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Parsi Theatre and Its Role in the Development of Modern Indian Theatre

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ABSTRACT: Parsi theatre and its significance in the modern day theatre has been underrated and understated in the contemporary world. This study portrays the emergence and evolution of the Parsi Theatre. It also implies the numerous factors of Parsi Theatre that have contributed to the modern day theatre. This research will put forward various elements of modern Indian theatre and how they came into existence through Parsi Theatre. The struggles of a commercial entity such as the Parsi Theatre and its survival and relevance are all talked about in this report.

KEYWORDS: Parsi theatre, Kathryn Hansen, languages, Bombay, proscenium arch, dramas and plays, cross dressing, impact on modern theatre

I. INTRODUCTION

Parsi Theatre is a controversial term used to describe the art of performing theatre (largely owned by the Parsi business community) that dominated the Indian cultural arena for a whopping hundred years, i.e., from 1850 to 1950. According to Kathryn Henson's book "Parsi Theatre: A Story in Time", Parsi Theatre originated in the mid 19th century in Bombay, India. The Parsis, who were a small but influential community of Zoroastrians, were the primary audience and patrons of this form of theatre. Henson explains that Parsi theatre emerged at a time when Bombay was experiencing rapid economic and social changes due to the British colonial rule. The Parsis, who had a long history of commercial and cultural ties with the British, were eager to embrace British culture and technology while also maintaining their own distinct cultural identity. Henson argues that the Parsi Theatre was a product of this interesting coming together of two such distinct cultures. It combined western theatrical traditions, such as melodrama and farce with Indian classical music and dance as well as local folk traditions. The result became a unique theatre form that appealed to both Parsis and non Parsis alike. Parsis gradually became the pioneers in the modern theatre movement in India. Prior to this theatre, Indian theatrical practices had folk theatre performances as the only kind of Indian theatre. The spectrum of Indian theatre widened to an unbelievable extent where theatre became a symbol of much more than just folk performances. Parsi theatre introduced new forms of literature, music and dance and helped to establish Bombay as a cultural centre of India. It also addressed social and political issues of the time, such as colonialism and Indian nationalism through its plays and performances.

II. BEGINNING OF THE PARSİ THEATRE

Mountstuart Elphinstone was a British colonial administrator who served as the Governor of Bombay from 1819 to 1827. He recognized the potential of Parsi Theatre as a popular form of entertainment and was instrumental in establishing the first public theatre in Bombay in 1822 which provided a platform for Parsi Theatre companies to perform their plays. He also supported the establishment of a school of acting in Bombay, which trained actors and helped improve the quality of Parsi Theatre productions. Although the beginning itself showed so much potential, things went downhill soon after.

Parsi theatre was supposed to be a profit generating entity. After the departure of Elphinstone, things went south and the theatre went into debt. The situation worsened to an extent wherein a proposition was made in 1834 that if the generation of losses continued, the theatre would be converted into a clubhouse. This is when



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Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy entered the scene as a knight in shining armour. He was a prominent Parsi businessman and philanthropist who supported the arts and culture of the Parsi community. In 1835, he bought the theatre for Rs. 50,000. He made all the necessary payments and retained the property owned by the theatre. Jeejeebhoy is considered as one of the pioneers of Parsi theatre because he was the first to introduce Western-style Indian theatre to the Parsi community in the early 19th century. The theatre remained closed for ten years. Jagannath Shankarset, donated a plot of land on Grand Road in 1844. Jeejeebhoy built the Grand Road Theatre in Mumbai, which was the first theatre in Mumbai to stage English and Parsi plays. This theatre became the centre of Parsi theatre activity and provided a platform for Parsi playwrights, actors and directors to showcase their talent. Jeejeebhoy was instrumental in promoting the work of Parsi playwrights such as Bhavani Shankar Nallaseth, who wrote the first Parsi play, and Framjee Cowasjee, who wrote several successful plays in the early days of Parsi theatre. Jeejeebhoy's financial support helped these playwrights to produce their plays and made Parsi theatre a popular form of entertainment in Mumbai. In recognition of his contribution to the arts, Jeejeebhoy was awarded the title of Knight Bachelor by Queen Victoria in 1842. Today, he's remembered as a pioneer of Parsi Theatre and a benefactor of Parsi community.

