



FORMS OF THE LEFT IN POSTCOLONIAL SOUTH ASIA

Aesthetics, Networks and Connected Histories

Sanjukta Sunderason & Lotte Hoek

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Forms of the Left in Postcolonial
South Asia

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Edited by
Sanjukta Sunderason and Lotte Hoek

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Introduction

Forms of the left in postcolonial South Asia

Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason

In October 2016, the film *Jago Hua Savera* (Day Shall Dawn, 1959, Ajay Kardar, dir.) was to be screened at a film festival in Mumbai. Recently restored and flush with Cannes success, the film was slowly making its way through specialist screenings and audiences. Hailed as a 'lost classic' and neorealist triumph in specialist film circles, the film had been a cross-regional project with contributions of artists from across West Pakistan, India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), many of whom were linked to a progressive, left or communist cultural politics. The film had been controversial and badly received when released in Pakistan in 1959. Now, in 2016, while celebrated in international circuits, it incurred wrath and censorial attitudes in India. In the context of the simmering military conflict between India and Pakistan, and rising authoritarianism and exclusionary nationalism, partisan nationalist groups put pressure on the film festival to drop the film.¹

Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia asks how we might return to and recuperate such (dis)connected histories of left-wing aesthetics that persisted across South Asia's partitioned and decolonizing geographies. We pursue in this volume cultural forms of the postcolonial left that continued – via displaced, transforming and resilient forms – *beyond* the high noon of what has been retrospectively called the 'Marxist Cultural Movement'² of the late-colonial 1940s and the partitions in South Asia (of India in 1947, with the birth of Pakistan; and of Pakistan in 1971, with the birth of Bangladesh). Such cultural forms have slipped historiographies that fetishize national stories or dominant figures and have indeed been overshadowed by the struggles and failures of the political

¹ Tanuk Thakur, 'Under Pressure, Mumbai Film Festival Drops Classic Pakistani Film', *The Wire*, 17 October 2016, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/classic-pakistani-film-jago-hua-savera-dropped-mumbai-film-festival>.

² Sudhi Pradhan (ed.), *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents* (Vol. 1, Calcutta: Pustak Bipani, 1979; Vols. 2 and 3, Calcutta: Nabanna, 1982).

left. Our contemporary moment of authoritarian and right-wing resurgence obfuscates such forms, and more importantly, the long-standing trans-border collaborations and conversations organized by and around aesthetic forms across postcolonial South Asia.

Forms of the Left is an effort at mapping these histories via aesthetic forms of the left. This book emerges from conversations among a group of scholars who have collected stories, resonances and possibilities around the field of left-wing aesthetics across postcolonial South Asia. This field transcends South Asia's post-1947 borders and exceeds the postcolonial trajectories of the political left too. It takes shape as constellations of people, forms, networks, traces and questions around the postcolonial left as a subcontinental and transnational formation. Such constellations are at once rooted in national and locational trajectories of the new nation states born out of decolonization and partitions (1947, 1971), and are resonant of affinities, friendships and conversations across nation-state divides. They require, as we propose in this volume, new frames and questions: *Does the political left in South Asia have a recognizable aesthetic form? How have the region's climactic twentieth-century experiences – of anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles, of famines and genocides, of partitions and displacements – recast the cultural imaginations of the political left? And how do we today write about the entanglements of the twentieth-century transnational left in dialogue with the experiences of decolonization and postcolonial modernities?*

Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia has distinct methodological goals: first, of activating hitherto unexplored connected histories of the left across the new political frontiers of postcolonial, post-partition South Asia – India, Ceylon/Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh; and second, of foregrounding therein the question of aesthetic form. Placing the question of form squarely within the particularities of the left's changing political circumstances in individual and connected contexts in the region, we intertwine here two sets of queries. The first asks how left-wing art manifested (in) cultural and social formations in the region: How were left-wing cultural forms and affiliations re-imagined post and despite mid-twentieth century displacements triggered by decolonization (see Chapters 1, 2, 5 and Afterword by Sunderason, Uddin, Rambukwella and Ali, respectively, in this volume)? In the second set, we ask how the aesthetic forms of left-wing art across postcolonial South Asia have been imagined to be politically efficacious: What modes and treatments, for instance, have been considered appropriate or appropriable to the cause and how has the efficacy of art been theorized (see Chapters 3, 4, 6 and 7 by Dadi, Ramnath, Hoek and Dass, respectively, in this volume)? By pursuing forms and connected

histories simultaneously, we foreground aesthetic form as a political trope in understanding cultures of the left in postcolonial South Asia. These concerns are also intended to reframe 21st-century concerns with political aesthetics within a distinctly postcolonial and decolonial framework.

Given the left's alignments and textures of cultural action within the shifting political contours and dispensations of the region, the question of form is significant. We investigate art, film, literature, poetry and cultural discourse in postcolonial South Asia produced by artists and cultural and political activists committed to the left in various forms – through their art, and through social and ideological affiliations. Studies of aesthetic politics in South Asia, which frame and inspire our endeavours, tend to focus either on popular forms and their consolidation of political subjectivities and ideologies, or on the intertwining of art and the nation in the pursuit of modernism in colonial and postcolonial South Asia.³ In this volume we focus instead on questions of left-wing political commitment *as* artistic and aesthetic values across productions of fine arts, *belles lettres* and cinema. We trace the particular trajectories that the left's cultural movement took during decolonization *after* its high point of radical anti-imperial cultural resistance in late-colonial South Asia in the 1940s. Dissipating both socially and ideologically after independence and partition in 1947, and along the complex transformation of Communist Parties in India and Pakistan and the left more broadly in Ceylon/Sri Lanka, the forms of the left in postcolonial South Asia took on new fluid and dynamic guises. Sharing the ethics of committed art, artist-activists formerly aligned with the Communist Party re-articulated left political-aesthetic tropes of national-popular art under new and contentious political circumstances post-1947. This produced a dense repertoire of affectively loaded forms that are recognizable and shared across South Asia in a distinct sensory regime. This repertoire is positioned adjacent to, and intersects with, the domain of popular and public culture that has been theorized for its political efficacy. Investigating the figure of the political artist, Afro-Asian literary exchanges, art film-makers, cultural collaborations, aesthetic debates and citational aesthetics, we are looking here at aesthetic forms and art-making that display great intentionality. We ask thereby how such works can

³ See, among others, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Beyond Appearances? Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern Art* (New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003); Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004); Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

divulge the means and the modes by which committed artists have contributed to the sensory regimes in which particular moral and political impulses were given concrete and replicable form.

