RETHINKING CATEGORIES
OF THEATRE AND
PERFORMANCE

Archive, scholarship, and practices
(a post-colonial Indian perspective)

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The objective to set up archives dedicated to collecting, collating, and researching performance practices in post-independence India, in order to rewrite colonial histories with a vision for the future, was a project initiated by the new state, then subsequently forgotten. However, this is an apt entry point to open up critical debates about how the post-colonial euphoria urged new scholarship and how, at the core of this, theatre and performance practices would be redefined. In tracing the history and politics of discourses around performativity and theatricality in the United States and Europe, Janelle Reinelt draws attention to the fact that the applications of the terms theatre and performance resonate with “local struggles” and enable “a challenge to these discourses in light of an increasingly urgent imperative to think and resituate performance theory in relation to our contemporary transnational situation” (2002, 201). She argues that theatre and performance are not mere linguistic distinctions but are rooted in different conceptual foundations with political implications. In post-colonial contexts, particularly in India, debates have focused on the dichotomy of theatre as a colonial import along with a wide range of heterogeneous local practices referred to as performance. Reviving, recovering, and archiving performances was therefore a much-anticipated and pedagogic post-colonial project of rewriting histories. As has become apparent, this was not merely in the realm of idealism, but ultimately had long-term implications for the discipline of theatre and performance studies in the Indian as well as other post-colonial contexts. Thus, in view of the colonial experience and its aftermath, the binary of theatre and performance collapsed into reductive categories layered with different meanings than the ones prevalent in Western academies. This affected the course of the discipline in India and provoked crucial debates around secularism vis-à-vis communitarianism. Significant in this context, I argue, was an intervention in the original binary perspectives, which often extended or changed meanings.

The idea behind landmark debates is the hypothesis that while theatre histories can be researched and written, the study of performance practices cannot follow the critical historical method that is widely practised in the discipline. Instead, ethnography was seen as the means to research, archive, and write on performance practices. Meanwhile, theatre, which continued
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to be produced in the post-colonial period, was harshly critiqued by academics for its colonial orientation and the naïveté of its political idealism, and artists were left to write their own histories in the autobiographical mode (Bharucha 1983).

This chapter unravels a representative history of archiving, writing, and scholarship about theatre and performance in view of the dichotomies and binary constructions that ran parallel to the historicisation of practices and institutions in the post-colonial context. These debates were not held in isolation and cannot be contained exclusively within theatre and performance histories or writings, but exist parallel to other developments in academic discourses, particularly post-colonial histories’ references to cultural elitism and hegemony. The debates reveal a complex intertwining of cultural-performance projects of the nation-state along with individuals’ alliances, affinities, complicity, and hostilities. There are repercussions in the present: in particular, the growing right-wing populism that is connected to these histories and debates.

Any attempt to chronologically frame the developments — either in archiving or classification as theatre or performance — starting from the time of independence is deliberately avoided in this chapter. Instead, I question the state archival project that tries to simplistically draw a linear history from the pre-colonial to colonial to post-colonial times. However, I broadly frame the examples within the decades of the 1950s and 1960s and offer a more diachronic or synecdochic engagement with historical time (Schneider 2011, 102). As a contrast to the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) and other state projects, I also refer to the revival of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in the post-independent phase and its engagement with people’s or folk art. The aim is to offer a critical historiography of these landmark decisions that affected performance and theatre practices and their study in post-independent India.

Performance archives

The SNA was one of the three institutions dedicated to the performing arts set up in 1952 by the Indian state; together they mapped out the distinctions between literature (Sahitya Akademi), fine arts (Lalit Kala Akademi), and performing arts (SNA). On the occasion of its inauguration, Maulana Kalam Azad, the education minister, explicitly laid out its principle objectives as

to promote research in the fields of Indian dance, drama and music for this purpose to establish a library and museum, to encourage the exchange of ideas and enrichment techniques, [and] to promote cultural exchange in the fields of dance, drama and music with other countries.

Sangeet Natak 1953–58, 2

The museum component and documentation projects would create the basis of what we now call the archive.

Although dedicated to the performing arts, the SNA left the reference to theatre anomalous. The president of India, Zakir Hussain, speaking at the convocation of the National School of Drama (an institution under the SNA in its initial stages), explained:

Theatre has its beginnings in the grass roots of civilization. In the pulsating beat of a drum around a fire, at a tribal ritual, in the weird chant of the witch doctor in his fantastic garb and mask; in the relations between myths and epics down the ages.

Sangeet Natak 1965, 31
This indicates promotion of Indian traditional, Indigenous, or folk art, with the archive as an integral aspect of its preservation. Rustom Bharucha regards the institutionalisation of the archive as “confrontational” in its origin. He explains that

the Akademis were instituted in India in the mid-50s [and] viewed as “cultural organisations” … sufficiently elevated to designate the high ideals of an emerging nation that could be proud of national institutions that could match the reputation of long-standing Academies of art and language, particularly in England and France.

1992, 1668

The history of the SNA is synonymous with complex and mammoth projects of the reconstruction of classical dance and traditional forms that, in most cases, were non-existent during the colonial era but that were subsequently staged as the new culture of India. The archive, an offshoot promoting research, supplemented reconstruction and revivialist projects by focusing on Indigenous popular and folk performance cultures. The nomenclature used in the official documents explicitly refers to “folk,” and this created a clear priority for the genre of performance to be positioned by the archive against theatre. Samik Bandopadhyay critiques such projects for being devoid of any systematic reassessment: “the Akademi did not have the patience to chart out the national scene in the performing arts at so many levels, in so many modes, with such a range of regional cultural divergences — urban, rural, rururban, classical, traditional, folk and experimental” (rururban acknowledges how small towns retained features of the rural) (1997, 422). Archivists were carefully selected, funded, and entrusted with the task of reviving and archiving the hitherto neglected and marginalised folk and popular forms, but this is complicated by two factors: folk forms continued to evolve outside archival spaces, and such protection and preservation was not free of the state’s ideological impositions.

