

Stages of Life

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Indian Theatre Autobiographies

KATHRYN HANSEN



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Preface

This book tells the stories of four men whose lives were profoundly touched by the Parsi theatre. Their tales begin near the end of the nineteenth century. In 1898, a boy named Jayshankar began his career as a 9-year-old child actor. Recruited from Visnagar, a small town in Gujarat north of Ahmedabad, he traveled the long distance to Calcutta to join a Parsi theatrical company. In the same year, hit tunes from the Parsi theatre were echoing through the lanes of Bareilly (Bareilly), in what is now northern Uttar Pradesh. There a boy named Radheshyam, almost the same age as Jayshankar, took to singing in the Ram Lila. A third young man, a poet named Betab, was then working at the Kaiser-i Hind Printing Press in Delhi. A restless theatre enthusiast of 24, he had just started writing plays for the Parsi stage. In the following year, 1899, the youngest in our quartet, Fida Husain, was born in Muradabad (Moradabad), a center for artisans not far from Bareilly. Although singing was forbidden in his household, he too became infatuated with the Parsi theatre. When he reached adolescence, he ran away from home to join a traveling company.

The lives of these boys were to be irrevocably altered by the Parsi theatre of the early twentieth century. Raised in humble circumstances, they grew up poor and unlettered. They went on to earn fame and fortune in their theatrical careers. The stage became their schoolhouse, bestowing on them its store of knowledge. When the tours of the companies separated them from their homes, they found surrogate families in the troupes they joined. Here they received sustenance and affection, imbibed discipline and respect for authority. The theatre took advantage of them, used them, and broke their health and spirit from time to time. But it also enabled them to develop their gifts, and they blossomed as singers, dancers, and poets. Through the

professional stage these boys entered a larger world, an arena of possibility. The Parsi theatre turned these boys into men.

Jayshankar and Fida Husain became well-known actors; Betab and Radheshyam achieved fame mainly as playwrights and publishers. Each made valuable contributions to India's theatrical history. Jayshankar crafted a new feminine persona through his seductive impersonations of respectable young women. Fida Husain too excelled as a female impersonator, but he became most famous for his enactment of religious devotion in the role of the saint-poet Narsi Mehta. Both Betab and Radheshyam popularized the Hindu mythological genre in a period of national awakening. These achievements reoriented the half-century-old Parsi theatre, shifting it toward new agendas and audiences. It is because of these four men, and one or two others such as the playwright Agha Hashr Kashmiri, that the Parsi theatre continued to thrive well into the twentieth century. Through their life-work, the popular stage was able to retain its audience even after cinema made inroads in South Asia.

The end of the nineteenth century, when these impressionable boys took to the stage, was an age of infectious song and story. Every region of India possessed its own mix of popular oral genres. Frequently, these forms were central to the repertoires of hereditary performing groups or subcastes. Radheshyam, like his father, was a *kathavachak*, a storyteller who expounded upon religious verse for a living. Jayshankar was from the Nayak or Bhojak community who recited genealogies and narrative song-cycles for Jain patrons. Coming from artisan backgrounds, Betab and Fida Husain were not born into performing communities. They inherited the secular songs and theatre forms of North India: *lavani*, Svang, and Nautanki.

Then, from the port city of Bombay came a cosmopolitan entertainment culture carried by traveling theatre companies run by Parsi businessmen. These drama troupes brought a new level of sophistication to popular performance. Capitalizing on technologies introduced by European thespians, they paraded showy styles of acting, singing, and emplotting drama. The proscenium stage was newly adopted and outfitted for theatrical representation. Roving companies stayed for months in small towns like Bareilly, where they rented family mansions for rehearsals and erected tin-roofed playhouses for their shows.