The efficacy of the artistic, particularly visual, form has been a key site of debate for scholars of public culture in South Asia. The very premise of the idea of public culture as developed by Appadurai and Breckenridge was as ‘an arena where other types, forms and domains of culture are encountering, interrogating and contesting each other in new and unexpected ways.’⁴ Within this arena, visual and material artefacts, from religious prints and photographs to films and theatre performances, encounter and shape one another in rhythms and modes that are both of the times and formative of them. The central premise for this body of scholarship has been that the material artefacts within this arena have the capacity to exceed existing discursive fields through its figural forms.⁵ Their concrete manifestations are not fully subdued by surrounding narratives about the times and places in which they exist and this provides these visual and material forms the potential to be socially and politically efficacious.⁶ Much of the scholarship in the field of visual and public culture studies has been focused on popular culture, not least under the wider influence of the historians of the subaltern school. Their discussions around what lay beyond the discursive formations brought into being by colonialism, yet shaped by the global history of capital, and how to recuperate this from within an archive set up on colonial premises, fundamentally asks about the objects and subjects outwith these discursive strictures.⁷ The subsequent debates about public culture inherit some of the concerns and premises of subaltern studies but explore them within the field of cultural practices, particular aural and visual forms and popular artefacts. These material forms, from music cassettes through to calendar art, are understood to not be fully incorporated into hegemonic discursive forms.⁸ It is their aesthetic form that interrupts their easy equation with established narratives

⁴ Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, ‘Why Public Culture’, *Public Culture* 1, no. 1 (1988), 6.

⁵ William Mazzarella, *Shovelling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43; Christopher Pinney, ‘Things Happen: Or, from which Moment Does that Object Come?’ in Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality*, 256–72 (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁶ See Ramaswamy, *Beyond Appearances?*; Christopher Pinney and Rachel Dwyer, *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics, and Consumption of Public Culture in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*; Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*; Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *A Brief History of Subaltern Studies*, In *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays by Partha Chatterjee*, with Nivedita Menon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010 [1998]), 289–301; O’Hanlon, Rosalind, ‘Recovery of the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia’, *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1988), 189–224.

⁸ Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 14.

and histories, speaking to other constituencies, in different vocabularies and across new temporalities. Recent work within political history has extended this methodological approach to explore the lasting presence of revolutionary, anti-imperial and anarchic political potentialities, notably around the iconography associated with Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh.⁹ In this volume, we extend these discussions around the efficacy and lasting political potentiality of cultural forms from their focus on popular culture to inform an approach to art objects and practices that seek to understand their political efficacy within the context of left progressive politics. We argue that it is important to study the aesthetic and formal modes by which a left progressive political agenda was given shape in fine arts, art cinema and *belles lettres* during the post-independence years, not only because it illuminates transitions in political thought and shifting alliances between comrades, activists, fellow-travellers and the disenchanted but also because these aesthetic tropes travel through public and popular culture in a lasting way.

In this Introduction, we lay out the historical and conceptual domain on which we stage the question of the forms of the left in postcolonial South Asia. The Introduction is split into three segments, each thinking through the left as form *and* as history. The first – ‘Histories in formation’ – asks if histories of the postcolonial left in South Asia can be read and configured via the question of aesthetic forms and cultural formations. We lay out the dispersal and transformation of the ‘left’ as a wide political and social formation across the region in the years leading up to and after partition in 1947. We track the changing fates of the Communist Party in the different countries in the region, and within the unique parameters of the left in Sri Lanka, with new alliances made across borders – both across South Asia and across Afro-Asian solidarity networks. We also trace the conjunctural moments that offer potential connected frames and questions for intertwining histories of the postcolonial left across South Asia and in dialogue with global dynamics – whether under the political rationalities of the Cold War, of Third World solidarities or the repercussions of the global 1960s and Maoist internationalisms active strongly in the subcontinent. The second segment – ‘Form’ – posits aesthetic form as a means of tracing shared commitments and communities of practice in the particularly dispersed historical and political field of the left in postcolonial South Asia. Informed by long-standing discussions in South Asia about the

⁹ Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text* (London: Hurst, 2015); Chris Moffat, *India's Revolutionary Heritage: Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

nature of realist and socially progressive artistic forms, we draw on current scholarly ideas about form and materiality to suggest that close reading and engagements with form provide an entry point to these fields of intensity that are both consciously crafted by artists as well as resistant to the dominant discursive domains they find themselves in today. The third segment – ‘Contemporary articulations’ – opens up the questions of left-wing aesthetics and potentialities via current artistic engagements and theoretical/epistemological questions. We consider here what sort of, and whose, histories and forms are being revalued in the contemporary context of both resurgent Maoism in rural South Asia and middle-class and elite reappropriations of these forms in contemporary art markets and NGO programmes.

Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia brings together a cross-disciplinary and trans-border group of authors who bring approaches from history, art history, anthropology, film studies and literary studies to bear on the material. A few caveats are due at this stage. First, as we draw from hitherto un-addressed conversations between trans-border cultural archives in South Asia, such archives are often as informal and scattered as they are unique and untapped, and therefore in many cases hard to source (via copyright clearances) for reproduction as illustrations. We hope our readers will sense the rich texture of such archives through their detailed analyses within our chapters. Second, our selection here has been driven by resonant traces and connected forms, and we have not followed a representational rationality of covering every country in South Asia. While our archives and questions are drawn from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and their transregional dynamics across forums of Afro-Asian solidarities, we are aware of some critical omissions – for instance, of leftist theatre and literature from Nepal, or across post-partition Punjab, or Kerala, among others. Our proposition is that conversations in this volume are taken not as indexical markers of plural histories in South Asia but as dynamic signposts for new and potential subcontinental historiographies of culture and decolonization, attuned to particular, as well as expansive and connected, histories. We hope that the organic unity of our chapters here will be self-evident.