The holdings comprise audio recordings of music “recorded under [a] controlled environment” (Kothari 1966, 10), a number of musical instruments to be exhibited in museums,1 and other material remains of performance such as masks, ornaments, puppets, costumes, and photographs.2 We can assume, therefore, that the efforts to create an exclusive archive of performance practices included the intent to write about performance. Such articles appeared subsequently in the Akademi’s journal (Sangeet Natak, founded 1968); they focus on the problems of preservation and conclude with recommendations for the archive or other institutions to study these genres. The initial resources are from two folk genres of West Bengal (the chhau and the yatra) and a larger range of folk performance from Rajasthan. These were eulogised as representative of authentic people’s performance practices, yet they fit comfortably within the state’s agenda for the SNA. Theatre dialectically remained at the core of these reformulations, against which the need to revive and reinstate lost Indigenous folk forms was instituted as a historical necessity and the nation’s priority.

What is significant in terms of these reformulations is that, unlike the reconstruction projects where defunct practices were linked to ancient texts or sculptures, often arbitrarily, these were living forms that could be cited to embody a continuous history from pre-colonial to post-colonial times, indestructible by violence inflicted on local communities by colonialism. This strategy showed the theatre culture (cited as a colonial import because of its historical connections) at a disadvantage in terms of continuity and reach, particularly given its urban locations and middle-class audience. By highlighting the folk, the archival project contained similar contradictions to the older anthropological, ethnographic, or folklore documentation, particularly when the first initiative emerged to claim a new performance category.
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In a series of articles, the archivists presented some of the debates while defining the scope of the archive and its priorities, which are otherwise difficult to discern. In the first article (published in the third volume of the Akademi’s journal), Komal Kothari (1929–2004) wrote on “Problems of Preservation in Folklore Studies,” and a discussion forum on his paper appeared in the subsequent volume (Kothari 1966). The other archivist, Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1909–84), who is one of the discussants in the forum on Kothari’s paper, wrote articles on chhau and gambhira (focusing on masks) and yatra of Bengal (1968, 1969). The career trajectories of these two pioneer archivists are important and reveal the cultural mediators whom the new state would regard as its scholar-archivists (the term historian is not applicable in their contexts). Both pursued independent careers as researchers and scholars invested in the forms they collated and wrote about for the archive. Engagement with the archive was on a voluntary and part-time basis.

At the time of writing the article, Kothari had resigned from his previous post as secretary of Rajasthan’s Sangeet Natak, where he had worked for six years. Continuing his commitment to document and archive the folk arts of Rajasthan, and to be associated with the state archives and the funding offered by the SNA, allowed him to engage with the archive while pursuing his own personal interest in studying and supporting folk arts. Kothari subsequently made a documentary and collected musical instruments, photographs, and recorded music of the art forms in a private capacity. Thus, although as an independent scholar who was yet heavily subsidised by the state, he worked in close collaboration with Vijayadan Detha; built his own personal archives; founded a society for the study, preservation, and dissemination of folk arts in Bourunda; published a journal; and wrote numerous volumes on the folk arts. He could be regarded as a passionate amateur, a self-fashioned folklorist and ethnographer. In the ensuing debates he figures as a repository of oral histories of Rajasthan, the region he continued to represent.

Bhattacharya was a Sanskrit and Bengali literary scholar who held the Tagore Professorship at Viswabharati University while he collected material for the SNA archive and wrote about his speciality. Earlier, he had worked with the Anthropological Survey of India and the colonial anthropologist Verrier Elwin (Bhattacharya 1968). Thus, he was a scholar who moved directly from colonial institutions into a post-colonial one, proficient in the anthropological approach to performance (i.e. as a static genre without history and presumed not to evolve over time).

If the resources of the archive were determined by the background, training, and interests of the two intellectual-archivists, they are also reflected in the writings on the forms prioritised for collecting. Kothari argues for folklore to be included as a discipline in educational institutions, which would then help with research and draw much-needed middle-class attention to the forms and assist with their dissemination and preservation. However, he clearly states that it is not enough to do a social and literary analysis of the performance texts: they must be located in local customs, ceremonies, fairs, and festivals. He dwells on the methods of transcription, translation, and linguistics to understand the performances’ manifestations. Like a number of folklorists, he makes strong recommendations in a didactic tone on the prospects of extinction if forms are not preserved, on modes of dissemination, and on the need for more funding. In sum, Kothari recommended a sociological approach to the study of cultures and called for the locating of performance practices within local traditions and communities (Kothari 1966). The debates and controversies would surface around some common issues in the SNA’s collection and archivists’ writings. Both Kothari and Bhattacharya would highlight the organic link between folk and high literary cultures in reference to Sanskrit literature. Kothari further saw a racial commonality among the popular traditions in northern India and his own area of interest, the folk arts of Rajasthan (Kothari 1966, 5; Bhattacharya 1969, 29).
Bhattacharya’s engagement with the *yatra* and *chhau*, like genre studies, often draws on a lineage from mythical times to the present without acknowledging changes in the evolving forms. Drawing on others’ ethnographic research, he links *yatra* and *chhau* to rituals around the harvest festival, and in the process focuses on the predominance of the epics and other ancient Hindu texts as the core content. Hence, the link with Hindu mythologies is what distinguishes these forms in his partial analysis. Even when discussing contemporaneous *yatra* practices, which were far more heterogeneous, he emphasises the mythological narratives and illustrates this connection with photographs. To describe a form as existing from time immemorial to the present — without a historicist frame — is to portray the past and present practices as nearly synonymous, with only slight variations. He offers a critique of how the authenticity of the forms had been corrupted: the Islamic and the colonial periods did violence to them, but subsequently they are seen to reassert Hindu identities through adherence to gods and epic heroes that supposedly lie at the core of these performance practices. Such descriptive accounts barely need to construct a historical timeline or attempt a rough historical perspective. There are no dates, performances, or landmark events in such accounts. At most there are some interesting components of the material remains of a performance culture, such as masks used in *chhau* and, as an alternative point of reference, the *gambhira* song tradition (Bhattacharya 1968, 1969).

