction of "classical" dance forms such as *bharata-*

natyam in the southern Indian region of Tamil Nadu and the dramatic form of *kathakali* in Kerala, although the revival processes for the forms took very different trajectories.³ Revivalists such as E. Krishna Iyer and Vallathol were attempting to salvage from near extinction indigenous dance forms, engaging in meticulous and painstaking research on ancient dramaturgical texts in the process. The IPTA movement however, did not prioritize a “return to the origins” or a search for an “authentic” tradition in its engagement with the folk. In the words of Malini Bhattacharya, the IPTA’s “call to resuscitate folk culture was not a purely revivalist slogan, but embodies the strategy of promoting a vigorous exchange between different existing forms of entertainment, and of being the cultural forum where urban and rural sections of the struggling people might communicate” (1983: 7).

As several theatre scholars, including Bandyopadhyay (1971) and Bharucha (1983) have noted, the colonial state-engineered Bengal famine that claimed millions of lives between 1942 and 1946 triggered several theatre productions, chief among which was the notable play *Nabanna* (The New Harvest, 1944).⁴ Relatively less documented are the dance-drama productions that were performed through the encouragement of P. C. Joshi, the general secretary of the IPTA in Bombay (see Purkayastha 2014). After the success of *Bhookha Hai Bengal* (Hungry Bengal, 1944), a dance-drama production on the Bengal famine choreographed and directed by Shanti Bardhan (1916–1954) and performed across India to raise funds for famine victims, Joshi decided to set up an IPTA Central Squad with Bardhan at its helm.⁵ Bardhan had trained and performed with Uday Shankar (1900–1977), and brought with him the knowledge of different dance forms such as Manipuri and Tippera (East Bengal) dance, along with influences of Shankar’s modernist choreographic approach. In Bardhan’s choreographic works for IPTA, such as *Bhookha Hai Bengal* (Hungry Bengal, 1944), *Spirit of India* (1945), and *India Immortal* (1945–1946), the formal boundaries between theatre and dance were blurred, leading to a new transdisciplinary performance experience for dancers and actors that departed from either indigenous or colonial dance-theatre forms.

The women of Central Squad were artists who hailed from different Indian states: Shanta Gandhi, Dina Sanghvi (later Pathak), and Guniyal Jhaveri from Gujarat; Rekha Jain from Uttar Pradesh; Leela Sundaraiah from Maharashtra; and Reba Roy (later Roy Chowdhury), Ruby Dutta, and Priti Sarkar from Bengal. Most of them were largely untrained and amateur dancers. All the trained performers of the squad were men who came from Uday Shankar’s Almora Centre, which had closed its doors by 1944.⁶ The women actors in Central Squad productions were Kalyani Kumaramangalam, Usha Dutt, and Jaya Roy. Lata

Singh (2011), who has also been attentive to gender and specifically the role of women within IPTA (along with Urmimala Sarkar Munsi; see Dutt and Munsi [2010: 225–228]), makes a very interesting observation about how women never occupied positions of power within the squad, nor were they given the opportunity for decision making when it came to the actual business of making or choreographing the dance-dramas. All of Central Squad's major dance productions were choreographed and credited to Shanti Bardhan, even though women dancers contributed to the making process and often created short dance pieces themselves (Roy Chowdhury 1999). Singh's research suggests that most of the leadership (both administrative and artistic) was retained by the male squad members, and male comrades guided IPTA's day-to-day running of activities. Certainly the accounts left behind by women performers such as Dina Pathak (in Singh 2011) testify to a hierarchy that was established, whether intentionally or not, within the troupe, even though women were treated as comrades rather than subservient figures. For example, Ravi Shankar (1920–2012), Uday Shankar's younger brother, who would later become a world renowned sitar player, had joined IPTA's Central Squad, and his musical genius and penchant for professionalism added to a male-oriented star system that was ultimately prohibitive of a truly collaborative space of equals.