Histories in formation

Can we configure forms of the left across postcolonial South Asia via its (connected) histories? The twentieth century offers some possibilities where the left’s transnational histories can be seen to be shaped by shared questions

of aesthetic form as well as manifest in particular formations – social, cultural as much as political. Here we trace some of the modalities of such (potential) formations that shape trans-border, subcontinental configurations of the left and its transnational resonances. This is aimed at providing a historical context to the artistic practices discussed in this volume. It also foregrounds the nature of relations between political formations and artistic practices as dispersed and dynamic, rather than monolithic or consistent.

A critical modality in the histories of the left in South Asia is its dispersed political spectrum, its forums spread out amidst Communist and Socialist Parties and amidst pro-communist elements scattered across centrist parties. This dispersion was contained via collaborative politics and sustained also by internal contradictions and splits that echoed regional, national and transnational shifts.¹⁰ This dispersed modality of the South Asian left in the twentieth century exceeded party political structures and developed across extra-party forums, friendships and associations, where being on the left happens (often) from the positionality of being *outside* the party or active political left – as ‘fellow-travellers’ and via informal affective affiliations.¹¹ Across late-colonial and postcolonial South Asia this dispersed, collaborative modality was evident in the formations of the left. In British India in the 1930s for instance, the Communist Party of India (CPI; banned between 1934 and 1941) worked in incipient forms ranging from the forums of socialist politics and peasant fronts like the Congress Socialist Party and the All India Kisan Sabha (All India Peasant Congress), through growing radicalization of political prisoners, as well as via growing socio-intellectual affinities towards Marxist thought. In Ceylon likewise, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) was formed in 1935 out of growing discontent around the lack of national front in support of the working class, felt strongly during the Depression years in the early 1930s, and emerged to give direction to both nationalist politics and working-class politics.¹² Foundational to the formation of the LSSP were Ceylonese students returning from British and American universities with their exposure to international communist politics and Indian communism. As the Communist International itself developed the

¹⁰ Kamran Asdar Ali, *Surkh Salam: Communist Politics and Class Activism in Pakistan 1947-1972* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015); Vijay Prasad, *No Free Left: The Futures of Indian Communism* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2015); Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹¹ David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973); Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹² Kumari Jayawardena, ‘Origins of the Left Movement in Sri Lanka’, *Social Scientist* 2, no. 6/7 (January–February, 1974), 3–28.

transnational Popular Front politics with its programme of anti-fascist resistance in its Seventh Congress in 1935, there were late-colonial variations. In British India for instance, the 'United Front' of anti-imperialist politics was inaugurated in 1936, with the Indian National Congress under its president Jawaharlal Nehru becoming a forum for growing socialist affiliations and underground communist mobilization, even if ambiguous and irregular.¹³ This (idiomatic) collaboration between nationalist and left-wing politics found echoes in a growing shared and ambiguous vocabulary of the 'people', 'popularization' and 'popular' politics/art/artist – where Gandhian populism interacted with a revolutionary popular imaginary steered by the underground left. Even when this United Front political collaboration petered out in 1941 with communist support for the imperial war effort in the defence of the Soviet Union, the sociocultural cohabitation of left-wing affinities with mainstream nationalist anti-colonial politics persisted.¹⁴ This was felt most actively in the field of a growing cultural movement of the left that grew in dialogue with new imaginaries of political resistance – in the late 1930s through formations of forums like the All India Progressive Writers' Association and the All India Kisan Sabha, and in the early 1940s with the Indian People's Theatre Association.¹⁵

To comprehend the left's textured social histories, as well as its aesthetic possibilities, we therefore conceptualize the political as adjacent to, but not overdetermined by, party politics – the political read hence as both (cultural) practice and (political) theory.¹⁶ Echoing Raymond Williams, we read the left via sociocultural formations that were 'simultaneously artistic forms and social locations'.¹⁷ Such formations thus carried, what Michael Dennings has called

¹³ For instance, at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in 1935, it was declared that 'the Indian communists must set aside their internal sectarianism that has thwarted their participation in anti-imperialist national politics dominated by the Indian National Congress and organizations affiliated with it, boosting Gandhi's control of the popular movement; in the new United Front, the Indian communists must consolidate all the anti-imperialist forces of the country', 'both within and without the National Congress' and broaden and lead 'the struggle of the masses against the imperialist oppressors'. Wang Ming, Report delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, 7 August 1935, 30. See also, Subodh Roy (ed.), *Communism in India, Unpublished Documents 1935-45* (Calcutta: Ganashakti Printers, 1976); Gene Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communist Party of India, Miscellaneous Pamphlets* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959).

¹⁴ Roy, *Communism in India, Unpublished Documents 1935-45*; D. N. Gupta, *Communism and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1939-1945* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008).

¹⁵ On histories of the Progressive Writers' Association, the Indian People's Theatre Association and the left's cultural movement in late-colonial India see, Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation, and the Transition to Independence* (London: Routledge, 2005); Sumangala Damodaran, *The Radical Impulse: Music in the Tradition of the Indian People's Theatre Association* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2017).

