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Imagining the Proletariat: The Indian People's Theatre Association and the Making of a Working-Class Public Sphere

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Abstract

This paper examines the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) as a political-cultural movement that sought to imagine, mobilise and represent the working class during a critical conjuncture in late colonial and early postcolonial India. Founded in 1943 amid the Second World War, the Bengal famine, and intensifying anti-colonial struggle, IPTA emerged as the cultural front of the communist movement and the first all-India attempt to create a people's theatre rooted in labouring lives. Rather than treating IPTA's plays and songs as literary texts, this study situates the organisation historically as an institutional network, a mode of political mobilisation, and a site where ideas of the "working class" were actively constructed. Drawing on IPTA manifestos, conference resolutions, memoirs of activists and artists, contemporary press reports and Communist Party and trade-union materials, the paper investigates how IPTA conceptualised the worker as a political subject. It analyses the organisation's touring practices, performance spaces, and links with trade unions and peasant organisations to show how IPTA attempted to create a working-class public sphere beyond elite urban theatre. The paper further explores the ideological framing of workers on stage as victims of famine and exploitation, as heroic agents of collective struggle and as constituents of a broader "people's" bloc that fused class politics with anti-imperialist nationalism. The study also addresses the limits of this representational project, highlighting tensions between IPTA's predominantly middle-class leadership and the labouring subjects it sought to speak for, as well as silences around caste, gender, and regional diversity within the working class. Finally, it traces how shifts in communist politics after independence reshaped IPTA's labour imagination and contributed to the movement's fragmentation, while leaving a durable legacy for later people's theatre initiatives. By locating IPTA within labour history and political-cultural historiography, the paper argues that cultural representation was central to the making of working-class consciousness in modern India.

Keywords: Working class; nationalism; labour; historiography; manifesto; diversity.

The Indian People's Theatre Association was born at a moment when India's streets were louder than its legislatures, when famine stalked the countryside even as wartime profits swelled bourgeois pockets and when the word "people" trembled with the weight of hunger, anger and hope. In this turbulent conjuncture of the early 1940s, theatre ceased to be merely an evening diversion and became, in the hands of IPTA's activists, a weapon of agitation and a language of solidarity. The stage was dragged out of the proscenium and into factory yards, mill lines and crowded bastis, where crude wooden platforms and open maidans became sites of political education for those who laboured longest and earned least. To reconstruct this history is to listen again to the songs and slogans that travelled with IPTA's troupes, and to ask how, in these performances, the Indian working class was imagined, addressed and summoned into a new

kind of public. This paper approaches IPTA not as a purely aesthetic formation but as a historical project of cultural-political mobilisation. The central concern is deceptively simple: how did IPTA see the worker, and how did it ask the worker to see themselves? In the silhouettes that recur across its plays and songs, the starving peasant in the shadow of the landlord's granary, the striking mill-hand facing the lathi charge, the anonymous figure in a crowd chanting for bread and freedom, one encounters more than characters; one confronts a particular vision of class, nation and revolution. These images, repeated from Bengal to Bombay, stitched together a narrative in which "the people" were no longer a passive backdrop to nationalist leaders, but the protagonist of history, with the industrial proletariat and semi-proletarian poor at its heart.