For provincial audiences, a night at the theatre meant dazzling lights, glittering costumes, and heart-stopping trick effects. Most memorable was the catchy music. Tunes from the Parsi companies soon infiltrated the soundscape. Singers of all stripes reworked familiar genres—sacred or profane—around the melodies, rhythms, and phrasing of the glamorous theatre companies. The allure of the new mode was so great that by the turn of the century the Parsi theatre had become a ubiquitous part of public culture across the subcontinent, its audience comprising people of every class. It knew no religious, linguistic, or ethnic bounds either. All the way from Quetta to Calcutta, an evening's fun could be had for the price of a ticket.

This colorful world of urban entertainment, transported to the tracts of northern India, comes alive in the life-stories contained in this book. Presented here are the autobiographies of Betab, Radheshyam, Jayshankar Sundari, and Fida Husain. As witnesses of epochal change, these men lived lives of inestimable value to historians. Their autobiographical writings capture a moment in India's cultural development that is largely forgotten. The four texts in this volume also introduce a new genre: the theatrical memoir, a variety of autobiographical narrative that emerged in India in the early twentieth century. The evidence of life-writing by theatre performers and poets raises important questions for the study of autobiography. Firmly planted in vernacular, largely oral, systems of communication and knowledge, these artists possess voices that speak in stylized performative registers. Through their work, the reader encounters not only a record of theatrical history but a living transcript, an oral performance in itself.

This book combines different objectives and is divided into several parts. Principally, it makes available a set of autobiographical texts by celebrated figures associated with the Parsi theatre. Written originally in either Hindi or Gujarati, the four accounts are here translated into English for the first time. The translations attempt to carry over the formal features and stylistic idiosyncrasies of the originals, while aiming for fluidity and easy access.

To explain specialized information, an apparatus of footnotes, appendices, and glossary has been provided. These aids synthesize a decade and more of research, and draw on an extensive archive including nineteenth-century newspapers and rare books in Gujarati,

Urdu, and Hindi. Their purpose is not only to render the texts more intelligible, but to trace the lineaments of the dense theatrical culture in which the autobiographers' activities were embedded. The footnotes interpret literary allusions and puns, and insert information omitted in the originals. Historical personages mentioned in the autobiographies, and institutions such as theatrical companies, are annotated in Appendix 1. Titles of plays and films in the texts are referenced with their authors or directors and dates in Appendix 2. The glossary defines Hindi and Urdu words that remain untranslated because of their specialized usage.

Each autobiography is preceded by an introduction specific to that work. Although arranged in chronological order, the autobiographies are self-contained narratives and may be read in any sequence. The introductions outline the life and achievements of the autobiographer and list his most important performances or works. Such topics as the style of the original, translation issues, the publication history of the text, and how it came to be written are also discussed.

The translations with their attached introductions in Part 2 are preceded in Part 1 by two chapters that supply contexts for the autobiographies, drawing on the approaches of cultural history and literary criticism. The aim of the first of these two chapters is to insert the autobiographies within an account of a historically specific form of theatrical practice. The Parsi theatre had been in existence for forty-five years by 1898, when Jayshankar entered the scene. Herein I present a synoptic view of its development, beginning with the first Parsi-sponsored drama performances in Bombay in 1853. This chapter explains how from its roots in amateur dramatics the Parsi theatre became a middle-brow commercial enterprise, in the process fanning out from Bombay to all parts of India, especially Delhi and the North.

The objective of the second chapter is to problematize autobiographical writing in India and focus on the theatrical memoir as a distinct genre. To this end, I enter the debates about the origins of autobiography and propose a definition of autobiography that is transcultural and transregional. Turning to the emergence of theatrical reminiscences within print culture in India, I then trace the context of literary production for the autobiographies within this volume. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the ways in which theatrical

memoirs constitute archives for examining histories of cultural formation, theatrical practice, and oral performance. This analysis entails a thematic reading of the texts for their documentary value.