By the mid-1960s, the SNA archival project had lapsed, although some isolated initiatives regarding traditional forms in Orissa and Assam were undertaken. The resources of the first phase continued to generate critical debates in the field; even after other archives such as the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Performing Arts arose in 1985, the orientation and the rhetoric around the need to preserve folk and traditional arts did not change.

The descriptions and narrative in the articles supplement the archive, but what often goes unnoticed is the uncritical celebration of performance practices whose choice is determined by an unspoken understanding that they must be positioned in opposition to what the urban, middle-class theatre performed on proscenium stages. The forms celebrated as performance are labelled folk entertainment, folk dance, folk arts, folk music, popular drama, or ritual dance, emphasising closeness to socio-religious milieus of local populations. This binary of theatre and performance in the post-colonial context would permeate later academic writing in a more critical mode.

**Critical citation of state institutions**

Rustom Bharucha and other post-colonial scholars critique the Akademi’s efforts to reconceptualise performance. Reading the achievements and failures of the Akademi within a broader agenda of “pursuing Nehruvian rhetoric and affinities, and the engagement with the popular,” Bharucha writes: “while this makes for an ordered, and occasionally eloquent discourse, with high sounding humanist sentiments, it also affirms an ‘integral’ view of Indian culture which is illusory” (1992, 1668). This critique of the Akademi, implying a tendency towards homogenisation, was particularly apropos of the archive and history-writing projects.

In the same essay, Bharucha critiques the state’s agenda for being framed within pseudo-secularism (1992, 1668). I argue, in contrast, that the archivists made no pretence of using secular criteria in their choice of accessioning and, more importantly, in their writing about it. Quite the opposite: they accentuate and fetishise the Hindu ritual aspects and collapse rituals of faith and performance into one socio-cultural category. This begs the question of whether Bharucha encourages discarding the pretensions of pseudo-secularism, or secularism itself, to highlight what he would later pose as the “body of evidence in relation to the lives and Indigenous
knowledge systems of traditional communities in Rajasthan, against which theoretical con-
structs of ‘community’ in the communitarian/secularist debate can be measured” (2003, 3).
While researching and writing on Kothari, Bharucha unconditionally adopts the perspective
that Kothari propagates sacred life practices. Ultimately Bharucha, as well as many others whose
critique is of the state’s clumsy and futile efforts at homogenising, urges refocusing on cultures
of communities where social and religious lives are implicated and symbiotically co-dependent.
According to Bharucha, the performances to be studied with a more scholarly focus were those
seen as manifesting in socio-religious cultural milieus: in this instance, those of Rajasthan, with
Kothari being the mediator, informant, and archival gatekeeper.

I read this essay as a reprise of the earlier debates, but one that is more influential in terms of
the academy and the assertion of post-colonial scholarship in the 1990s and first decade of the
twenty-first century. Bharucha’s position as a post-colonial performance studies scholar echoes
post-colonial historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty. Whereas Bharucha sees the “pseudo secu-
larism” of the state’s projects in the course of understanding the deeply socio-religious cultural
manifestation, Chakrabarty embraces the non-secular aspects to celebrate the religious com-
ponents in forms associated with rituals and worship. Chakrabarty’s classic work Provincializing
Europe, for example, discusses “the ex-colonial subject disrupting the notion of historicism” by
“anachronism,” which brings “Gods and spirits into a life world” positioned against the “secular
and homogenous time of histories, contradicting the universals and secular visions of humans”
(2000, 4). Thus, Chakrabarty is in line with Bharucha’s advocacy of communitarian methods to
study the history of cultural performances.

Both Bharucha and Chakrabarty are aware of the debates where secularists and the nar-
ators of community (with their anti-modernist agendas) are pitched against each other in heated
arguments, but they are reluctant to locate themselves directly in either camp. Bharucha, for
example, refuses to see himself as either a scholar who is writing the narrative of the community
or a “secularist.” He writes:

This is not the place to substantiate the tired polarities of this debate, but it doesn’t
help that the upholders of “community” continue to be steeped in highly secular-
ized, cosmopolitan, globalized locations, whose benefits of modernity — notably, the
conceptual apparatus to critique it — are rarely acknowledged. Nor is it particularly
convincing that communitarian theorists should flaunt the pluralist principles of tradi-
tional belief-systems, without subjecting the patriarchy of the communities to critical
scrutiny. Conversely the disdain of the diehard secularists for any mode of knowledge
that cannot be rationalized within the paradigms of an enlightened modernity contin-
ues to suffer from blind spots.

Bharucha is thus critical of theorists who celebrate communitarian practices without adequate
critique, and he advises caution in such academic pursuits yet adopts the community as the
field of his subsequent studies. He makes a significant shift in his own focus and engagement
from his earlier interest in theatre practices to a more eclectic perspective, an area that locates
performance in its socio-cultural milieu (and which brings back the archivist-scholar Kothari).
Kothari is seen, by Bharucha and others, as embodying the community whose work he has col-
clected and studied. In a 2003 monograph, Rajasthan: An Oral History, Conversations with Komal
Kothari, Bharucha only adds occasional critical notes amid a free-flowing “conversation” with
his interlocutor. The outcome is cogent and framed in a complex ethnographical dialogue, with
Kothari’s voice and archive representing Bharucha’s fieldwork. I am interested in Bharucha’s
role as the scholar who records the narration of the archivist once assigned by the state to create the foundational resources of its archives; this reveals Kothari’s deep commitment to the community and its socio-religious cultural practices, including performative manifestations. After his initial critique of inter-culturalism and the works of Edward Gordon Craig, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Richard Schechner, and Peter Brook, which drew widespread attention in Western academia, Bharucha came back to India to focus on practices he regarded as a concern of the “contextual realities permeating the Indian theatre, and its dynamic relationships with numerous communities” (1990, 5). Through his interest in Kothari, he sets this discourse into an academic frame and initiates its inclusion into the domain of post-colonial performance studies along with a number of his other works of the period (1990, 2001).