Yet this vision did not arise in a vacuum. IPTA emerged from an already thick milieu of progressive cultural work: the Progressive Writers' Association, anti-fascist committees, left-wing student organisations and communist-front initiatives that had begun to sketch an idea of "people's culture" in the late 1930s. The Second World War, the Bengal famine and the escalating crisis of colonial rule sharpened this project, forcing artists and intellectuals to confront the stark contrast between imperial rhetoric and the grim arithmetic of death and deprivation. Within this crucible, IPTA's founding conference in Bombay in 1943 announced an ambition to unite scattered efforts into a national people's theatre that would speak in the name of workers and peasants, soldiers and students, women and men. The worker thus entered IPTA's vocabulary not simply as a sociological category, but as a bearer of historical possibility, the figure in whose name cultural resistance and political transformation could be simultaneously imagined. For a historian, the archive of IPTA; its manifestos, minutes, pamphlets, songs, scripts, memoirs and scattered press reports, offers precious clues to how the working class was represented at the intersection of art and politics. Unlike factory records or trade-union resolutions, these materials do not primarily count wages or strikes; instead, they dramatise exploitation, condense grievances into allegory, and translate economic antagonism into gesture, dialogue and melody. This paper reads such sources not to evaluate their literary merit, but to trace the historical work they performed: the ways in which they named enemies and allies, mapped the social world, and inscribed the worker into a broader narrative of anti-imperialist and socialist struggle. In doing so, it seeks to treat IPTA as part of the historical apparatus through which class consciousness was cultivated and not merely as a reflection of consciousness formed elsewhere.

The representation of the working class in IPTA's practice was, however, neither simple nor uniform. At times the worker appears as the suffering victim of colonial and capitalist greed, emblem of famine and forced labour, a body etched with hunger and lash-marks. At other moments, the worker stands as heroic militant, raising the red flag, calling for unity, guiding hesitant peasants towards organised resistance. Often, the figure is absorbed into the expansive category of "the people", a collective that includes peasants, petty traders, lower middle classes and segments of the intelligentsia, blurring sharp distinctions between different strata of the exploited. These shifts are not mere artistic choices; they index the strategic calculations and ideological debates within the communist movement and its cultural fronts about how best to build alliances, narrate struggle, and speak across divisions of region, language, caste and gender. This paper, therefore, reads IPTA's working-class figures against the grain of its organisational history and political context. The touring squads that performed at factory gates or in crowded working-class neighbourhoods did more than mirror reality; they actively helped to construct a "working-class public" by gathering dispersed labouring bodies into audiences addressed as a historical subject. The very act of naming performances as "people's theatre" and songs as "people's songs" invited workers to imagine themselves as part of a broader collectivity, one whose story was being told on stage and whose consent was being sought for particular forms of struggle. At the same time, IPTA's leadership and creative core remained predominantly middle-class and urban, shaped by the education and sensibilities

of the intelligentsia, even as they sought to align themselves with proletarian interests. This tension, between speaking for and speaking with workers, haunts the archive and forms one of the critical questions this paper pursues.

The enquiry is framed by concerns central to labour history and subaltern historiography: who has the authority to represent workers, and through what forms? Whereas classic labour histories focus on strikes, unions and legislative battles, the IPTA archive compels attention to the symbolic dimension of class formation, the stories through which workers' lives are made intelligible to themselves and others. By placing theatre and song at the centre of analysis, this work joins broader efforts to write a "history from below" that is attentive not only to material struggles but also to the cultural idioms in which those struggles are imagined, justified and remembered. The representation of the working class on IPTA stages thus becomes a vantage point from which to reconsider how class itself is historically produced, contested and re-signified. At stake, ultimately, is more than the story of one organisation. IPTA's experiments with people's theatre bequeathed a repertoire of images and sounds that would echo in later movements, from street theatre groups like Jana Natya Manch to contemporary cultural fronts affiliated with left parties and unions. Tracing how the working class appeared in IPTA's practice allows this paper to illuminate both the radical aspirations and the limits of a project that sought to harness art to revolution, yet operated within the constraints of censorship, repression, internal factionalism and the everyday pressures of survival. To write this history is to step back into those dimly lit yards and improvised stages where, for an hour or two, the worker could see a reflection of their world and, in that reflection, the outline of another world struggling to be born.

At its core, this paper asks three interrelated questions. How did IPTA represent the working class in its organisational discourse and theatrical practice during the 1940s and early 1950s? In what ways did its performances and touring practices help to construct a working-class public sphere in late colonial and early postcolonial India? And how did tensions between a predominantly middle-class leadership and labouring audiences, as well as silences around caste, gender and regional diversity, shape and limit this project? Taken together, these questions guide an enquiry that treats representation not as a secondary embellishment of "real" labour history, but as one of its central terrains.