¹⁶ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, 'When Was Modernism?' in *Politics of Modernism*, 34–5.

in his study of the early-twentieth-century Popular Front in the United States, two ideas of ‘politics’ active within the front’s notions of the politics of art: first, a ‘cultural politics’, that is, the politics of the allegiances and affiliations that forms the cultural field, and second, ‘aesthetic ideologies’, that is, the politics of form. While allegiances and affiliations represented the ‘social consciousness’ of the cultural front, Denning argued, the works produced by the artists and intellectuals on the left embodied a ‘political unconscious’. The idea of the cultural front itself, he noted, was ‘an attempt to theorize the relation of culture to politics.’¹⁸ We extend this insight to anthropological conceptions of the political that explore the ‘huge scope for different ways in which to construe the idea of the “people” as well as the idea of “representation” which supposedly binds them to the government.’¹⁹ We also carry this dynamic to nuancing how art and politics entangled particularly during conjunctural periods across the long decolonization in South Asia, where the ‘political’ itself is a dispersed complex of aesthetic and ideological participation, rather than concrete party political affirmations. Modalities of the left *as form* emerge here more as a field of ‘partisan aesthetics’ rather than ‘political art.’²⁰

A second modality in reading transnational formations of the left’s histories in South Asia – with or despite active patronage from the Communist Parties – would be its uniquely conjunctural character. Such conjunctures were marked by the colonial theatre of the Second World War, with famine, displacement, communal riots and partition itself at the arrival of independence, as well as the *longue durée* footprints of such ruptures – in structural shifts, transformational forms, memories and hauntings. This temporal modality of the South Asian left is marked by decolonization itself – its locational trails and transnational dynamics – entangled with global wars, genocides, solidarities and ideological polarizations of the Cold War. Under the accelerated time of decolonization, the left’s politics gained historical momentum and radical cultural echoes as artists, performers, writers, academics and society at large strove to visualize and act upon social ruptures. Conjunctures, in Gramscian terms, are grounds upon which multiple ‘forces of opposition’ – political, social or aesthetic – organize, giving the time itself a particular radical charge.²¹ Conjunctures connect scales of

¹⁸ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), xix.

¹⁹ Jonathan Spencer, ‘Postcolonialism and the Political Imagination’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3, no. 1 (1997), 12.

²⁰ Sanjukta Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India’s Long Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

²¹ Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 178.

the regional, the national and the transnational, as the wartime decolonial decade of the 1940s amply shows. Conjunctures also cite and echo recent histories with newer, contemporary events, agendas and imagination, creating, as Stuart Hall has noted, circular possibilities of historical citations within artistic production.²²

In British India as the wartime Bengal famine broke out along the eastern frontiers of war, with an advancing Japanese army, burning of crops by the Allied forces to quell Japanese advance and rampant black-market profiteering,²³ the CPI negotiated a political contradiction: its support for the war effort in defence of the Soviet Union (following German attack in 1941) legalized it in British India, yet the support itself marginalized its politics in the late colony steeped in the Gandhian Quit India movement. While in Ceylon, the LSSP refused the Moscow Line, affirming the national rather than foreign commitment of the Ceylonese left, the CPI in India had to re-imagine its resistance. The famine – notorious as man-made and killing and displacing more than three million across Bengal²⁴ – became an alternative political field for the left via activist reportage and relief work alongside anti-imperialist and anti-fascist rhetoric. Under the Party Secretary P. C. Joshi, a ‘cultural front’ was created where artists, performers and political activists collaborated to author an active socialist cultural critique of imperialism, one that bolstered the CPI’s ‘policy and work in the War of Liberation.’²⁵ Such a front – framed as a left-wing cultural movement – connected social struggle with political emancipation on the one hand, and on the other, a regional crisis with multiple scales of war-fronts and post-war mobilizations of decolonization across Asia. The cultural front resonated with what C. Vaughan James has described as the tendency of socialist culture not only ‘to enlist the poet as philosopher, the writer as tribune and the artist as teacher in the translation of the socialist dream into reality’, but also to explore ‘the *almost unknown interstices* between artistic genres by uniting poet, painter, sculptor, singer, actor, dancer and director in one common socio-aesthetic system.’²⁶

²² See Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey in conversation, ‘Interpreting the Crisis’, *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 44 (Spring 2010), 57–8.

²³ See Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Bengal Famine of 1943–44* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, and the End of Empire* (London: Hurst, 2015).

²⁴ Sample Survey of the After-effects of the Bengal famine of 1943, Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta, 1946, and the unpublished mortality data gathered by the ISI under the statistician Professor Prasanta Mahalanobis. Cited by Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, 305–9.

²⁵ P. C. Joshi, *The New Situation and our Tasks, Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of India*, passed at its meeting in December 1945 (Bombay: New Age Printing Press for the Communist Party of India, 1945).

²⁶ C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), xii, (emphasis ours).

A third and connected modality here would be the foundationally multi-scalar nature of the left, reaching across histories and geographies of war, Comintern politics and decolonial movements, as well as in national, locational/regional and transregional dialogues with ongoing changes in the literary and artistic fields.²⁷ It reflected a complex ‘relationality of ideas and political affiliations’ that was shaped by ‘the changing nature and the varying inflections of the leftist movement in India,’²⁸ as Ali Raza argues in his excavation of the impassioned engagements of leftists with utopian ideas in colonial India. In the context of geopolitical transformations and challenges, the ongoing critique of classicism and romanticism that developed across the left’s cultural movement in the subcontinent echoed the global calls for art rooted in the ‘people’, in dynamic aesthetics of realism – whether via social realism or with active *socialist* realist addresses.²⁹ The idea of ‘progressive’ culture upheld by the left during these years in the late colony reflected these multi-scalar transregional dynamics, as its subcontinental networks spanned from Chittagong and Dhaka in the east to Lahore and Karachi in the west, from Kashmir in the north and Colombo the south, while remaining conversant with global values and vocabularies of modernism and socialism. Across South Asian decolonizing contexts, the idea and rhetoric of progressive art drew in writers and artists rooted in the exigencies of colonial contexts as well as the modernist universalism of artistic form. By the end of the 1940s, formations of progressive art in the subcontinent would also register the global tensions between political and cultural imaginaries of the left, particularly as artists formerly associated with left-wing anti-fascist cultural resistance now began distancing themselves from the increasingly more stringent ideological regimentation around Stalinist ‘Socialist Realism’ that came to dominate in international socialist aesthetics steered by the Soviet Union.³⁰

The multi-scalar, transregional modalities in the histories of the subcontinental left in South Asia were at once subcontinental and global. The

²⁷ On the transnational histories of the Comintern and the postcolonial left, see Shobhan Lal Dutta Gupta, *Comintern and the Colonial Question: The Decolonization Controversy* (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1976); Oleska Drachewych and Ian McKay, eds., *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions* (Montreal; Kingston; London; Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019); see also, Jacopo Galimberti, Noemi de Haro García and Victoria H. F. Scott (eds), *Art, Global Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

²⁸ Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts*, 10–11.