This perception of theatre and performance as cultural practices pre-empts inclusive histories that could challenge binaries of theatre and performance rather than enforcing them. I use Bharucha as the most famous and eloquent example in a field of intellectual and academic discourse focused on what Bharucha himself pointed out as the communitarian versus secularist debates that became a foundation of the nascent discipline of theatre and performance studies in India (and beyond) (Bharucha 1990, 2001; Gargi 1966; Yarrow 2001; and Richmond, Swann, and Zarrilli 2007).

Oral histories and methods of understanding performances

It is useful to dwell on Bharucha’s work on Kothari to connect the earlier state projects with later academic writing where Kothari emerges as “embodying this history through his almost ceaseless capacity to talk.” Bharucha states in Rajasthan: An Oral History, Conversations with Komal Kothari that he resisted the demands of authorship by saying that “I am not writing this book, I’m listening to it.” Although he confesses that this was a bit disingenuous, “there is listening-in-writing and a writing in listening,” which are the interstices the book hoped to reveal (2003, 2).

Bharucha lays out the focus in chapter headings that thematise his perspective of the oral narratives: land, water, oral epics, women’s songs, professional caste musicians, and frameworks such as local and global. The problems resurface particularly in the two chapters “Folk Gods and Goddesses” and “Sati,” bringing the anomalies of Bharucha’s own cited position into question (2003, 118–55). In the chapter “Folk Gods and Goddesses,” Kothari (as the resource person) identifies and conceptualises what is meant by “folk gods and goddesses,” and Bharucha (as the listener) asks the vital question “what makes them folk?” (118). This question is not supposed to be answered but underlines the organic relation between religion and folk performance practices to challenge what is supposedly a heuristic relationship between culture and society. Kothari and Bharucha emphasise that if culture is a realised signifying system then it is rooted into larger structures such as belief systems, namely the dominant religio-social hegemonic structures at the roots of Rajasthani society; these are cultural manifestations that reflect rather than disturb a harmonious cogent narrative. Kothari lays out stories and anecdotes of a large corpus of local gods and goddesses who intervene and supposedly resolve problems of everyday life (unlike the great gods of the Hindu pantheon). The narrative of the local gods follows the stories of their origin and deification, spread, and popularity among the local population. Deification leads to small innocuous shrines being consecrated. As a region with feudal socio-cultural customs and royal families (small chieftains) ruling over their subjects, Rajasthan is also marked by a strong focus on kin worship and consecrating death rituals. Death rituals and the immolation of women (sati) conclude the chapter, along with a problematic footnote about how, for Kothari, these are sentiments rooted in a value system.
Bharucha admits “I cannot deny that it is hard to listen to stories around sati with the actual practice of widow immolation in contemporary times and the violence involved” (2003, 142). The problematic part is in the next sentence, where Bharucha comes back in the non-critical vein that encases these oral histories:

> Without valorizing this non-modern belief system as providing the foundations for an “authentic” Indian [Hindu] identity against “modernity, westernisation and materialism,” it would be useful to listen to more of these stories if only to complicate the historical evidence surrounding sati today.

2003, 142

This references a 1987 event in the Deorala village of Rajasthan, where an eighteen-year-old bride, Roop Kanwar, was immolated at her husband’s funeral pyre, evoking public outcry. The central government subsequently passed the Commission of Sati Prevention Act to prohibit such practices at the local level, but tensions were not resolved.

The positions and perspectives are not much different from Kothari’s original work, organised and written as a study of folklore, which Bharucha tends to adopt at face value with only occasional criticism. The social world dominated by religious customs is accepted as the only source of cultural practices of the people. These two chapters highlight the paradox where the day-to-day social life and inherent performance manifestations are described with only minor references to performance practices such as songs, music, dance, or theatrical renditions, which is Bharucha’s real forte as a performance scholar.

Bharucha is content with oral history being an ethnographical account of the folk cultures of Rajasthan, and he records it as such. A more historicising impulse echoing Bharucha’s perspective comes about when Chakrabarty argues that such cultural practices successfully challenge the notion “that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end ‘social facts,’ that the social exists prior to them” (2000, 16). As a historian, he not only complicates the social but asserts that the social, in the sense of religious practices, exists prior to any cultural choices, and, further, that cultural habits reflect religious beliefs as dominant. The idea that performance can be reflective but also the catalyst for change and challenging norms is not considered. Here, performance culture is entirely reflective of the socio-religious practice, an overwhelming entity that dictates all cultural practices.

**Theatre and performance binaries and subjectivities**

It is apparent that the motives behind the archival and research projects of the early post-colonial state, however insipid, did not die out but continued as an important facet of Indian cultural writing. Scholarship in this vein was not devoid of anomalies on what constitutes Indian performance practices; the problem was also rooted in constructing the theatre-performance binaries and what I argue is a lacuna in history-writing. The practices archived, described, and analysed as Indian performance were not incorporated into a historical purview that took the colonial period into account. Nor was one of the important performance practices against which these were being set up as a binary — the theatre — even included as a critical category. Even so, Bharucha writes “if there is a holding principle in this narrative, I would say that it comes from my discipline in theatre, which I continue to regard as a laboratory of the world,” and it is the immediacies of theatre that guide his insights about the phenomenon he addresses (2001, 21). Methodological perspectives were bound to shift, and therefore when the nascent discipline(s)
of theatre and performance studies charted a course no attempt was made to incorporate a critical history of genealogical formations to contextualise perspectives.

In India, theatre did not remain a merely colonial cultural import, isolated and alienated even in its urban locations from a mass Indian audience. Rather, a number of the forms that the archive accessioned, such as the *yatra*, were in many ways hybrid theatrical forms that worked in the peripheries of urban theatre culture, borrowing features, content, and the star system from the theatre, but also rooted in rural milieus. The genre divisions are confusing and stem from the fact that archived resources are actually objects such as masks, costumes, musical instruments, or puppets, disambiguated from the performance practices, tending to highlight differences rather than similarities across forms. I advocate for the need to understand the multiple fields of cultural practice whose historicisation is critical to disturb the ethnographic and anthropological perspective that came from colonial educational institutions, was valorised in the state archives, and was then extended (with critique, but nevertheless prioritised) in academic discourses. This not only pertains to archiving of performance practices but also, I argue, to theatre histories written in the linear mode that would benefit from dialogue across the methodological paradigms (Rangacharya 1971; Das Gupta 2002; Gupta 2018). There is a need to engage the much-advocated heterogeneity of theatre and performance genres’ complex network of interactions and antagonisms within historical perspectives. The problems are implicated in the subjective positions of the archivists, scholars, and their projects.