Historical Context and Origins of IPTA

The Indian People's Theatre Association did not emerge out of cultural spontaneity but from a dense historical matrix of war, famine, mass politics and communist reorientation in the early 1940s. To understand how IPTA came to represent the working class, a history paper must first recover the conjuncture that made "people's theatre" thinkable as a political necessity rather than an artistic experiment. The years preceding IPTA's founding saw an accelerated politicisation of artists and intellectuals across India, as the intertwined shocks of the Second World War, the 1943 Bengal famine and intensifying anti-colonial struggle exposed the stark inequalities underpinning colonial rule and capitalist expansion. In this context, theatre became one of several instruments, alongside pamphlets, journals, songs and public meetings, through which the Left sought to reach workers and peasants with a language that combined agitation with affect. Before IPTA formally coalesced in 1943, several currents of progressive cultural activity had already begun to shape an idea of "people's culture." The Progressive Writers' Association, formed in the mid-1930s, had articulated a programme that demanded literature aligned with anti-imperialist and anti-feudal struggles, drawing many young writers and artists towards Marxist and socialist ideas. Simultaneously, local cultural organisations, anti-fascist committees and youth groups experimented with political plays, workers' songs and recitations in different

regional languages, often in close collaboration with trade unions or peasant bodies. These scattered initiatives did not yet constitute a single organisation, but they created the cadres, repertories and sensibilities from which IPTA would later be built. From the standpoint of labour history, the 1940s marked an important expansion of the industrial and semi-industrial working class, with increasing concentration of labour in mills, railways, docks and urban services. At the same time, the Bengal famine revealed both the vulnerability of rural labourers and small peasants and the callousness of colonial policy, intensifying radicalisation in the countryside and in urban working-class districts. Communist organisers sought to translate this anger into structured movements, but they also recognised that conventional political propaganda had limits in societies marked by low literacy, linguistic diversity and entrenched hierarchies. Theatre offered a way to bridge these divides, using image, song and story to address workers and peasants collectively, often in spaces where formal meetings might have been impossible or illegal.

Within the global communist movement, the period was also marked by a renewed emphasis on united-front politics and anti-fascist cultural work, influenced by the Comintern's calls for broad alliances against fascism. In India, this translated into efforts by communists and fellow travellers to build organisations that could bring together not only party members but also sympathetic writers, artists and performers in the name of a wider "people's culture." The Indian People's Theatre Association represented one of the most ambitious attempts to institutionalise this impulse at an all-India level, giving organisational coherence to what had previously been dispersed regional endeavours.

Several specific developments form the immediate pre-history of IPTA:

- The growth of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) created a network of left-oriented writers and critics who were already debating the role of art in anti-imperialist and class struggle.
- Anti-fascist cultural fronts in the late 1930s and early 1940s, often aligned with communist and socialist politics, encouraged the use of plays, recitations and song performances at rallies and meetings.
- Regional experiments in workers' and peasants' theatre in Bengal, Bombay, the Punjab and Andhra developed rudimentary forms of agit-prop drama and musical performance aimed at labouring audiences.
- Youth and student organisations associated with the Left began to form cultural squads, performing short skits and songs in working-class neighbourhoods and college campuses.

These elements did not automatically produce IPTA, but they indicate that, by the early 1940s, the idea that theatre might belong to "the people" and serve their struggles had already taken root in several milieus.

Founding of IPTA and Its Early Mandate

The formal founding of the Indian People's Theatre Association is generally traced to the All-India People's Theatre Conference held in Bombay in May 1943, where artists, writers and political activists gathered to consolidate a national organisation. Documents and later recollections from this conference emphasise several key objectives that would structure IPTA's subsequent activities. Though phrased in different ways across regions and languages, these goals shared a commitment to aligning theatre with the struggles of workers, peasants and other oppressed groups against imperialism and reaction.