²⁹ For the critical debates around realism and the popular, see Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertold Brecht, György Lukács and Fredric Jameson, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007 [1938]); also, Geeta Kapur, ‘Realism and Modernism: A Polemic for Present-Day Art’, *Social Scientist* 8 [Marxism and Aesthetics], no. 5/6 (December 1979–January 1980).

³⁰ On collectives and politics of progressive art, see Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics*.

critical juncture of 1947–8 – our starting point in this volume – marks multiple ruptures, shaping the unique modality of the postcolonial left in South Asia that we are focusing on. In South Asia these ruptures were shaped significantly by the bloody Partition of 1947 in the wake of a communal genocide. Globally, it reflected the shifts within the international left, the Stalinist turn in the shadow of the Cold War manifesting in the split within the CPI – both ideologically and politically, with the party split between new leadership and the newly formed independent nation states of India and Pakistan. The left vacillated on the creation of Pakistan, half supporting the cause of Pakistan and half expecting the Partition to be temporary. These vacillations were visible through the mid-1940s, and by the time of the Second Congress of the CPI in Calcutta in 1948, the party was not only forced to reorganize its divided Indian and Pakistani fronts but also negotiate a shift within the party ranks. The second party congress saw a series of shifts in policy, both displacing the General Secretary P. C. Joshi and his collaborative politics, and bringing in a political hardline under B. T. Ranadive, who declared freedom in 1947 itself to be ‘false’. At this second congress, it became clear to delegates from Pakistan (125 of whom attended from East Pakistan) that the party had to split to account for the new political realities of former British India, but that the East Bengal part of the new CPP should remain under the guidance of the West Bengal CPI.³¹ The trajectories of the post-1947 left thus fall along and across the new lines drawn by both partition of the subcontinent and divisions within the party. Such histories were also spread across the newly redrawn frontiers – territorial and ideological – shaping under the shadow of the deepening Cold War ideological fronts. This makes histories of the postcolonial left in South Asia organically transnational and transregional, with cross-border connections and echoes in the South Asian region, even as the frameworks of the postcolonial nation state tend to make such connected histories tertiary.

The exit of P. C. Joshi at the turn of a more radical partisan shift within the party under the new leadership of Ranadive dissolved the collaborative cultural front of the 1940s, and marked a period of eclipse for the left’s cultural movement. Over the 1950s the cultural momentum of the 1940s dissipated substantially – not only through the retreat of political patronage and cultural vision but also through the assimilation of a segment of the left’s cultural interlocutors *into* the

³¹ Moni Singh, ‘Establishing the Communist Party of Pakistan’, in *The Bangladesh Studies Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds, Meghna Guhathakurta and Willem van Schendel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 171.

cultural apparatus of the postcolonial state – particularly in India.³² In Pakistan, the dissipated communist left could not sustain patronage of a progressive culture,³³ particularly under repressive policies of the new postcolonial nation state, not least with regard to the continued insurgencies among peasants, workers and tribal groups in East Pakistan that had been so effectively allied by left-committed artists in the earlier 1940s.³⁴ In India, the prime minister's international support for socialist culture saw an ironic repression of the communist left within the country. The party was banned in 1949, with most of its activists having to go underground. In Ceylon, John Kotelawala in the early 1950s displayed a similar two-pronged policy in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Staunchly anti-communist, he would brand the communists as 'unpatriotic' and sustain a fundamentally anti-communist politics at home, while being 'superficially pro-Communist in international affairs'.³⁵

In this volume we focus on the cultural left in postcolonial South Asia across the boundaries and temporalities of the nation state. The parallel processes of dispersion and repression created a new historical formation for the cultural left – one that was transformational due to multipolar 'postcolonial displacements' – moving from the ideological cohesion under a communist culture to more diffracted forms of marginal critical socialist iconography and socially conscious artistic forms more assimilated within the mainstream modernist imaginary of the post-colonies. This dissipation and dialogue, we argue, constitutes a new critical modality of the postcolonial left in South Asia, one that requires more trans-border collaborative research and attention to the question of form and aesthetics *beyond* political party lines. Critical to this modality is the very question of freedom – and its layered meanings between immediate experiences of political independence and the longer horizons of the imaginations of liberation.³⁶ Sensibilities of freedom as a utopic horizon were deeply embedded in the ways in which the left interacted with the narrative of arrival and progress propounded by the postcolonial nation states, as the logic of resistance in the post-colony morphed from an anti-colonial one to one where

³² Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics*, Chapter 4. See also, Dilip Menon, 'Lost Visions? Imagining a Left Culture in the 1950s', in *Land Labour and Rights – Ten Daniel Thorner Memorial Lectures*, ed. Alice Thorner (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001).

³³ See Saadia Toor, *The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2011); Kamran Asdar Ali, *Surkh Salam: Communist Politics and Class Activism in Pakistan 1947-1972* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁴ Ahmed Kamal, *State Against the Nation: The Decline of the Muslim League in Pre-independence Bangladesh, 1947-54* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2009), 110–15.

³⁵ Ivor Jennings, 'Politics in Ceylon Since 1952', *Pacific Affairs* 27, no. 4 (December 1954), 345–52.

³⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

the enemy was not everywhere clear. Here the paternalistic nation state, and the promises made for its independence, seemed to temper and condition what the progressive would mean. For artists on the left, imagining and struggling towards a future often ran counter to the narratives of progress and modernity that the new nation states upheld. It heightened tensions between (postcolonial) nationalism and the utopic frontiers of socialist internationalism, where the limits of political freedom were being questioned in continuing struggles for social freedom. The left-wing artistic visions of freedom were, however, not simply of critique; such radical imaginations of futures were of hope and utopic time. This formed the cornerstone of the progressive discourse that the left had carried over from the 1940s, and which captured new potentialities in postcolonial times. Each of the chapters in this volume bespeaks these tensions around ideas of freedom.