The two representative archivists, Kothari and Bhattacharya, came from older disciplines, such as anthropology, which were then modified to folklore studies without any apparent critical reflexivity. Their interest in performance genres came from nostalgic and pedagogic agendas, but also from their being middle-class intelligentsia, educated during colonial times, with social and cultural distance from the performances they sought out. They were outsiders to the social and cultural milieus to which these performances were attributed, and the post-colonial state opened up the scope for them to archive and write on performance forms within its hegemonic and nation-building projects. Neither the focus on performance genres located in rural milieus nor a celebratory tone and style of writing were limited to the performance revivalist projects of the 1950s state, for they crystallised during Indira Gandhi’s premiership (1966–77) as part of her new populist policies, which redefined people on the basis of their sense of belonging either to peasants (true India) or to Hinduism (original India). Christophe Jaffrelot and Louise Tillin reference Antonio Gramsci when they write that the “national popular dimension” entails a “mythical hegemony within democratic societies” to “construct a popular identity out of a plurality of democratic demands” wherein the category of the people is often reduced to “empty signifiers” (2017, 233). The archival projects are then cast as an apt cultural counterpart of the larger perception and reformulations of the nominal notion of “the people.”

Calling the people “empty signifiers” is a strong critique of state cultural policies, yet it is applicable to the Akademi archive, where the material remains of cultural practices were accessioned into state institutions. It is also important to acknowledge the reason behind prioritising “the people” and the massive engagement with what could be a people’s culture. Post-independence India, like a number of other post-colonial nations, emerged from a robust and energetic anti-colonial nationalism that brought various groups and ideological affinities together. The close collaboration in cultural activities between the cultural wing of the Communist Party, the IPTA, and the Congress Party cultural activists in the first phase of the IPTA (1943–46) is a reflection of this inclusive endeavour to accommodate different sections of the population through thematising the peasants’ plight. During this period, the IPTA created plays and performances depicting the people’s travails during the famine and partition of India. There were also massive programmes like the Surama Valley projects that tried to create peasant
units and mobilise peasants and tea-garden workers through songs and performative forms (Bhattacharya 1989). Fissures emerged in the post-independence phase, and one of the reasons that theatre was ignored in the state’s hegemonic projects was theatre-makers’ growing antagonism towards the state: they challenged the valorisation of the new nation for its exclusive, elitist orientation and opportunistic populism that reduced the people to “empty-signifiers.” By the 1960s, the theatre had assumed a role in the public domain by trying to reach out to the people and a mass audience that would embrace its practices. The political theatre of the 1960s and 1970s increasingly challenged the growing exclusivity of Indian democratic practices and the systematic deprioritisation of issues of social citizenship based on an equitable distribution of material wealth. The debates around what is people’s culture took on strong political overtones, with the theatre being censored by the state. Both the state and the cultural left claimed engagement with the people through their polarised ideological positions.

Utpal Dutt, one of the major playwright-directors of the first phase of political theatre in post-independent India, who had also been a member of the IPTA, entered the debate declaring a new role for the people as audiences, writing:

Since in all these contradictions the audience is the constant factor, it follows that the size and cultural level of the audience must also play a part in the resolution of the contradictions. The smaller the audience, the less it is a representative of society and its classes and less is its power to influence and catalyse the contradictions on the stage. … Therefore, those who believe in an elitist theatre are actually cutting themselves off from the most important aspect of theatrical dialectics — from their only link with society.

The notion of the people was equally critical for the theatre and for performances that were valorised as people’s performance practices. Chakrabarty (quoting Homi Bhabha) draws a distinction between the domain of the “pedagogic” (where I place the state enterprises) and the “performative” (theatre-performance cultural experiments). Chakrabarty reads the performative and the carnivalesque in the domain of political mobilisation — such as rebellion and protest marches as well as democratic practices of the universal adult franchise (Chakrabarty 2000, 10) — but I would add to this the performative manifestation of political theatre. When the theatre ultimately found its way into the state archive, the “performative” impulse may have diminished or lost its fire.

Historicising theatre and performance practices and complicating binaries

The ban on the Communist Party of India in 1947 caused a hiatus for the IPTA, the cultural wing of the party. When the IPTA was revived in 1951, it had a new political perspective, antagonistic towards the state and the Congress Party. The IPTA borrowed the term “people’s theatre” from Romain Rolland’s famous essay “Le Théâtre du peuple” (1903). Thus, the left’s cultural organisation took oppositional positions vis-à-vis the new state. By 1956, the contrast between objectives, aims, and practices for the two projects was clear, and the collaborative spirit between a wide range of artists, which characterised the pre-independent phase of the IPTA, was all but over. The state’s Drama Seminar of 1956 saw a number of artists earlier associated with the IPTA professing loyalty to the state and taking over key positions in the newly founded state institutions.
Nevertheless, the IPTA evinces a plethora of practices in contrast to the state’s pedagogical vision. Various genres of performances were placed beside each other. Partha Chatterjee describes it as follows:

However there is another form of activist theatre that has tried to open up spaces outside both the performance-capitalist sector and the state sector by associating itself with an ongoing political or social movement. The trail was blazed in the 1940s by the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) which operated closely with the Communist Party and performed at events organized by trade[s] unions and peasant organizations. Forced to function with limited funds and makeshift stages and seeking to communicate a specific political message to audiences that were not necessarily attuned to the spectatorial practices of modern theatre, IPTA branches in different parts of the country made many bold innovations in stagecraft, narrative and acting styles and social content. … Despite its location outside the sphere of commercial entertainment, IPTA, because of its political agenda, had to be mindful of its audience. As a result, it had to wed its modernist aesthetic with dramatic and narrative forms that were more familiar to its working-class and rural audiences.