The early mandate can be summarised as follows:

- To develop a "people's theatre" that would reflect the lives and struggles of workers, peasants and the poor, as opposed to the escapist fare associated with commercial stages and elite audiences.
- To create an all-India cultural front that could co-ordinate progressive theatrical activity across provinces, languages and communities, thereby giving national scope to local initiatives.
- To use theatre for anti-imperialist mobilisation, linking performances to campaigns around famine relief, war profiteering, political prisoners and civil liberties.
- To serve, in practice if not formally, as a cultural arm of the communist and broader Left movement, working closely with trade unions, kisan sabhas and youth organisations to reach labouring populations.

Later recollections and institutional histories emphasise that the Bombay conference framed IPTA's work quite explicitly as part of the anti-imperialist struggle (Banerjee 74–75; "Indian People's Theatre Association"). One frequently cited formulation describes the association as having been formed "in response to the need for theatre artists to become part of the Indian freedom struggle," making clear that the "people's theatre" it envisaged was not merely socially conscious but oriented towards active participation in nationalist and class politics. In this view, dramatists, actors and musicians were to join workers and peasants as cultural fighters, using the stage to expose exploitation, strengthen unity and prepare audiences for political action rather than passive sympathy (Banerjee 75). From the outset, therefore, IPTA framed its mission in terms that foregrounded "the people," "workers and peasants" and "toilers," marking a clear distance from elite cultural institutions that catered to upper-class urban audiences. The choice of the name "Indian People's Theatre Association" signalled both an identification with the nation and a claim to speak for those who were usually excluded from its cultural representation: the working classes, rural and urban.

The Working Class in IPTA's Early Discourse

If IPTA's resolutions and manifestos reveal how the working class was conceptualised in organisational discourse, its plays, songs and touring performances show how that conceptualisation was translated into images, stories and sounds addressed to specific audiences. This section therefore turns from language to staging, asking how workers and poor peasants appeared on IPTA's stages, what kinds of roles and trajectories they were given, and how those representations related to the wider political debates of the 1940s and early 1950s. Even at this early stage, however, the working class in IPTA's discourse was a complex and layered figure rather than a strictly defined sociological category. Manifestos, pamphlets and programmatic statements from the 1940s invoked a range of terms; "workers," "peasants," "toilers," "ordinary people," "labouring masses" that sometimes overlapped and sometimes diverged. For a historian, these terminological choices are significant, because they reveal how IPTA's founders understood, and sought to construct, their audience.

Several specific tendencies can be noted:

- Early writings linked the sufferings of workers and peasants directly to colonial exploitation, presenting the working class as the principal victim of imperial rule and therefore as the most authentic bearer of the national cause.

- The term "working people" often encompassed not only industrial workers but also poor peasants, urban petty traders and lower employees, reflecting the united-front strategy of the communist movement.
- Descriptions of labour emphasised sacrifice, endurance and productive contribution to society, constructing workers as morally superior to parasitic landlords, capitalists and speculators.
- While rhetorically inclusive, early documents rarely specified women workers, Dalit labourers or certain marginalised occupations, hinting at gendered and caste-based blind spots that would persist in IPTA's practice.

In each case, the working class was less an object of detached sociological analysis and more a political subject invoked to justify a radical reorientation of cultural work. To argue for people's theatre was to claim that theatre must turn its face towards those who produced wealth but remained voiceless in the sphere of representation.