The birth of the first Parsi theatre company was in 1853 by Faramjee G. Dalal. It came to be known as the "Parsi Natak Mandali" or "Parsi Dramatic Corp". The earliest play performed by the "Parsi Natak Mandali" is 'Rustom Zabuli and Sohrab' at the Grand Road Theatre in 1853, followed by 'King Afrasiab' and 'Rustom Pehlvan'. 'Rustom Zabuli and Sohrab' is the adaptation of the 10th century epic Shahnameh. Rustom Zabuli and Sohrab are characters written by Firdosi. This production was significant because it established the popularity of Parsi Theatre in India. The play gained popularity for its lavish sets, costumes and music and it was performed to enthusiastic audiences. The success of the play paved the way for the Parsi Theatre to become a significant cultural force in India in the decades to come.

III. RISE OF PARSİ THEATRE

Parsi theatre had a long way to go after its first production. This theatre had it all. It incorporated western theatrical traditions such as melodrama, farce and musical comedy and adapted these western methods to suit the Indian audiences. The grandeur of Parsi theatre was unparalleled to any theatre that had been previously performed in India. The Parsis spend a generous amount of money on stage settings. The proscenium form of stage design was frequently employed. The stage was framed by a substantial arch known as the proscenium arch. This arch concealed the backstage area from the audience while acting as a visual framing for the stage activity. The audience used to typically sit in front of an elevated stage while facing the proscenium arch. The rich and intricate sets used by the Parsi theatre groups were renowned for conveying a feeling of grandeur and spectacle. These sets could be shown to their greatest potential since the arch naturally served as the audience's attention grabbing focal point. Khawasji Khatau, known as the 'Irwing of India' established the Alfred theatrical company in 1877 which was known for staging Shakespearan adaptation.

Henson points out in her text that since the Parsi theatre was a commercial enterprise driven by profit, it focused more on producing plays that would become famous and would gain more commercial success which would appeal to broad audience. In this respect, the important themes that were used were romance, adventure and heroism. Parsi theatre, while being true to its art kept in mind the demand of its audiences just like the Parsis who maintained their distinct identity while incorporating and adding more value to the nation.

Furthermore, one of the hallmarks of Parsi theatre was its highly skilled actors who evoked a wide range of emotions in the audience. They conveyed complex emotions and situations effortlessly on the stage. The actors were trained in a variety of musical styles that went from Indian music to Western operatic traditions. The powerful acting in the Parsi theatre was a testament to the skill and talent of the actors who performed in this vibrant and important cultural tradition.



IV. LANGUAGES IN PARSİ THEATRE

Parsi Theatre and English

Let's take a step back to look at the demise of English as a language of the Parsi stage before moving to Gujarati/Urdu. In a setting where sociability and reciprocal hospitality strengthened economic partnership between European and indigenous merchant societies, Parsi elites in Bombay were among those who were first drawn to the cultural capital theatre. Leading Indians were given tickets to the English theatre in exchange for inviting their coworkers to event like nautch parties. The English speaking Bombay Theatre, additionally referred to as the Theatre on the Green, was located in the Fort's centre by the year 1821 and the Parsis started going there.

Every performance at the Grant Road Theatre until 1853 was in English. Both professional British actors and amateur British actors from the civil cantonment lines made up the cast of English theatre. Professional travelling performers from America, Europe and England came to perform in India. Indians only appeared sometimes as extras. A theatre troupe from Sangli, Maharashtra, which was visiting, brought about significant transformation. The Hindu Dramatic Corp staged the first public theatrical performance in an Indian language on March 9, 1853, at the Grant Road Theatre, under the leadership of Vishnudas Bhawe. The primary drama was in Marathi and was based on the Ramayana. The Corps presented *Gopichand and Jalandhar* in Hindustani in November of the same year.