The IPTA’s activity subsequent to its All India Conference held in Bombay on 14 May 1951, summarised in the IPTA journal *Unity* in July 1954, maps out priorities such as a “genuine space of multiple performances” without any centre or margins (Sen 1954, 14). These cultural manifestations, including various folk practices, forms, and theatres, were mobilised around “world peace” in the aftermath of World War II, anti-colonial wars, and internationalism, but also within a more antagonistic relationship with the state and the nation’s projects. A detailed study of the IPTA performances and their characteristic carnivalesque cultural congregations, sustained by a regional and local network, suggests an effort to nurture local performers and performance genres, loosely connected by a political sensibility ranging from leftist demands for social justice and social citizenship to issues emerging in the aftermath of World War II, when the Cold War and subversion of the nation were countered by robust anti-colonial multinationalism and anti-imperialist offensives. A number of the forms adapted were allowed to express views and opinions on local, national, and international issues by reworking idioms and vocabulary in an innovative and experimental way.

The war maniacs were becoming more menacing and the issue of peace was getting an emergent one. The mass struggle took a gigantic shape in different Provinces, the demand for good, healthy dramas and songs was increasing every day, cultural units were springing up in numbers, not only in urban areas but also in rural and working class areas, demanding a lead from the IPTA.

In this crucial second phase of the IPTA, activities were mobilised with local practitioners and performance representations to cover almost eighteen regions of India and forty separate performance forms. These included songs, dramatic theatre, dance, shadow plays, ballets, folk dances, *saint lores,* tamashas, yatras, and *gambhiras* responding to the critical issues of the times. The spaces opened up physically and symbolically to artistic and ethnic heterogeneity, an integral aspect of pluralistic cultural practices in the Indian context.
For brevity’s sake, I confine illustrations to IPTA’s experiments with the *yatra* and two performances presented in the *yatra* form: *Samghat* (conflict) and *Rahumukta* (free of Saturn). According to performance reviews published in *Unity*, the two *yatra* forms were performed by an IPTA unit on an open-air arena stage. In its efforts to democratise culture, the IPTA resorted to the time-tested ploys of the popular theatrical techniques of the *yatra*: melodrama, high-pitched acting with gestures, abundant use of music, and bold intervention in the structure by incorporating a political message (Ghosh 1954, 72–5).

The IPTA intervention in forms like the *yatra* was followed and emulated by a number of experiments in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly by playwrights and actors who wanted to participate in popular and commercial theatre forms. Actors and directors, playwrights including Shombhu Bag and Brajendra Kumar De, and theatre personalities such as Utpal Dutt engaged with the *yatra* for a prolonged span of time to propagate what they regarded as a people’s theatre, exploring opportunities of mass contact with audiences to take up positions antagonistic to the nation and state’s elitist policies. Dutt, in his autobiographical work, writes:

My long association as writer and director with *yatra* players has exploded many beliefs I had once held passionately with regard to form. … All that violence and rage and unashamed dramatic devices were aimed at keeping the vast audience’s attention riveted to the play, to the content. Form here is reduced to an elemental power, a savage tribal power, a magical *danse macabre* where the audience and players become one, a condition hardly to be met in the city theatres. Since content is the most important element of our plays, the *yatra* form can be our most important form precisely because it has been tested and enriched by the dialectics of audience reaction, it has destroyed the boredom of vast mass audiences unreachable today except by use of the public address system.

2009, 172

By implication, Chakrabarty’s jute mill worker, who prays to his machines (2000, 77), or Kothari and Bharucha’s labourer—who prays at the temple at the site of the factory to stop production (in honour of the spirit of a worker who died) because his “religion” was more real than his ideology (Bharucha 2003, 90)—were also the audience of the IPTA and other progressive organisations’ performances of *yatras* for over a decade in rural areas and the industrial belt of West Bengal.10 The worker who “produced certain points of friction with the teleologies of ‘capital’” (Chakrabarty 2000, 90) also sang songs of protest, identified with the actor over the agonies of life, and went to see plays about revolutions. Dutt writes about one of these transformative moments of theatre:

I have watched the response of the proletarian audiences to these patriotic battles of the past. In the villages, the working masses often burst into slogans against their present-day enemy—as they watch their ancestors sing their way to the gallows.

2009, 73

These are significant theatrical and cultural movements in the history of post-colonial theatre, and while we can problematise historical practices in conjunction with the ethnography, we must not overlook the former. For the most part, political theatre in India is linked to the IPTA, with a number of theatre directors and actors starting their cultural activism and theatre-performance practices there.

The reason I discuss the IPTA practices and others of the subsequent period in this context is that at the intersection of theatre and performance practices histories open up: there is scope
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to not only write more inclusive histories but also reflect critically on the reasons why dichoto-
mous binary categories were constructed and thought necessary, eulogising some practices at
the cost of others. Recognising this allows one to question writings on theatre or performance
and to understand how discursive debates are dictated by choices and illustrations that are them-

In this context it is important to return to Bharucha’s critique of the IPTA on methodologi-
cal and discursive grounds, although it is difficult to distinguish whether he critiques the histori-
cal interpretations or the performance practices in his all-encompassing assessment. In actuality,
Bharucha aims for a historiography based on secondary (linear) sources of the IPTA’s history
rather than revisiting archives to unravel the anomalies of historical works that, I argue, collapse
the political and cultural left and fail to acknowledge the differences between the state’s cultural
efforts at nation formations and the challenges inherent to the IPTA’s agonistic manifestations. 11

Bharucha picks up from his earlier (1983) critical history of Bengal’s political theatre, Rehearsals
of a Revolution (where one chapter is dedicated to Dutt’s work in the theatre and yatra) in the
1998 work In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India, which features a
strong critique of the IPTA for its secularist position, particularly for adopting practices belong-
ing to communities while marginalising their religious belief systems. He writes in the context
of the IPTA, “tellingly, this continues to be the most confused area in secular cultural discourse,
in which the discriminations between religion and culture are either dichotomized or collapsed
into a falsely reductive religiosity” (1998, 35).