A citational and affective economy of the left's postcolonial internationalism was visible throughout the 1950s to 1970s, alongside the will to assimilate national particularities within a transnational vocabulary – whether it be one of Third World cultural solidarities or people's resistance echoing Maoist rhetorics of people's war from China. A significant front for a transnational postcolonial left was Afro-Asian cultural solidarity. It went back as far as collectives for anti-fascist cultural resistance and Asian Youth conferences of the 1940s, and supported further by the cultural internationalism of the Afro-Asian fronts during the decolonizing decades of the 1950s – at the Bandung Conference (1955), and thereafter in conferences of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Association and the Afro-Asian writers.³⁷ For figures of the progressive cultural movement of the subcontinental left – Mulk Raj Anand in India, or Faiz Ahmad Faiz in Pakistan – navigating the spaces of international left-wing forums was at the same time a mode of negotiating nationalism and internationalism, making the sensibilities of the postcolonial left a dialogue between national identity and international affiliations.³⁸ Whether in Mulk Raj's assimilation in a Nehruvian modernity or Faiz's exile from a repressive regime in Pakistan alongside his patronage of postcolonial Pakistani modernism, being on the left in postcolonial South Asia suggests intertwinement of multiple histories – of both alienation

³⁷ Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis (eds), 'Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War', *Journal of World History* 30, no. 1–2 (June 2019).

³⁸ See Annapurna Garimela, ed., *Mulk Raj Anand: Shaping the Indian Modern* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2005); Aamir Mufti, 'Towards a Lyric History of India', *Boundary 2* 31, no. 2 (2004), 245–74 and *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Mohsin Zulfikar and Fabbeh Husein, *Elusive Dawn: Faiz Ahmed Faiz: A People's Poet, A Centenary Publication* (Bradford: Kala Sangam, 2011).

and assimilation.³⁹ This suggests also the plural and diverse modalities in the histories of the postcolonial left in South Asia. In East Pakistan – the eastern wing of post-1947 Pakistan that became Bangladesh after the War of Liberation in 1971 – the left carried a series of intertwinements – across international, regional and national agenda's, and with dialogues between peasant, tribal and working-class politics that were allied to student movements and tied to linguistic sovereignty that took on a distinct cultural guise.⁴⁰ The left's entanglement with cultural identity was active in Ceylon/Sri Lanka too, where the language question and tensions between national culture and the politics of Sinhala and Tamil cultural imagination were echoed within left-wing discourses.

The 1960s and 1970s – critical decades in decolonization and global left-wing politics – found their unique echoes in South Asia. International tensions between the Soviet and the Chinese lines, and revolutionary edge of Maoist ideologies fascinated not only the West but also the political imaginaries of popular, particularly student, politics across the Third World.⁴¹ In India, the CPI split multiple times during this period, the first in 1965 triggered by the Indo-China war that produced the new China-oriented CPI-M from the old Soviet-oriented CPI; and second in 1968, with the formation of the far-left, Maoist faction CPI-ML breaking away from the CPI-M. The divisions were based on both ideological lines and those of radicalism, the CPI-ML occupying the extreme left position within the new spectrum. The split also occurred around the movement of sharecroppers in Naxalbari in North Bengal, from where a new radical peasants' movement was to develop in the late-1960s. The Naxalbari movement was a trigger to re-ignite unfinished land struggles of the 1940s, and with that a new wave of peasant revolution agenda, which has been famously called the Naxalite movement. The Naxalite insurgency was hailed by China as the initiation of a Maoist resistance that would soon spread across the country. 'Spring Thunder Breaks over India', read the Chinese radio broadcasts in July 1968.⁴² This was a return to the peasantry as the vanguard of revolutionary

³⁹ See also Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason, 'Journeying through Modernism: Travels and Transits of East Pakistani Artists in Post-Imperial London', *British Art Studies* 13, <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-13/hoek-sunderason>.

⁴⁰ Layli Uddin, "Enemy Agents at Work": A microhistory of the 1954 Adamjee and Karnaphuli riots in East Pakistan', *Modern Asian Studies*, online first, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X19000416>; Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*.

⁴¹ Sanjay Seth, 'Indian Maoism: The Significance of Naxalbari', in Arif Dirlik, Paul Healy and Nick Knight (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Mao Zedong's Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997); see also, Galimberti et al., *Art, Global Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*.

⁴² 'Spring Thunder Breaks over India', *People's Daily*, 5 July 1967, reprinted in Seth, 'Indian Maoism: The Significance of Naxalbari', 291. See also, Sumanta Bannerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising* (London: Zed Books, 1984).

resistance – an echo of the Telengana and Tebhaga peasant movements of the late 1940s, as Charu Mazumdar, the fiery Naxalite leader, announced, ‘We must build our party basically among the peasant masses.’⁴³ By 1970, the movement had spread to urban Calcutta, and took the form of an explosive iconoclastic movement where urban-middle-class students attacked institutions, cultural icons and bourgeois establishments in an extreme bid for social revolution. Its foment can be found in the narratives and montage of Mrinal Sen’s film *Calcutta 1971* (1972). As the establishment cracked down on the rebels through the early 1970s, the Naxalite movement became an explosion from within the contradictions of the postcolonial left – with party cadres turning on each other, new ideological splits and the extreme polarization of the parliamentary left and the far-left ‘Maoist’ activists.