The chapters in Part 1 do not presuppose any acquaintance with the autobiographies. Their purpose is to introduce the reader to the broad contours of the Parsi theatre and to establish the significance of theatrical autobiographies as cultural documents, thereby allowing for an informed encounter with the texts that follow. In Part 3, by contrast, the endeavor is to engage with the autobiographies fully from a position of foreknowledge and reflection. Here, I first look closely at the act of self-presentation at the heart of autobiographical writing. I begin with the axiom that life narratives are crafted by design and cannot simply be read as factual accounts. The reading of autobiography is connected to the way in which the self is understood, and the chapter therefore takes up the culturally and critically divergent forms of selfhood that have attained most notice in the literature.

In the final chapter I explore the voices articulated specifically in these life stories. My readings capture the differences among and within these memoirs in regard to narratorial manner and style, from Radhesyam's tone of supercilious superiority to Betab's mix of feistiness and self-deprecation. I highlight autobiographical templates such as the *bildungsroman* and consider the persistence of the didactic voice. The analysis responds to each autobiography in its own right, while marking the common ways in which childhood, education, maturation, success, and destiny are represented. Listening for what is omitted or elided as well as what is articulated, I direct attention to silences in the texts and point to instances in which silence, surprisingly, is broken.

These readings provide no closure; they are meant rather to spark questions and encourage a range of responses. Ultimately, they return us to the texts. In their performative ebullience, the narratives transcend analysis, suggesting the multifarious modes of being and vitality of their subjects—which, in the end, make their survival seem so worthwhile.

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PART 1

Pioneers to Professionals

A Retrospective of the Parsi Theatre

In South Asia, new forms of theatre stemming from the European encounter developed around 1850. The Parsis of Bombay, Zoroastrians who had come from Iran a millennium earlier, were one of the first groups to adopt Western modes of stagecraft and organize dramatic companies. They were not alone: the Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, and other Indian-language theatres offered spectators comparable diversions by the early twentieth century. Regardless of ethnic or regional affiliation, all participated in a commercial entertainment economy and played to a bourgeois class of spectators in cities with rapid economic growth. Everywhere, forms of music, dance, and drama once restricted to aristocratic groups became ready commodities. The theatre experience became a defining feature of colonial modernity across South Asia.

Within this overall transformation, the Parsi theatre occupied a distinct space. It was identified by its entrepreneurial backbone, not by its performers, audience, language, or content. The Parsi theatre companies contained a mix of Parsis and non-Parsis, as did their audiences, and the dramatic fare they offered rarely referred to Parsi religion or culture. In fact, Parsi theatre, both by the composition of its personnel and the sorts of plays it staged, synthesized elements of Asian and European origin, lending it a hybrid, middle-brow character. Most unusually, its large companies circulated throughout the subcontinent. Touring by rail and ship, they reached a vast territory and achieved a remarkable degree of popularity. The rubric “Parsi theatre” came to signify glamor and sophistication wherever the mobile units went.

For this reason, possibly, the designation stuck, despite its somewhat misleading reference to a specific community.

The Parsi theatre held sway as a major component of South Asian popular culture for almost a hundred years. During this span, it mushroomed from a few groups of aficionados in Bombay to a pan-Indian phenomenon. How did the Parsi theatre come to figure so significantly on the map of popular entertainment? This chapter provides a history of the dynamic process of its growth. It outlines the important shifts in theatrical organization, language, and repertoire that enabled the theatre to remain vital to several generations of spectators.

The period begins with the seeds of a new theatrical culture in 1853 and ends with the arrival of another entertainment medium, the talkies, in 1931. The autobiographers whose life stories form the substance of this book were key players in this history, even if their arrival on the scene did not take place until the late 1890s. This allows for a retrospective which creates a larger context for the autobiographies, and for sketching the conditions that led to their appearance. It positions these stories against a larger painted curtain, as it were, illuminating the lives of our four protagonists.