The decision to use Indian languages rather than English reflected shifting of audiences and geographic trends as well as the hybrid nature of the budding parsi theatre. The Grant Theatre was located in the so called Native Town, considerably to the north of the Fort. It drew viewers with progressively less English language proficiency and limited capacity to understand an English play. Due to the distance, the British audience, which was not very large, started to leave. In the middle of the century, business related instead of literary English knowledge predominated among Parsis. The pit at the Grant Road Theatre was filled with lower class locals from nearby Girgaum and Kalbadevi, which forced Mrs. Deacle to lower her ticket prices.

The infrequent use of English music, terminology, and cultural references persisted without losing its attractiveness to the audience. The Parsi theatre, in fact, mastered the craft of presenting Englishness even while it removed English as a language. The Parsi theatre tapped into the fascination of English metropolitan culture through its architectural setting, stage design, administration and publicity, as well as by naming companies after royalty and myriad other public signals. Through the entire nineteenth century, business managers remained closely connected to the English reading public by placing advertisements in both English and Gujarati newspapers.

Parsi Theatre and Gujarati

There was more to the theatre turning towards Gujarati than just gathering a bigger number of spectators. Not soon after Dadabhai Naoroji coined the term *swadesi* to counter colonial economic policy, the Gujarati dramatists made use of the emotion and presented the constructing of a theatre that appealed and acknowledged its own people. The Parsi theatre thus established itself in its early years as a public representation of a certain community through the shahnameh plays performed in Gujarati. These performances weren't meant to be exclusively for Parsi viewers. Nevertheless, they expressed a proud sense of Parsi identity.

Folk songs and tales in Gujarati were frequently utilized to spread reformist ideologies as well as to instill new habits and attitudes, particularly among women. Women were considered to be especially susceptible to superstitions, and the surrounding non parsi society was blamed for their domestic seclusion and poor levels of education. The female protagonists of Shahnameh and medieval Persian romances like Nizami's were held up as role models in popular songs and stories, despite the fact that the norm of female purity or pativratiya established for Parsi women was practically identical to its counterpart among Hindus.



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The nama tales and their enactments, the garbas and garbis or women's songs, the old dastans and qissas, the khyals or improvised poems of the Turra-Kalgi factions, playlets and songs from the Gujarati language are all notable genres of mid-century Parsi popular culture.

Bhavai in dramatic form, lavanis and ballads in Gujarati and Marathi connected to mahlaris and tamasha, ghazals in Persian, Urdu, and Gujarati, songs based on bhakti poets like Kabir, and horis, thumris, tappas, and other secular songs.

The various song anthologies created by Parsis and published in Gujarati serve as excellent examples of each of these genres.

Parsi theatre and Urdu/Hindustani

The fact that one of the most intelligent Parsi associated with the early theatre invented performing in Urdu is significant. Dadi Patel M.A., as he was affectionately called, was also known as Dadabhai Sohrabji Patel. Patel came from a prosperous business family who disapproved of his acting endeavours. One of the first Parsis to earn a Master of Arts from the University of Bombay, he took things in a new path. Besides ordering the initial, he popularized “opera” as a new type of Urdu play, introduced “scientific” stagecraft, professionalized the company by offering full time salaries, and started the practice of travelling even before railway links were finished to the Deccan. His experiment, which was directed by an authoritarian actor with charisma, inspired his audience members’ imagination.