The popular left-wing upsurge of the late 1960s and early 1970s was shared across South Asia in varying forms. At the start of the 1970s, histories of the far/left, of insurgency and resistance, made political and cultural geographies of South Asia coalesce. Across the border in East Pakistan, students and urban professionals joined the peasant, tribal and worker movements that had been active and actively repressed since the early 1950s, into a movement reaching a crescendo in the late 1960s. Here too, modes of resistance and insurrection were in conversation with foment in India and China while cultural representations drew parallels with Vietnam.⁴⁴ February 1969 saw a surge in resistance with the distinct socialist agenda of Maulana Bhashani – the peasant and labour leader of the National Awami Party. The Eleven-Point programme released by the student alliance of Dhaka University in January 1969 against the military dictatorship of General Ayub Khan had incorporated ‘subaltern concerns’, and Maulana Bhashani called for an alliance of students, workers and peasants around the rallying cry of economic and political change.⁴⁵ A revolutionary mobilization and ongoing resistance ensured a violent military repression that led to the popular insurrection and guerrilla warfare that eventually led to the

⁴³ Charu Mazumdar, ‘Undertake the work of Building a Revolutionary Party’, *Liberation*, October 1968, accessed on Charu Mazumdar-Collected Writings, <http://cpiml.org/library/charu-mazumdar-collected-writings/formation-of-all-india-coordination-committee-of-communist-revolutionaries/undertake-the-work-of-building-a-revolutionary-party/>. Accessed on 22 February 2019.

⁴⁴ Fahmida Akhter, ‘Zahir Raihan’s *Stop Genocide* (1971): A Dialectical Cinematic Message to the World’, in *South Asian Filmscapes: Transregional Encounters*, eds. Elora Halim Chowdhury and Esha Niyogi De (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 233–49.

⁴⁵ See Peter Custers, ‘Maulana Bhashani and the Transition to Secular Politics in East Bengal’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 2 (2010), 231–59. See also, Layli Uddin, *In The Land of Eternal Eid: Maulana Bhashani and the Political Mobilisation of Peasants and Lower-Class Urban Workers in East Pakistan, c. 1930s-1971* (PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2016).

independence of eastern Bengal as Bangladesh.⁴⁶ In Ceylon, soon to be renamed Sri Lanka, 1970 was a year of popular insurgency with militant students staging multiple attacks against the institutions of government and pushing for a more radical agenda on the left. Like the Naxalbari movement happening at the same time in India, such insurgents were inspired by Maoist ideologies of people's war, and displayed a nihilistic politics that was at the same time, generational. The April 1971 insurrection happened despite a sharply leftward turn in the elections of 1970, and due to disgruntled 'Homegrown socialist, egalitarian and populist revolutionary movements,' who as an observer noted, '[. . .] will trouble regimes that are unable to solve basic social and economic problems,' and will be 'poly-centric rather than mono-centric movements': 'The spectre of communism haunts Asia but it is very different from the spectre that haunted Europe earlier this century.'⁴⁷

Histories of the subcontinental left beyond the 1980s echo more strongly our proposed call for reading ideology via imagination and dissonance rather than affirmation. The historical modalities of the cultural left in postcolonial South Asia, as we have tried to show here, were mobile and multi-nodal, consisting of partisans and fellow-travellers, with informal affiliations that were shaped but not overdetermined by the ideological and political certainties of nation states and party lines, nor the oceanic affect of revolutions and despairs of repression. Across such historical moments of the South Asian left are personal, aesthetic, national and transnational entanglements, intersections and (border) crossings. The interaction between the political and the cultural fields was steered by individuals – with different, shifting or contradictory political subjectivities. The personal trajectories of artists and cultural forms exceed the frontiers set by political borders and party lines. Our focus on the postcolonial period also foregrounds a new sociocultural matrix – marked by migration, displacement, trans-border conversations as much as inabilities to contain and converse – that shaped questions of aesthetic form.

The chapters in this volume activate these decolonial histories of the left in South Asia via form, seeing form both as a site for working through the nature of political commitments in the complex historical modalities of the left and as a trace of the networks and affiliations that produced them. We propose that

⁴⁶ Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd, 1980).

⁴⁷ S. Arasaratnam, 'The Ceylon Insurrection of April 1971: Some Causes and Consequences,' *Pacific Affairs* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 1972), 356–71, 368.

forms of the cultural left can capture what Partha Chatterjee has called the ‘the fragmentary, the local, and the subjugated’,⁴⁸ and thereby the ‘heterogeneous time’ of postcolonial modernity⁴⁹ rather than the ‘homogeneous empty time’ the national identities are idealized on.⁵⁰ Such forms – of disenchantment, solidarities and counter-hegemonic imaginations, as much as hauntings – as the chapters here show, can resist the drives for ‘shallow homogenization’, and open up for ‘other, potentially richer definitions of the “nation” and the future political community.’⁵¹

Form

The social and political transformations and mobilizations of the left across South Asia found expression in aesthetic forms and cultural practices. These emerged in response to the central questions animating left-committed artistic practice about how to give concrete shape to, and insight into, the experiences of the people, and galvanize commitments to a transformative future. Today these forms provide a parallel register or archive through which to grasp and interpret the changing political fortunes, alliances and contestations of the postcolonial left in South Asia. In this volume, we present close readings of the aesthetic forms, artworks, texts and events to provide insight into the ways in which conceptual discussions and political passions intertwined and were given material shape. In exploring the discussions around those forms, we also gain an understanding of how those materials and their formal contingencies were considered to express and transmit those debates and passions to viewers, activists, critics and audiences elsewhere. We show how form worked to connect fields of artistic practice, centred debates and reflections, and allowed individual works or artists to be recognizably part of a broader field of political commitments, building lasting connections among artists and activists across the region.

⁴⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), xi.

⁴⁹ Partha Chatterjee, ‘The Nation in Heterogeneous Time’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38, no. 4 (2001), 399–418.

⁵⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

⁵¹ Gyan Pandey, ‘In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today’, *Representations*, no. 37, *Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories* (Winter 1992), 29.

Form is a mode of representation that gives material shape to ideas.⁵² Michel Foucault has distinguished resemblance and similitude as different modalities of representation.⁵³ Resemblance has a model to which it is faithful; it 'serves representation, which rules over it.'⁵⁴ Similitude propels series of articulations that are set apart through small differences; 'similitude serves repetition which ranges across it.'⁵⁵ The objects, phrases and images under discussion in this volume share characteristics but are not faithful copies limited by resemblance. They are connected through similitude and shift alongside the fracturing, splitting and realigning historical and social formations of the cultural left in postcolonial South Asia. They are therefore also distinct from more conventional or generic public cultural forms. In this volume we follow Lauren Berlant's idea of form as an extended repetition. Berlant distinguishes 'between *form* as an extended repetition that conscripts attention and *genre* as scene of elaborated and conventional expectation.'⁵⁶ While figure and genre point to historical and determinate norms and expectations,⁵⁷ and work along the lines of Foucault's resemblance, form captures the attention through its repetition with difference and is marked by similitude. Where genre 'is always about modalities of practice that circulate norms,'⁵⁸ form is marked by similitude, which 'reveals what recognisable objects, familiar silhouettes, hide, prevent from being seen, render invisible.'⁵⁹ Form can reveal what genre conceals.