If we view the performances of the Central Squad of IPTA as a form of unacknowledged labor within larger historical processes of nation building, then IPTA's women performers and their artistic and bodily labor were doubly erased by the larger rhetoric of people's war and civil liberty. Sheila Rowbotham (1992) has argued that within the Marxist worldview, gender equality is always secondary to class inequality, even though Marx himself was committed to women's emancipation and right to work. In a Marxist organization such as IPTA, although the labor of women was clearly seen as being coexistent with that of men, it could never shape or provide direction for the organization, since gender equality was always overshadowed by what was considered to be a more urgent issue: the political autonomy of the nation. This parallels the story of several women's organizations, such as the Women's India Association (WIA, established 1917), the National Council for Women in India (NCWI, established 1925), and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC, established 1927), which were backed by the Indian National Congress but whose call for women's emancipation was subsumed within the overarching struggle for national independence. Leela Kasturi avers that during the colonial period, "When revivalism, nationalism and communalism were overlapping responses to British rule, the progress made by women's organizations depended on two factors—the interests of the government and support from the

nationalist elites, who could not always be relied upon” (2007: 331). A progressive, modern Indian theatre organization such as IPTA gives us the possibility of noticing how the most well-intentioned and egalitarian of movements during the anticolonial revolution ultimately failed to recognize women’s artistic labor or creative autonomy, while male work was “naturally” privileged.

Her-Stories: Some Narratives from IPTA’s Women Comrades

This essay cannot, however, focus only on the failures of the nation-building process, useful as these may be to alerting us to the problem of collusion with patriarchal structures that blighted many seemingly ethical and women-facing organizations in India. Just as Fox (1996) urges us to notice individual liberatory acts for women in Gandhian revolution in spite of Gandhi’s gender essentialisms, IPTA too, within its gendered organizational structure, offered its women artists moments of real agency. In this penultimate section, I would like to privilege the autobiographical narratives of IPTA performers and their day-to-day embodied experiences of being women activists and artists.

The first selection is from the writings of Reba Roy Chowdhury. The sister of Benoy Roy, who was one of the singers in IPTA, Roy Chowdhury traveled with her brother from Calcutta to Bombay to join the Central Squad. After the success of *Hungry Bengal*, the Central Squad moved to a bungalow named Khusru Lodge in Andheri East, a suburb in Bombay, where work began in earnest for IPTA’s other forthcoming productions. Roy Chowdhury’s autobiography in Bengali gives a detailed account of the spartan life in what became a sort of commune of Khusru Lodge, with bare essentials, rationed food, and strict discipline. Roy Chowdhury (1999) writes:

We left central Bombay for a bungalow in Andheri towards the end of 1944. The Communist Party of India took the historic decision to create a Central Cultural Squad. The party was strengthening its cultural weapon in its fight against fascism and colonialism. Our difficult battle began in Andheri. The whole squad would have to maintain strict discipline and abide by rules. Labour was divided amongst all members.

The cook was Dungan Singh, who came from Almora. He would sing beautifully whilst cooking. A song from the mountains [. . .]. I had even choreographed a dance to his song. We would both serve food together. The food was—4 chappatis [Indian flat bread], a small portion of rice, dal [lentil soup], vegetables, and a bowl of yoghurt. Prem was a Punjabi. He would not settle for less than 8–10 chappatis. Every-day day there would be a huge fuss at meal time. We women would give some chappatis from our share to him. When he would be in a good

mood, he would write a couple of songs. We all loved Prem. He was an extraordinary songwriter.

Our day would begin at 5 am. In cold or hot weather, I would bathe early and exercise with Ruby and Rekha. The bell for tea would ring at 6 am. After half a piece of bread and a mug of tea, we would start rehearsals at 7 am. All performers, be they singers or dancers, would have to warm up at first. [. . .] Practice would continue till 10 am. We would rest from 1–3pm. Rehearsals would resume at 4 pm, which is when we would offer corrections to each other's work. The afternoon rehearsals would involve live music. Everyone would work in silence, without chatting. That was our discipline. (pp. 16–17)

Roy Chowdhury's invaluable reflections offer a rare glimpse into the lives of a collective of artists—men and women—in pre-independence India, who were clearly engaged in a restructuring of gendered domestic relations through their everyday actions. Cooking and feeding the troupe was not relegated to women, but equally shared among male and female artists. Women and men collaborated on making choreographic pieces together. Even though hints of the self-sacrificial nature of women (sharing food) seep into the narrative, the overall sense is not of women's deprivation but of their joy in laughing, singing, and moving with their male comrades. And finally, the extraordinary bodily discipline that was required of women—in warm-ups, rehearsals, and corrections to practice—enables us to reimagine the kinesthetic power of their dancing bodies.