Many Bombay citizens did not grow up speaking Urdu or Hindustani as their first language. The first official census was taken in 1864, and it showed that 65% of people were Hindus and only 20% were Muslims. Muslim people separated between industrial workers, craftsmen, and cultivators who were largely Konkani speakers, and the mercantile communities (Bohras, Khojas and Memons) all of whom spoke Gujarati. The Parsis, who made up the 6% of the population, may have used Hindustani as a common language in trade, but Gujarati and English were the official languages of instruction. In addition, a lot of Parsi males went to madaras to study Arabic and Persian. Feelings for Urdu may have been influenced by the acquisition of Persian and resuscitation of historical ties to Iran. *Sone ke mol ki Khorshed*, a Behram Fardun Marzban translation of a Gujarati drama by Edalji Kohri, was the first Urdu play. It was ordered by Dadi Patel for the Victoria Theatrical Company in 1871. There were two justifications given for the adoption of Urdu. The first benefit is that it might act as a general language that transcends particular communities, expanding the audience of Parsi theatre. The theatre’s literary status and enjoyment were raised by its connection to rich narrative and lyric traditions. Any connections that Hindustani that Hindustani/Urdu might have with a particular group of speakers, in the writer’s opinion, were unimportant. The reason it was recommended as a theatrical medium was more because it had no territorial borders and was not restricted by restrictive idea of *quam*. Newspapers accounts of these early plays mention how the audience was taken aback when they heard Parsi actors clearly pronounce Urdu words. Even if Urdu poetry was unfamiliar, Dadi Patel showed his talent by successfully rehearsing the cast in a language other than their own, making him exotic to both viewers and performers. The Victoria and The Elphinstone, the two largest businesses of early 1870s, became fiercely competitive as a result of the employment of Urdu and the concurrent push towards the new fad of “opera”. Consequently, the adoption of Urdu was more than just an act of inclusion geared at the non parsi viewers. It was a part of a bigger environment in which the musical, poetic and visual economics of the theatre were expanding it.

Parsi Theatre: Cross dressing and Introduction of Women on Stage

Parsi theatre was also the most intriguing because it employed cross dressing of all genders and races. In this instance, the female impersonator was crucial to the development of new Indian womanhood norms. He/she was praised by Jewish and Anglo-Indian actresses posing as Hindu and Parsi heroines. Therefore, because of the apparent abnormality of Indian men posing as females and foreign women posing as Indian women, the parsi stage developed a paradigm for female performance even before Indian women themselves had become evident. Female impersonators set up the stage for female performers, helping the nationalists’ newly united Indian woman replace



earlier practises that were stigmatised. The best examples of this historical development can be seen in the theatres of western India, where cross dressing persisted during the colonial era. This is also the situation where the emergence of a modified code of feminine behaviour and an accepted norm for female appearance is most closely associated with female impersonation. The argument that impersonators and outsider women were used as quick stand-ins when the reputation of the urban theatre would have been jeopardized is not the only issue at hand. New perspectives on the feminine body emerged as a result of gender and racial masking. Theatrical directors, playwrights and audiences had more opportunities to experiment with new processes of envisioning and acting, thanks to practices of gender and racial impersonation. Looking at women, the revised role of the spectator within the urban entertainment economy was crucial to this process. The audience's predisposition for theatrical transvestism and its distinctive ways of conveying erotic ambiguity somewhat shaped how cross-dressed actors were received on metropolitan stages. The court and salon environments, where the affluent male customers had exclusive control over courtesan singers and dancers, had similarly impacted modalities of responding to female performance. Impersonation and other theatrical techniques started to confront the spectator as a gendered topic with the rise of the middle class theatre going public and the size of the female audience. Not only male viewers were catered to in more intricate ways as ideas of companionate marriage challenged the long standing homosociality society. Women made up a larger and larger portion of the audience, necessitating accommodations within the theatre, and their preferences and satisfaction influenced how gender difference was acted out.

Performances of feminine identity provided a forum for men and women to discuss and clarify the gender norms. The result was that theatrical cross-dressing during this time period went beyond the reification of pre-existing gender boundaries, or the violation of the limits in order to evoke laughter.