Situating IPTA within broader labour and political history clarifies why its founders believed that the time was ripe for such an organisation. The early 1940s witnessed a surge of strikes, food riots and militant actions by workers and peasants, often under communist or socialist leadership, in textile centres, ports and agrarian regions. At the same time, state repression, wartime censorship and the shifting positions of major parties created an unstable political landscape in which conventional forms of agitation were heavily policed. For communist and fellow-travelling intellectuals, developing a robust cultural front was both a strategic response to these constraints and a way to cultivate a more durable political culture among labouring populations. In this perspective, the founding of IPTA appears not as an isolated artistic initiative but as part of a wider attempt by the Left to build what might be termed a working-class public sphere in colonial India. Through performances, songs and public events, IPTA helped to create spaces, physical and symbolic, in which workers and peasants could see their experiences dramatised and their grievances articulated in collective form. The association's historical significance, therefore, lies not only in the content of particular plays but in the way it anchored cultural production within the rhythms of labour and struggle, making representation itself a terrain of class politics.

Workers on Stage: Themes, Images, Narratives

In IPTA's repertoire, the worker walked on stage already marked by famine, wage cuts and eviction orders; the theatre became a historical archive where class antagonism was not described but enacted in flesh, gesture and song. The emblematic example is Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (1944), which brought starving Bengal peasants and agricultural labourers into the centre of urban theatre spaces, replacing romantic leads with bodies reduced to skin and bone by the 1943 famine. In performance, the half-naked figures, the empty utensils, the queues for rice and the repeated cries for food translated the statistics of famine mortality into a visual and sonic language that a working-class audience in Calcutta or Bombay could recognise as part of a shared structure of exploitation. Plays on strikes, mill lockouts and dockworkers' struggles similarly transformed economic conflicts into narrative sequences, in which workers debated whether to risk dismissal, confronted managers and police, and discovered their strength in collective action rather than in individual heroism. Alongside such plays, IPTA developed songs, dance-dramas and short agit-prop sketches designed for rapid deployment in strikes, relief campaigns and mass conferences of the Kisan Sabha and trade unions. Reports from Andhra and Bengal units describe pieces like *Hitler Parajayam* adapted into traditional

veedhi natakam forms, where the downfall of fascism was allegorised through popular idioms, and famine-relief squads sang compositions that linked the price of rice to profiteering and imperial war expenditure. In industrial belts, brief street-corner performances used simple choruses and repeated slogans to connect local wage disputes with a wider narrative of working-class struggle, ensuring that even those who could not stay for a full play absorbed a condensed lesson in class politics. These forms were historically specific responses to wartime censorship, police surveillance and long working hours; they allowed IPTA to address workers in transit, on their way to mills, in lunch breaks, at relief kitchens, rather than expecting them to attend formal theatres.

Contemporary accounts of *Nabanna* underline how closely its representational choices were tied to IPTA's relief and mobilisation work. Staged by IPTA on 24 October 1944 at Shrirangam Theatre under the direction of Sombhu Mitra, and later taken on an all-India tour as part of the "Voice of Bengal" festival, the production drew large crowds attracted by its intense realism and is reported to have raised substantial funds for famine relief in rural Bengal. Chroniclers stress that audiences were struck not only by the skeletal bodies and empty utensils on stage but also by the way the play linked village hunger to urban profiteering and wartime policies, thereby allowing working-class spectators in Calcutta and other cities to recognise their own vulnerabilities within a wider structure of exploitation. The ideological framing of the worker in these productions oscillated between victimhood and agency. In famine dramas such as *Nabanna*, the peasant-labourer appears first as the "living dead," caught between hoarded grain and empty fields, a figure whose suffering indicts colonial procurement policies and landlord greed. As the play unfolds, however, the same peasant is drawn into collective protest, suggesting a historical trajectory from passive endurance to organised resistance that mirrored communist hopes for politicisation through crisis. In strike plays and factory-gate sketches, workers were more straightforwardly heroic, leading walkouts, confronting police repression and urging hesitant colleagues to overcome fear, thereby embodying the revolutionary subject envisaged in communist discourse. At the same time, many plays subsumed the worker into the broader category of "the people," placing them alongside peasants, small traders and students in a united front whose common enemy was imperialism and domestic reaction, rather than capital alone. This fusion of class and nation produced productive tensions between nationalist and explicitly class vocabularies. Songs composed by IPTA members spoke of "azaadi" and "national integration" in the same breath as "mazdoor-kisan ekta," suggesting that the true nation was being forged from below by workers and peasants rather than by constitutional elites. In some performances, the nation appeared as a violated mother whose rescue required the sacrifice of labouring sons and daughters; in others, it was barely invoked, with the focus falling instead on wages, land and immediate survival. These shifts reflected broader debates within the communist movement about how prominently to foreground class against the backdrop of anti-imperialist nationalism, especially during the Second World War and its aftermath. The worker on IPTA's stage was therefore always double: at once the representative of a particular class position and the synecdoche for a larger "people" whose liberation was imagined in national as well as socialist terms.