The second excerpt is from an in-person interview with the late Gul Bardhan. In 2006, I traveled to Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, India, to meet Gul, an ex-IPTA activist-performer and partner of the late Shanti Bardhan. I spent a few days with her and the company Little Ballet Troupe, which she had helped Shanti Bardhan establish before his death and which she was leading at the time. During our interview, Bardhan shared her memories of being a Central Squad member and talked lucidly of her days as a performer. I include an excerpt of life immediately after her IPTA years:

In 1947, I was sent as part of the first youth delegation to Prague carrying the exhibition *My Country My People* but when I returned, I saw him [Shanti Bardhan, who had just returned from Kasauli sanatorium after contracting tuberculosis and losing several of his ribs]. I said “nothing doing, this won't do.” I finally convinced him to start LBT [Little Ballet Troupe]. He asked where is the money? I said, you agree then everything will come, money will come, artists will come. There was a friend of ours, Ambubhai, and we asked him, “Do you know a place where we could work?” He talked to some friends in Trombay, and told us about Rammandir [an old temple site], which was available. So

we started working in Rammandir: Shantida, myself, two doggies, and a boy called Gyan who was a cook in the Communist Party. Gyan said “hum jayenge tumhare saath” (I’ll go with you). “Tumko hum leke kya karenge?” (What will we do with you?) He replied: “Tum jahannum main bhi jayega hum tumhare saath hi jayega.” (Even if you go to hell, I’ll come with you). “Chalo toh phir” (Let’s go then). There was a young girl called Devaki, who was thrown out by the Communist party because of a rift between her and her husband. I said, no you cannot throw a girl out like this, and was told, “You take her.” So I took her to Shantida, and he agreed to take her in. We had 186 Rupees cash [£1 86p in today’s currency]. One small burner and utensils. The place had one small room, one big room, and a big hall. It was in a fishermen’s village. All the fishermen would come and watch rehearsals in the evening. And they would leave 5–10 Paise [a few pence] for us and go away at the end of rehearsals. They knew that *dada* [Bengali word for older brother, here referring to Shanti Bardhan] was Bengali, and liked fish. So they brought fish for *dada*. They were such fine human beings. And we started practicing small items like “Roomal” [Handkerchief] and “Brijlila” [Dance of Krishna] and so on. Simkie [Uday Shankar’s former dance partner] was also in Bombay. She used to come. She had an engagement in Taj [a luxury hotel], and wanted to perform our items. In one item “Brijlila,” she was due to appear. She did not know [the] Manipuri style [of dance], so she asked me to teach her. Whatever she made from the performances, she gave the money to LBT. (Bardhan 2006)

Gul Bardhan’s memories enable us not only to access the precariousness of labor in the theatre profession (we notice how a group of financially and physically broken artists continue to make work against all odds) but they also reveal to us the commitment and vision of a woman artist such as Gul, who by the time of India’s independence not only had national tours but also international performance experience under her belt. Gul Bardhan’s mobility and determination made it possible for Shanti Bardhan to continue making work until his final days. Finally, another instance of the uncertainties faced was the way a young woman (Devaki) is “thrown out” of IPTA, without any financial settlement, suggesting that within performance activism, labor (and particularly women’s labor) is not only unrecognized but also easily dismissed.

The final excerpt is from an interview with Sima Das (2013), an IPTA activist-performer who was part of the North Squad in Calcutta during the 1940s. Das says:

I moved with my parents from East Bengal [present-day Bangladesh] to Calcutta after Independence [1947]. My mother was in the freedom struggle and my father loved theatre. The family business was wrecked

by the Partition and we moved into a tiny room in Ultadanga. I felt trapped in that little room, without any music. I joined IPTA in January 1948 and delighted in chorus singing. I saw several of IPTA's theatre and dance-drama productions. For example, Shambhu Bhattacharya and his dancers would never use classical hand gestures. They would base their movements on everyday gestures of ordinary people, and the themes were very simple. There were no Radha-Krishna dances [duets based on Indian gods and goddesses]. Instead, the work would focus on labor and toil and revolution.

Once Panu Pal was supposed to perform at BE College with a few other performers, but they did not show up. He was very angry, but asked me to improvise on stage with him. Panu Pal entered as Death on stage, wearing a skeleton costume. He was a terrifying presence, as he moved around me. It was a piece on the famine.

In my experience, politically conscious and educated men and women joined IPTA. And after the Partition, many East Bengalis who suffered from rootlessness joined the Communist Party. We were fearless. After the CPIM was banned, the police would raid our rehearsals, charge at public gatherings and beat us up in the middle of songs and performances.