The phenomenon of Anglo-Indian actresses brought glitz and excitement to a theatre already known for its spectacle. Along with the changes brought about by imported stage props, sound effects, and painted scenery, there was also a gender hierarchy in colonial society changing. The male Indian viewer might subjugate the English beauty through the use of his gaze and subvert the power dynamics that reigned in the British-ruled colonial society. Although these relationships were based on political and economic dominance, they were viewed as a case of the masculine West dominating the feminine East on the basis of gender. The Anglo-Indian actress, the feminine embodiment of the West, was suddenly domesticated and subject to the Indian hero and the male audience's gaze. Domestic comedies and melodramas started to rely so much on this inversion that writers had to adapt their stories to fit it. According to playwright Betab's autobiography, dramas of that era were not played at all ' if they lacked a fair mistress (gori bibi) and a black master (kale miyan). The image of the Anglo-Indian actress helped her to prosper. She might be interpreted intertextually, inside a complex of existing Indian understandings of the ideal feminine, despite being seen as a symbol of the West, of colonialism, and of a strange and exotic set of gender relations. The beloved is portrayed as a pale fairy or an houri from Paradise in Indo-Islamic mythology. The Anglo-Indian actress became a symbol of beauty and became this category feminine perfection.

Viewers positioned Mary within the ghazal lyric poetry traditions and the heterodox mystical lexicon of Sufism, referring to her as a "doll carved out of marble, an houri from heaven". The lover or viewer would bow down to the idol, encoding sexual mastery in masochistic self-surrender. While stemming from an earlier poetic formation, this position also anticipated the fan worship cult that emerged during the film era. The actress's face was photographed, and that image afterwards served as a crucial marketing tool and took on a life of its own. A drama's stars would be promoted on billboards placed throughout the city, and when the women debuted on stage, their names and images on them. The song books and libretti that were purchased at the performance venue and sung by auditors during the performance started to have actress images on covers. Famous actresses were featured on matchboxes and postcards that were printed abroad and circulated throughout Asia. The voices of singing actors and actresses were captured on wax records in the first decade of the twentieth century, and these too started to move separately from the staged performances.



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Despite the “white” actress’ “sellable” physical appeal, the audience ultimately wanted to see a genuine portrayal of Indian femininity. Mary Fenton was frequently cast in parts that featured naïve, lovely protagonists typically from the village, who were momentarily overcome by evil powers. *Gamre ni Gori* (The Fair Village Belle), *Bholi Gul* (Innocent Flower), and *Bholi Jan* (Innocent Dear) are only a few examples of dramas that fit this description.

In conclusion, during this time of transition, Indian women’s public image was shaped notably through the widely accessible commercial theatres of western and northern India, in addition to literary representations and social experimentation.

There were taboos on acting, particularly women acting. Particularly on the Parsi stage, Indian men who passed for women or white women who passed for Indians were most frequently used to play as Indian ladies. Both images offered more opportunities for viewers, more joy than those allowed by the union of Indian and female. Both continued the patriarchal control over both the physical and visible manifestations of the female body. Nevertheless, these practices gave women a chance to finally become publicly visible, no longer being merely objects of imagined desire but rather being physically represented with a variety of gestures, habits, and visual cues that signify femininity. This time period was later regarded as a passing phase until the fully realized Indian Woman (*bhartiya nari*) emerged. But despite its complexities and ambiguities, it is still deserving of attention.

Parsi Theatre and its Impact on Modern Theatre

One of the ways in which Parsi Theatre influenced modern Indian theatre was through its spectacle and visual effects. Parsi theatre productions were known for their elaborate sets, costumes, and special effects, which were intended to create a sense of grandeur and spectacle. This emphasis on spectacle has continued to be an important feature of Indian theatre, especially in the genres of musicals and dance dramas. Modern Indian drama also benefitted from the influence of Parsi theatre. Many of the plays that Parsi theatre companies produced were adaptations of European plays, but they were altered to appeal to Indian audiences’ preferences and sensitivities. These adaptations frequently included folklore and elements of Indian culture, and they contributed to the development of an Indian theatrical tradition that relied on both Eastern and Western influences.

The development of a commercial theatre sector was another way that Parsi theatre inspired contemporary Indian theatre. An extremely prosperous economic endeavour, Parsi theatre opened the foundation for India’s current theatre business to emerge. Indian theatres now include a diverse range of genres and forms becoming a vibrant industry.

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