Issues of gender, region and caste complicate this picture. Visual and textual evidence suggests that, despite rhetoric about "working people," the paradigmatic worker in IPTA's imagery was often an able-bodied, industrial male, typically Hindu, whose class identity overshadowed questions of caste and whose family remained largely in the narrative background. Women did appear as famine victims, as supportive wives of striking workers and, in some cases, as participants in demonstrations, echoing the involvement of organisations like the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti in Bengal. However, the figure of the autonomous woman worker, whether in jute mills, bidi workshops or domestic service, rarely took centre stage, revealing a gendered limitation in IPTA's imagination of the working class. Similarly,

Dalit labourers and migrant workers from oppressed castes are visible in the social reality underlying plays like *Nabanna*, but are seldom named as Dalit on stage; their oppression is coded in terms of poverty and landlessness rather than caste hierarchy as such, aligning with the communists' tendency to subsume caste into class in this period. These silences and homogenisations are historically significant because they show how, even in a self-consciously progressive movement, certain segments of the working class remained under-represented or were absorbed into a generic, ungendered, upper-caste-coded figure of the "worker."

Contemporary reception of IPTA's "progressive drama" reveals both enthusiasm and anxiety. Press accounts from Bengal and Bombay praised *Nabanna* for its stark realism and its departure from melodramatic convention, noting audiences moved to tears by the depiction of famine-stricken peasants and queues forming outside theatres for multiple shows. At the same time, colonial administrators and police saw in these performances a potential catalyst for unrest; surveillance reports and censorship files flagged IPTA units for spreading anti-government sentiment and allegedly inciting discontent among workers and peasants. Provincial governments sometimes refused permission for performances in sensitive industrial areas, or demanded cuts to scenes deemed too inflammatory, forcing IPTA troupes to negotiate the line between permissible humanitarian concern and prohibited political agitation. Where workers' memoirs and union reports are available, they suggest that IPTA events were memorable occasions in mill districts and village centres, providing rare moments when labouring people saw their conditions reflected on stage and were invited to respond collectively.

IPTA's relationship to communist politics shaped both its reach and its constraints. The association functioned as part of a wider progressive cultural movement linked to the Communist Party of India (CPI), even when it maintained formal organisational autonomy. Theatre squads participated in campaigns around famine relief, anti-fascist mobilisation and post-war strikes, performing at Kisan Sabha meetings, union gatherings and protest rallies, where plays and songs served as preludes or conclusions to political speeches. During the Telangana armed struggle and other militant peasant movements, IPTA units adapted scripts and songs to celebrate martyrs and dramatised encounters between landlords, police and insurgent peasants, embedding the worker and poor peasant within a narrative of revolutionary sacrifice. Shifts in the CPI's line especially after the crackdown of 1948, changes following independence and debates over parliamentary participation, reverberated in IPTA's repertoire, as some units moved towards more nationalist themes and others retained sharper class rhetoric, leading to uneven portrayals of the worker across regions and time. The post-independence period brought organisational crisis and fragmentation. With the formal end of colonial rule, the anti-imperialist horizon that had unified much of IPTA's work grew more ambiguous, and state patronage began to flow toward officially approved cultural institutions, marginalising radical groups. Internal disagreements over party alignment, artistic autonomy and the balance between propaganda and experimentation led to splits within IPTA, while intensified repression of communist movements in the late 1940s and early 1950s disrupted its networks in several provinces. Nonetheless, the movement left a durable legacy in the form of later people's theatre formations such as Jana Natya Manch (Janam), which explicitly positioned itself as reviving the lost radicalism of IPTA while adapting to new contexts of industrial restructuring, slum demolition and communal violence. Janam's short street plays in Delhi's working-class neighbourhoods, its collaboration with unions and its continued focus on labour issues testify to the long afterlife of IPTA's model of performance addressed to workers as political subjects. At the same time, the very need to "revive" this legacy and the vulnerability of cultural activists, exemplified by the murder of Safdar Hashmi in 1989, underline the limits IPTA confronted: the difficulty of sustaining