There were very few theatre groups in Calcutta at the time. Men and women performed together. The relationships between them were easy. They would have political debates amongst themselves, build stages together. We as women were never made to feel uncomfortable.

As artists, we were never paid by IPTA. In fact we paid to go to rehearsals. And individuality was never important. Our names were never announced before or after a performance. (Das 2013)

Journeying with Das into the past, we encounter the courage of young women activist performers who, alongside their male colleagues, butted against often violent authoritative regimes. The group constructed spaces in the city for theatre to happen, and, instead of being paid for their artistic labor, performers contributed from their family's income to practice their art. This is not artistic activity as commodity. Within the context of revolutionary theatre, artistic work is not the material labor of the individual, but the immaterial experience for the individual.

Women, Labor, and Performance

The narratives of IPTA's women performers outlined above offer an insight into an extraordinary world of theatre practice inhabited by ordinary women and men, one in which glamour, fame, and wealth were sacrificed in favor of a hand-to-mouth existence, anonymity, and even run-ins with the law. The three autobiographical accounts above, along with other significant essays such as Dina Pathak's (1995),

which details her experience as an IPTA activist-performer, suggest that women's work in this theatre movement was highly precarious labor: there was no financial certainty, no formalized legal contract, and no possibility of a "career" as an artist. Yet, the everyday practices of these women in Indian theatre and the bodily actions they engaged in (while rehearsing, fund-raising, performing, demonstrating, and protesting) ultimately transformed their relationship with co-workers and the colonial and nationalist structures they jointly opposed. And these everyday practices are significant, as Michel de Certeau reminds us:

[A]n everyday practice opens up a unique space within an imposed order . . . the everyday practice is relative to the power relations that structure the social field as well as the field of knowledge. To appropriate information for oneself, to put it into a series and to bend its montage to one's own taste is to take power over a certain knowledge and thereby overturn the imposing power of the readymade and the preorganized. It is, with barely visible or nameable operations, to trace one's own path through the resisting social system . . . everyday practice patiently restores a space for play, an interval for freedom, a resistance to what is imposed (from a model, a system or an order). To be able to do something is to establish distance, to defend the autonomy of what comes from one's own personality. (de Certeau 1984: 254)

Following on from de Certeau's notion of everyday practices as sites of resistance and creative play, I would like to reflect on the legacy of IPTA's women performers for theatre and performance scholars, and women today. The autobiographical narratives of IPTA's Reba Roy Chowdhury, Gul Bardhan, and Sima Das suggest that IPTA's performances made possible for new forms of embodiment to emerge. Women who lived in Gandhi's *ashram* had to deny their sexuality and bodies to dedicate themselves to national freedom, while the IPTA women used their bodies to achieve political autonomy. The autobiographical narratives never speak of women occupying positions of power but on an everyday, material level, their bodies were empowered by the discipline and skill that they had to maintain as performers. The everyday embodied practices of women performers in IPTA therefore offer a rich site for discussions on gender and nationalism.

Second, IPTA's women performers make us conscious of how women's laboring bodies in performance can go unrecognized. It is easy to dismiss women's artistic labor as incidental to cultural economy, since much of this labor is informal, taken for granted, and ultimately swallowed up within grander metanarratives of the country's political history. As Mrinalini Sinha suggests, "The attention to the process by which women are constituted as political subjects, rather than assum-

ing the givenness of women as a constituency simply waiting to be mobilized, has interesting possibilities in the contemporary academic moment" (2014: 23). A closer analysis of IPTA women's performance practices and lives offers us one such possibility for women as performance workers.

Finally, women's performances in IPTA not only show that there are many different socialisms, as Raymond Williams (1986) has suggested, but also how socialist politics is embodied in a variety of ways. Theatre and dance practice within the IPTA did not simply imbibe Marxist ideas and politics but also pushed it forward. Randy Martin writes that "an effective dance study would expose both a political specificity and an entire political horizon. Such horizons, with their promise to enlarge the sense of what is possible, generally lost in daily experience to the enormous scale of society, are thereby condensed and made palpable. Hence mobilization in dance, because it is overdetermined, does not simply reflect the politics outside it but displays as well the activity of participation that is constitutive of the political field as a field replete with myriad practices" (1998: 14).