Bharucha’s critique of the IPTA centres on the discursive aspects and the subject position of
the historians who wrote the history of the IPTA in the conventional modes of depicting theat-
re and performance histories as serial events (e.g. chronicling the occasional party conferences
followed by performances or centralised festivals to showcase the IPTA’s work), achievements
of individual artists, and canonised performances that came closer to these artists’ understanding
of leftist culture. If Bharucha’s critique is directed at leftist cultural-secular positions as a whole,
then no distinction can be made between a significant initiative that contained the widest posi-
tible range of performance practices and the writing about this history. The performance prac-
tices included in the IPTA projects was in sharp contrast to the selective performance genres
archived in the SNA or eulogised by its archivists. Bharucha writes:

This, in essence, is the continued problematic of a secularist critique of traditional arts,
which refuses to acknowledge the liberatory possibilities of religion, or more specifi-
cally, of religious material transformed into another kind of cultural discourse through
oral narrative or performance, which functions with its own norms, quirks, grammar,
levels of interruption, and inscriptions of the worldly and the political. At one level,
the prejudice against religious narratives … is concretized through the imposition of
secularist categories. At another, it reveals the tremendous distance of the advocates
of “people’s art” from the actual contexts in which people create and interpret an art
for themselves.

1998, 37

Bharucha’s critique of the historical writings about the IPTA, written by its middle-class activ-
ists or subsequently by scholars engaged in various cultural activities of leftist organisations,
is justified to a certain extent. Yet this critique is also dismissive of the practices in the IPTA’s
entire range, without adequate engagement with it as an aberration, or consideration of how it
was organised under a secular (i.e. leftist) organisation and so biased towards such aims (1998). 12
The problem also lies in his refusal to distinguish between the state’s hegemonic projects, which
he critically adopted in his work, and the more democratic performance impulses of post-independent Indian theatre and performance practices. He frames the history of the IPTA practices in a common methodology whereby the secular criteria are applied uncritically to the wider range of performance practices that would otherwise have been anomalous and contradictory. Hence, writing on the IPTA using conventional tools of analysis (for example, the theatre and other middle-class, urban performance practices) fell far short of the requirements of historicisation of popular performances. If heeded, Bharucha’s urging to deliberate on oral historical methods and incorporate the non-secular within historical discourse could have expressed the contradictions rather than levelling out anomalies (something IPTA histories often do).

The key question, however, is why Bharucha and Chakrabarty were so keen to adopt ethno-graphic approaches without any reference to history or timelines (when they are available). The IPTA mediations of popular cultural forms, and other such examples, show the possibilities of writing theatre histories with a parallel trajectory to performance practices within wide-scale and dynamic socio-cultural contexts of post-colonial India. Socio-economic changes as well as political events affected the changing landscape of the life-worlds, or the performances that were part of popular belief systems.

Kothari and Bhattacharya were conditioned into folklore or anthropological studies and worked within a hegemonic post-colonial state project that rejected historical methods; but what prompted Bharucha and Chakrabarty to locate their projects of writing on life-worlds and traditional belief systems as if they were outside socio-cultural contexts of an evolving history? Chakrabarty’s stress on subaltern histories explains why and how “history from below” was significant in the Indian state, where dominance without hegemony (a colonial condition that had passed into similar formulations of the post-independence period and thereby into cultural history) was imposed from the top. Subaltern histories, mostly comprising anti-colonial peasant insurgencies where anachronistic symbols of peasant cultures emerged in rebellious expressions, are recorded and analysed in great detail.  

The post-independence phase, when popular traditional belief systems and dependence on local gods and goddesses gained priority, was also when economic and social crises, coming in the wake of liberalism, systematically marginalised political theatre. Bandopadhyay writes in this historical context:

Somehow it was a democratic criticality, a consistent negotiation with the social and political forces at play, a fast changing political scene that had provided post-independent Indian theatre with its rationale and inspiration. With the democratic experiment itself reduced to a sinister adhocism, the consequent confusion and cynicism seem to have left theatre dry and barren.

1997, 428

By the 1980s, when the significant theatre-performance experiments of the IPTA, theatre, and yatra were over, it was probably important for the new generation of post-colonial scholars to explore other forms — and engage with the folk and traditional belief systems as manifest in performances rooted in socio-religious milieus — in order to ascertain liberatory potential in the cultural practices of life-worlds. Scholarly engagement with living practices assumed more importance as theatre experiments became increasingly absorbed with individual explorations of form, and more entangled with state projects.

This chapter began with the institution of the state archive. Reflections on its practices and resultant academic discourses are evident in a state-sponsored seminar titled “Round Table on the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre,” organised by the SNA in 1971. Theatre
personalities from all over the country were invited to discuss what the convener Suresh Awasthi, the SNA’s secretary of theatre arts who introduced the seminar, regarded as a critical moment:

We felt that we are passing through a very exciting phase in our contemporary theatre and that it reflects a quest for its own identity. It is marked by a sense of discovery, a sense of exploration of the past and there have been very interesting experiments both in playwriting and in play production, utilising conventions, techniques from the traditional theatre.

Sangeet Natak 1971, 6

The IPTA was never a point of reference in the seminar. The “folk” was entangled with the traditional, and Dutt’s paper on his experiments with the yatra in the IPTA mode, in the spirit of being at once “popular and elevating,” evoked a long debate (Sangeet Natak 1971, 7). Other theatre personalities found Dutt’s leftist intervention in a traditional form exceptional and even offensive vis-à-vis their own celebratory discovery and exploration of various forms. To them, the traditional (or folk) and theatre should be separate, and the idioms and forms important for an urban-based theatre director to incorporate into work that explores Indian identity should be reflected primarily through aesthetics (Sangeet Natak 2004).