a working-class cultural politics against state power, capitalist restructuring and the fragmentations of class by caste, gender and region.

Historiography and theoretical framing

Scholarship on IPTA has steadily shifted it from the margins of theatre histories to the centre of debates on culture, class and politics in modern India. Early accounts, often written by former participants, tended to be celebratory retrospects that highlighted IPTA as a pioneering cultural arm of the Left, stressing its role in anti-imperialist mobilisation and the promotion of "progressive" drama and song. Later studies, particularly those focusing on Bengal, have been more critical and contextual, reading IPTA within the broader progressive cultural movement and asking how its aesthetics and organisational practices were shaped by communist strategies, regional literary traditions and urban middle-class leadership. Parallel work on modern Indian theatre places IPTA among other experiments in political performance, street theatre, workers' drama groups, post-1960s radical collectives, thus treating it as a progenitor but also as one moment in a longer, uneven history of people's theatre. Within this literature, several strands are especially relevant for a history of working-class representation. One line of enquiry examines the gendered dimensions of IPTA, foregrounding the participation and representation of women in labour-oriented performances and exploring how revolutionary theatre simultaneously opened and constrained spaces for female performers and women workers. Another focuses on regionally specific trajectories, such as IPTA in Bengal or Bombay, tracing how local labour regimes, linguistic cultures and political conjunctures produced distinct repertoires and audience formations even under a nominally national organisation. These studies underline that "IPTA" was never a fully homogeneous entity; rather, it was a loose federation whose representation of the working class varied across time and space, complicating any attempt to speak of a singular IPTA line on labour.

Debates about "people's culture" and proletarian art in Indian historiography provide a second axis of framing. Marxist historians from D. D. Kosambi onward insisted that any serious history of modern India must reckon with the emergence of a working class and with the cultural forms that accompanied industrialisation and capitalist penetration of the countryside. Within this tradition, IPTA is often cited as a concrete attempt to build a proletarian or at least popular culture, one that would displace elite, courtly and bourgeois aesthetics with forms rooted in folk traditions and labouring experience. At the same time, critics within and beyond the Left have questioned how far IPTA's "people's culture" genuinely emerged from workers themselves, and how far it remained a pedagogical project in which middle-class radicals used simplified forms to transmit Marxist and nationalist ideas to labouring audiences. The historiographical tension here mirrors classic debates in Marxist aesthetics: whether proletarian art should be created by workers, about them, or for them, and what happens when these positions diverge in practice. The broader field of Indian historiography, moving from nationalist to Marxist to subaltern and cultural turns, offers conceptual tools for reading IPTA's archive. Marxist histories of nationalism and class struggle, from R. P. Dutt to later historians, framed the national movement as a terrain where class forces contended, foregrounding exploitation, strikes and peasant uprisings as central to any narrative of modern India. Subaltern Studies, emerging in the 1980s, pushed this further by insisting on "history from below," seeking to recover autonomous peasant and labouring agency in movements often narrated through elite leaders and parties. Though Subaltern Studies rarely focused directly on theatre, its concern with how insurgent consciousness is articulated in subaltern idioms provides a suggestive parallel to IPTA's attempt to stage peasant and worker voices in songs, dialogues and embodied performance. Cultural history,

in turn, has emphasised how performances, symbols and everyday practices are integral to the making of political identities, offering a vocabulary, cultural hegemony, counter-publics, performativity, that helps interpret IPTA's labour representations as more than "mere propaganda."