The IPTA women's active participation as performing bodies in the nationalist movement was only partially able to address the contradictions around gender that neither the Marxist political movement nor Gandhi's revolution resolved in India. Yet the voices of IPTA's women dancers and the dance-dramas prove that a simplistic reading of Marxism's or Indian nationalism's failure to address gender issues is incomplete. More nuanced analyses of the multilayered experiences of women in political movements such as CPI is needed. We have seen here that the essentialization, nonrecognition, and marginalization of female labor by the nation-state (as in Gandhi's work) is countered by successful moments of agency through women's performance acts in IPTA. Recognizing their labor, their bodies, and their performance is of paramount importance.

NOTES

I am grateful to the Little Ballet Troupe for their hospitality during my trip to Bhopal in 2006, and to Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan for putting me in touch with the late Gul Bardhan. I am deeply indebted to Samik Bandyopadhyay for introducing me to the autobiography of Reba Roy Chowdhury (1999). To Sima Das, my heartfelt gratitude, for her time and her generosity.

1. The Sircars founded the Dancers' Guild company in Kolkata in 1983, a contemporary dance collective that was committed to Indian women's embodied agency. Manjusri Chaki Sircar specifically highlighted the influence of the revolutionary work of the Indian People's Theatre Association on her

own vision of women-centered performance. For scholarly works on autonomy and gender in the work of the Sircars, see Purkayastha (2014), Esha Niyogi De (2011), and Aishika Chakraborty (2010).

2. In her keynote speech at the 2014 International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) conference at Warwick University, theatre scholar Bishnupriya Dutt (School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) similarly highlighted the need to interrogate historical and contemporary anomalies in the representation of women within the Indian nation-state, following the Nirbhaya case.

3. In the state of Tamil Nadu in south India, two major events became the axes of Indian cultural nationalism: the Anti-Nautch Campaign of the late nineteenth century in Bombay and South India, unleashed by Hindu reformists on the temple dancers due to their association with prostitution and child marriage, and the revival efforts of Madras High Court advocate E. V. Krishna Iyer, who famously donned a *devadasi* costume and gave a public *sadir* dance recital in 1926 to resurrect the dance from near extinction. By 1936, the revivalists had won the battle, and fortunately succeeded in bringing the *sadir* back to life, but in a newly reconstructed form called *bharatanatyam*. In this reconstruction project, the chief contributors apart from Iyer were the women pioneers Rukmini Devi Arundale and Balasaraswati. See Meduri (2005) and O'Shea (2007). In the southern Indian state of Kerala, as part of the cultural nationalist movement of the 1930s, the Malayalam poet Vallathol played a significant role in reviving the *kathakali* dance-drama tradition from 1924 onward and founded the Kerala Kalamandalam in 1930 in Cheruthurthi to provide a formalized space for masters and disciples to work together on both preexisting as well as newly devised scripts for performance. See Zarilli (1999). Although *bharatanatyam* and *kathakali* do not share an identical history in terms of revivalism and reformism, both forms emerged out of a nationalist endeavor to preserve and protect theatre and dance forms that were severely threatened by the forces of colonialism.

4. A major milestone in the history of Bengali theatre was reached through the staging of playwright Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* in October 1944. Set against the background of the Bengal famine, the play had as its protagonist the character of Pradhan Samaddar, a peasant, and followed the turbulent events that he and his family face during the food crisis. The first staging of *Nabanna* resulted in a run of thirty-five performances at theatres and public gatherings in Bengal, "Often to audiences of seven thousand or more" (Bandyopadhyay 1971: 239).

5. From its address in the Communist Party Headquarters at the Red Flag Hall on Khetwadi Main Road, the Central Squad moved to a bungalow named Khusru Lodge in Andheri East, a suburb in Bombay, where work began in earnest for IPTA's other forthcoming productions. See Bardhan (1992).

6. The Uday Shankar India Culture Centre (USICC) was set up in 1938 with funds from Leonard K. (1893–1974) and Dorothy Elmhist (1887–1968) of Dartington Hall, Devon, United Kingdom. With Uday Shankar as its creative director, the center was established in the idyllic but ultimately impractical space of Simtola near Almora, in the Indian Himalayas. The vision of the

center was to impart education in the arts (including dance, music, theatre, and visual arts) to young students. The Almora Centre was a modern collective of Indian artists, many of whom would later become luminaries in the fields of dance, theatre, and cinema. The center was closed in 1944 owing to administrative issues and Shankar's decision to invest his creative energies into his only film, *Kalpana* (1948).

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