We understand form as an extended and modifying repetition of concrete material articulations of concepts and matter that draw our attention due to their break with convention, their repetition of something familiar incorporating the unexpected. The artists, critics, poets, film-makers and writers under discussion in this volume work to develop forms appropriate to their political

⁵² The humanities have recently witnessed a return to formal analysis as a conceptual starting point and methodology, resulting in a reclamation of form, and practices of close reading, as sites for critical scholarship, that are proximate to some of our approaches in this volume. See Ellen Rooney, 'Form and Contentment', *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000), 17–40; Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019); Anahid Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: on Poetry and Social Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Christa Robbins and Kris Cohen, 'Beyond Formaldehyde, An Interview with Lauren Berlant', *Open Set*, 2015, <http://www.open-set.com/cnrobbins/o-s-form-issue/an-interview-of-form-with-lauren-berlant/> (emphasis ours).

⁵⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971).

⁵⁸ Robbins and Cohen, 'Beyond Formaldehyde'.

⁵⁹ Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 46.

and ethical commitments, in which art must be freed from convention to allow the articulation and exposure of repression and inequality, to make visible the repressed, such as in Chittaprosad's *Children* linocut series that exposed the 'underbelly of Nehruvian Indian' (see chapter 2 by Sunderason) and remained largely unseen and rejected by the party. Such forms both expose the world and reframe our understanding of it. Anahid Nersessian suggests that both poetic form and the historical moment 'effect changes in how we, as embodied beings, experience the material world, and it also makes those changes harder to grasp'.⁶⁰ In an earlier iteration, she discusses 'calamity form' as 'a poetic technique that [. . .] allows even evanescent changes in the world to become apprehensible as well as apprehensive – objects of experience and sources of anxiety'.⁶¹ We take from this the capacity of form to be both generative of embodied ways of knowing the world and unsettling our familiarity with that world.

Making apprehensible, and even apprehensive, the evanescent changes in the world, and shaping the experience of living in cataclysmic times, were a central part of the call to arms of artists in the anti-imperialist struggle in late-colonial India. As articulated in the 1943 IPTA manifesto: 'In recent years, the depth, and sweep of the titanic events of contemporary history . . . have compelled many sensitive writers and artists to realize in varying degrees that art and literature can have a future only if they become the authentic expressions and inspirations of the people's struggles for freedom and culture.'⁶² Art was to be an inspiration to those who were swept up in these events and the unfolding political struggle for freedom and change.

The question of form was central to the debate about the ways in which art and artists formed a part of these larger political mobilizations. The IPTA manifesto rejected the idea that 'art was to be an ornament' and railed against the 'soulless formalism' of nineteenth-century art in India, which 'since long had ceased to be of any great significance in the lives of the people'.⁶³ As Ramnath details in her contribution to this volume (see chapter 4), like IPTA, the Progressive Writers Association and the Afro-Asian writers were committed to the idea that through their art, they could 'change reality by portraying reality'. Realism was the form for an 'objective

⁶⁰ Nersessian, *Calamity Form*, 4.

⁶¹ Anahid Nersessian, 'Two Gardens: An Experiment in Calamity Form', *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2013), 311.

⁶² In Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Amrit Gangar (eds), *Ritwik Ghatak – Argument and Stories* (Bombay: Screen Unit/Research Centre for Cinema Studies, 1987), 29.

⁶³ Rajadhyaksha and Gangar, *Ritwik Ghatak*, 27.

representation of reality [that] was expected to reveal existing contradictions in social relations and pave the way for revolutionary change.’⁶⁴ Formalism was in many ways considered its impotent and complacent other, indicating an unnecessary play on motifs and ornamentations in art that neither expressed nor galvanized the struggles of the people. It was dismissed as ‘art for art’s sake’, as a number of contributions to this volume demonstrate (see Chapters 3, 4, 6, 7 by Dadi, Ramnath, Hoek and Dass, respectively).

But the question of form nonetheless continued to haunt those artists who were to portray and make meaningful the contradictions that were the true nature of society and the source of its inequalities and injustices. Realism was embraced as an artistic operation, as described by Lukács, in which ‘every major realist fashions the material given in his own experience, and in so doing makes use of techniques of abstraction, among others. But his goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society.’⁶⁵ The question of realism was about form as illuminating, not about genre as reassuring familiarity. Left-committed artists debated the nature of this form in which material could be fashioned to express the objective reality of the people and their struggles within the context of newly decolonizing South Asian societies and states and make it newly perceptible to galvanize action. This concern continued to animate film-makers, writers and artists after the violent denouement of colonial occupation and its inheritances in the postcolonial nation states of South Asia, as they strived for ‘art for life’s sake’.

Folklore had presented itself before 1947 as one means of abstracting and evocatively capturing the reality of colonial society and presenting anti-colonial perspectives.⁶⁶ As expressed by Utpal Dutt, the playwright, director and actor: ‘folklore tradition has already captured the struggle of its own time as well as ours in a complex manner; its apparent naivete [*sic*] is an artistic device concealing an intense moment of suffering in the life of the masses.’⁶⁷ Folklore provided a mode of presenting immanent content in an abstracted, artistic, form, that was capable of articulating the ‘struggle of our time.’ The problem, as Dutt saw it, was

⁶⁴ Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 70.

⁶⁵ György Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, in Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007 [1938]), 38.

⁶⁶ Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and Avant-Garde 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 113–22; Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 191–2.

⁶⁷ Utpal Dutt, *Utpal Dutt on Cinema* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2009), 166.