Pioneers of the Parsi Theatre, 1853–1868

At the dawn of the Parsi theatre era, the idea of performing dramas in Indian languages on a proscenium stage was a novelty in Bombay. The first theatre house built on the Western model had opened in 1776 on the Bombay Green, in the heart of the British settlement. By the 1820s, amateur theatricals had acquired a modest following in colonial society. The dramas enacted were recent imports from the British stage, and the ambience derived from the London theatres. Nonetheless, members of the local elite began to take an interest in these English-language productions. In the face of mounting debt, the Bombay Amateur Theatre was sold in 1835, and for a decade Bombay lacked a public playhouse. When a large group of citizens petitioned the Governor in 1840 for funds to construct a new theatre, prominent Parsis topped the list of signators and provided financial aid.

The Grant Road Theatre opened in 1846 under English management, and the first plays were performed in English. Yet soon the new

playhouse proved an ideal setting for Indian theatrical ventures. A group of players led by Vishnudas Bhave staged dramas based on the Hindu epics there in 1853. Parsi drama clubs also chose this venue for their earliest efforts. Their performances offered Indian spectators the opportunity to behold their costumed brethren acting, and they produced on the proscenium stage the cadences and witticisms of their own languages. From the performers' perspective, the pleasures of mounting productions in such a milieu must have been enormous. After witnessing English dramas for several decades, they now took up the reins themselves.

The social environment in which these activities occurred was rather circumscribed. In the main, two groups were pivotal to sustaining the Parsi theatre's early growth. The patron class was comprised of the mercantile elite, or *shetias*, leaders in the city's economic, cultural, and political life. *Shetias* had been active during the campaign to construct the Grant Road Theatre in 1840.¹ These wealthy backers were tapped when the first Parsi troupes appeared in 1853. Their largesse was crucial because, for the first fifteen years of its existence, the Parsi theatre was an operation of amateurs. Only after 1868 did *shetias* begin holding shares and the companies become commercial enterprises.

The second group of pivotal importance was the professional middle class, which yielded the majority of the players. The earliest Parsi Dramatic Corps members were educated youths from respectable families, gentlemen who made their living in journalism, law, and medicine. Their exposure to English education and Western literature had developed in them a passion for amateur theatricals. With their penchant for performing and desire to educate and reform society, these middle-class actors supplemented the *shetias'* cultural philanthropy.

Both groups conceived of theatre as an agent of moral betterment. The stage was understood as created by men of refinement for the edification of their class of society. The new theatrical experiments required careful nurturing, and the English newspapers were only too happy to commend them:

¹ Hansen (2002): 40.

A Parsi Theatre will be opened before the rich, the gay, and the pleasure-loving of this island [Bombay], by a Company of respectable young men who intend to make their first appearance, on the boards of the Grant Road Theatre, about the middle of this month. . . . Nothing can be farther from their minds than any hope of pecuniary advantage—the highest wish of their hearts is to see the springing up of a taste among the Parsis for the Noble and the Beautiful, and for the enjoyment of those ethereal pleasures which the Drama is sure to provide for them, if only kept in subordination to Morality and Virtue.²

Thus was heralded the first Parsi production of *Rustam and Sohrab*, a tale from Firdausi's Persian epic, the *Shahnama*. In the following months, five similar performances were publicized in the newspapers.

Although not intended exclusively for Parsis, these early shows were oriented primarily towards this community. As the playwright Edalji Jamshedji Khorī, author of the first dramatic script, put it: "This play has the most intimate relation with Parsis. Its matters relate to Parsis. Its writer is a Parsi, its producer is Parsi, and the main audience is Parsi."³ The *Shahnama* corpus set the Parsi theatre apart from folk-theatre forms based on the Hindu epics. It strengthened the early theatre's identity by reproducing tales from Iran, the Parsi mythic homeland, which were already in circulation within the community. And such early plays were enacted in Gujarati, the language of the region where the Parsis first settled in India.