Historically, IPTA represented the working class not as a static social category but as the moving centre of a political project forged in specific conjunctures of war, famine, anti-colonial upheaval and early postcolonial uncertainty. In the 1940s, famine dramas like *Nabanna*, strike plays in mill districts, and agit-prop songs in peasant conferences translated crises of subsistence and employment into narratives of collective struggle, recasting workers and poor peasants as protagonists rather than background figures in the story of the nation. As the association's activities expanded across regions, its touring squads, factory-gate performances and collaborations with unions and Kisan Sabhas helped constitute a working-class public sphere in which labouring people could see their conditions mirrored and their grievances voiced in a semi-formal, semi-festive setting. Within this sphere, representation was not a neutral reflection but a practice that sought to bind audiences into an emergent class community, aligning their sense of self with broader projects of anti-imperialist and socialist transformation.

At the same time, the distance between real working-class experience and its staged image remained significant and historically revealing. IPTA's paradigmatic worker tended to be an industrial, male figure whose class position eclipsed caste and whose family life was often subordinated to scenes of public struggle, leaving women workers, Dalit labourers and informal-sector labour only partially visible or symbolically absorbed into a generic "people." The scripts and songs, crafted largely by educated, urban intellectuals, condensed complex labour regimes into emblematic scenes of hunger, eviction or police repression, sometimes at the cost of the messy, everyday negotiations that also shape working-class life. These gaps do not invalidate IPTA's project; rather, they indicate how representation is itself a terrain of class and cultural power, where who speaks for workers and which aspects of their experience are foregrounded becomes a matter of political choice and constraint. Despite these limits, IPTA's contribution to creating a working-class public sphere in India is substantial. By bringing performance into mill lines, bastis and village squares, it carved out spaces where labouring people could gather not only as economic actors but as audiences interpellated as citizens, comrades and historical agents. The affective charge of these gatherings, the shared laughter at landlords' humiliation, the collective silence before scenes of death, the rhythmic chanting of slogans, helped forge bonds that complemented, and sometimes exceeded, those formed in union meetings or party branches. The afterlives of IPTA in groups like Jana Natya Manch, which continued to address workers and the urban poor with short street plays on wages, housing and repression, underscore how this model of worker-oriented performance became a durable form of political practice, even as contexts and idioms changed.

Taken together, the findings of this study speak to wider questions of culture, class and politics in Indian history. They suggest that working-class consciousness in modern India cannot be fully understood through strikes, laws and party resolutions alone; it must also be traced through the songs people sang at demonstrations, the scenes they watched under temporary floodlights and the stories through which they imagined their place in the nation. IPTA stands at a crucial junction of these processes: a movement in which cultural representation was not an adjunct but a central arena of labour politics, where the struggle over wages and land met the struggle over images, narratives and voices. By reconstructing how IPTA represented the working class and how that representation both enabled and constrained "history from below" the paper argues for integrating cultural production more firmly into the historiography of labour and nationalism in India, recognising theatre and song as sites where history was not only told but actively made. In

sum, by following IPTA from its organisational proclamations through its staged images of famine and strike, its encounters with censorship and state repression, and its subsequent remembrance in theatre histories and radical practice, the paper has sought to show that working-class representation was not an ornamental supplement to labour politics in mid-twentieth-century India. It was one of the arenas in which class identities were forged, solidarities rehearsed and political horizons narrowed or expanded. To recognise IPTA's plays and songs as such is to place cultural production at the heart of labour and nationalist historiography, and to acknowledge that the making of the Indian working class was as much a matter of stories and stages as of factories and fields.

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