History-writing and strategies to challenge cultural nationalism

Thus far, this chapter has traced the shifting disciplinary focus since the 1950s, emphasising theatre’s historicisation vis-à-vis performance ethnographies: in particular, shifts that historians and scholars made from theatre histories to performance ethnography. This shifting focus entailed discarding many critical features of a historical perspective, and as a result scholarship on theatre histories and performance ethnographies has come to be seen as two separate discourses around theatre studies and performance studies in the Indian context. In this context it is important, I argue, to critically understand the subject positions of the scholars and to question the methodological frames constructed to engage with performances. What could have been the bridge, and what I propose as an inclusive historical perspective, are historical-cultural memories of the performances and their audiences (people), which are sources, or archives, of oral histories. Chakrabarty’s jute mill workers not only expressed cultural practices of their worldview but also could have told him of historical memories of the theatre (or other performances) at the dedicated sites they visited, and of whether the socialist imagination of more inclusive democratic practices based on equitable distribution of wealth made them visit the yatra, or theatre, again and again. Bharucha’s peasants of Rajasthan would also have been exposed to forms other than the ones they performed as part of traditional belief systems.16 Neglect of these points of intersection created the need to view performance and theatre practices as separate, which reinforced the original, simplified binaries of theatre and performance.

A final note. It is of critical urgency to review these debates in light of the growing right-wing, hyper-cultural nationalism and the coming to power of the Hindu right, which Bharucha says “has targeted so-called ‘pseudo-secular’ parties, without acknowledging the sheer violence and aggression of its own majoritarianism.” In a recent, deeply reflexive piece, Bharucha explains that though he still stands against a direct die-hard secular position, he also acknowledges the need for the secular to not be just one category, and in effect instead of reiterating the secularist-communitarian position he encourages a “dissensus around the secular.” Undoubtedly it is “a more productive way of defining its multiple and intersecting contours rather than the
upholding of a make-believe consensus” (2017, ix, x, emphasis in the original). He also warns against playing into the desires of “anti-secularist communitarianism, which all too often valorises sources of traditional knowledge and religious wisdom on grounds of their implicit plurality, without adequately confronting the hierarchies, exclusions and modes of symbolic violence that determine this semblance of ‘plurality’ in the first place” (viii).

The lines of difference between communitarian theories and secularist ones are not easy to define in India. Bharucha, in his recent works, appropriately complicates this. I insert this contemporary debate into this argument out of an urgent need to adopt self-reflexive criticality in revisiting those histories and discourses of post-independence India. The task of writing inclusive histories, keeping in mind the multiplicity of identities and performance practices (or even indicating a move towards this), is the much-needed critical gesture of the hour. Once housing a cultural plurality, the spaces where multiple performances and performative conceptions existed are fast disappearing. Therefore, it is desperately important that the history of democratic carnivalesque cultures — where theatre and performance practices existed beside each other in various forms and manifestations, in fact challenging any binary divisions between theatre and performances — be retrieved.

Notes

1 The museum is housed at Rabindra Bhavan, Delhi, and comprises a range of musical instruments of both the classical and folk genre. The diversity of instruments on display represents the continuum between high and low art forms.
2 These materials formed the initial resources of the archive, along with audio recordings of musical concerts to celebrate independence and audio-visual recordings of demonstration lectures from stalwarts like Kelucharan Mahapatra as part of the classical Indian dance reconstruction projects.
3 By the 1960s a number of regional centres of the SNA had arisen.
4 Post-independent India, under Jawaharlal Nehru, aligned “culture” with education; there was no separate ministry of culture. Cultural institutions like the SNA functioned autonomously, with important personalities from art and culture at their helm.
5 The yatra (literally procession, pilgrimage, or journey) was revived in colonial times; a popular form of theatre, it adopted melodrama and nineteenth-century European-derived acting styles. Yatra and similar forms such as nautanki, tamasha, and lavni were extolled as performance in the official and unofficial discourses and popularly written about in a mode of linear history that placed their origins in ancient religious festivals.
6 These pieces are still exhibited as museum objects on the ground floor of the Rabindra Bhavan, which also houses the Akademis and an independent museum called Malliah Memorial Theatre Crafts Museum in Delhi. These objects also travelled to different parts of the world as part of the India festivals.
7 The minutes housed in the archive/library are a reference point for a large number of histories written on post-colonial theatre-drama (see Bharucha 2001; Dharwadkar 2005; Cherian 2009; Mee 2008).
8 All Unity issues contain reports of IPTA activities; references and data have been taken from them.
9 Dramatic renditions around saints, particularly from the medieval popular religious movements, were a popular genre. Songs associated with the local cults of a saint would be sung while the life history (emphasising miracles, a simple lifestyle, and union with God, most often outside the religious pantheon) were narrated.
10 Dipesh Chakrabarty’s fieldwork among the jute mill workers of Bengal and the industrial belt around Rishra and Shymnagar was extensive. These were also key areas for the yatra and touring theatre, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s.
11 The problem of evoking the cultural left as symptomatic of the political left is a formulation presented by Samik Bandopadhyay in the context of the collaborative project on Cultures of the Left (Jawaharlal Nehru University and University of Warwick, 2016–2019).
12 Bharucha refers to the IPTA histories written by Malini Bhattacharya, whom he describes as the most meticulous historian of the cultural left movement in India (1998, 27). Bhattacharya was professor of
English at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, and an elected member of Parliament from the Communist Party of India (Marxist). At the time of documenting and writing the histories, she was director of the State Folklore Board (Bhattacharya 1989). Other references are from members of the IPTA or Progressive Writers Association (PWA) who were writing in the IPTA journal Unity, compiled by Sudhi Pradhan in four volumes titled Marxist Cultural Movement in India (Pradhan 1979).

13 Subaltern Studies refers to a group of Indian historians who published a series of essays and monographs from 1982 onwards that critiqued both colonial and nationalist histories of modern South Asia, employing insights from Gramsci. Ranajit Guha’s work on subaltern histories comprises a detailed study of peasant insurgencies and revolts under the colonial regime.

14 I refer to what would become a state-sponsored project broadly described as theatre of the roots. The successful experiments by directors who explored local idioms and forms became a state-sponsored project with enormous funding opportunities. These were showcased at the regional and national level, where the adoption of the folk form was compulsory. The state project of experimenting with roots was initiated by the Round Table of 1971, referred to later in this chapter (see Mee 2008).

15 Scholars writing on Indian post-colonial theatre would also use this source uncritically.

16 The IPTA also had branches in Rajasthan; the regional performances were exclusively from the folk expressions (songs and dances).

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