Firdausi was not the only source, however. Parsi theatre buffs demonstrated an early penchant for Shakespeare. Gujarati-language productions of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Timon of Athens* were presented in the late 1850s.⁴ Elphinstone College youths also experimented with performing Shakespeare in English. Kunvarji Nazir established the Elphinstone Dramatic Society, a student group that earned kudos for its public performances in the Grant Road Theatre. The Shakespeare Society, another student club, mounted productions in the more private confines of the college.⁵

² *Bombay Telegraph and Courier*, Oct. 4, 1853.

³ Khorī (1870): Preface, 3, trans. Samira Sheikh.

⁴ *Bombay Times*, May 13, 1857; Nov. 18, 1858; April 9, 1859; Aug. 4, 1859.

⁵ Mehta (1960): 178–88.

The third kind of play was the farce, typically performed as a “tailpiece.” At its debut in 1853, the Parsi Dramatic Corps presented *Dhanji Garak* after the main drama. In this playlet, a Goan watchmaker is brought to trial and the magistrate satirized.⁶ Many farces focused on gender norms and family life. When performed for women-only audiences, they inculcated “scientific” attitudes toward religion, hygiene, and family welfare. Women were warned against blindly imitating their European sisters in *Freedom to Native Females*. Other farces, performed for mixed audiences, were intended to correct the behavior of men. *The Mahlarees* urged youths not to frequent lewd song-and-dance shows; men were instructed to avoid the excesses of the traditional marriage system. Although played for laughs, these farces defended modernity, reform, and colonial rule. The butt of humor was often the “unenlightened native.” Some perpetuated the myth of the Oriental despot, indirectly promoting British rule. *The Folly of Indian Princes* portrayed the Oriental nabob and his sycophants. Anglo-Indian courts of law were also lampooned. One skit showed the judge, barristers, and functionaries in their flowing robes and “superfluous ribbons,” and the plaintiff was ridiculed as a rogue, rascal, and perjurer.⁷

In both the serious play and the farce, dramatic narratives were harnessed to agendas of improvement and instruction. This civilizing discourse was used to gain elite support for initial theatrical efforts in modern Indian languages. By the early nineteenth century, most popular theatre forms in the Indian vernaculars had fallen into disrepute. When the Parsi theatre was gaining a footing, it was often contrasted with the Bhavai, a folk theatre of Gujarat, and the dances of Mahlaris and nautch girls. Against their supposed decadence, the new theatrical mode claimed to impart reason, virtue, and civility.⁸

The new spatial set-up of the playhouse also distinguished the Parsi theatre. The European-style theatre served to contain the transgressive energies of popular performance. Its gates and guards restricted access,

⁶ Willmer (1999): 174–6.

⁷ *Bombay Times*, May 31, 1858.

⁸ Hansen (2003): 392–3. Similarly in Calcutta, the English-educated gentry held Jatra in contempt and tried to shed its influence, albeit unsuccessfully. Lal (2004): 40. On Bengali theatre in this period, see also Bhattacharya (1998), Chatterjee (2008), Das Gupta (1934).

while audiences were segregated by seating in separate classes: the pit, galleries, stalls, boxes. The proscenium arch positioned the players within an expansive picture frame, placing them at a distance from the audience. Announced times for starting and stopping asserted a new temporal discipline.

Despite these advantages, theatrical productions were limited by the poor quality of scripts, acting, costumes, and scenery. According to one journalist, "The Grant Road theatre in those days [*circa* 1863] was a picture of Gujarati translations of other plays, gaudy and loud costumes with gold and silver drapery, metal and silver-paper coated bamboo strips for swords, and only one type of curtain used as a backdrop."⁹ Shows were sporadic and poorly funded, and the musical aspect not well developed. The stage scenery, routinely considered inadequate by reviewers, was improved by the addition of gas lighting after the visit of an Italian opera company and the repainting of the proscenium in 1872.¹⁰

By the end of the 1860s, as many as twenty Parsi theatre companies existed; almost all were amateur troupes. Few playscripts had been published, and very little is known about the playwrights.¹¹ Nor did the actors achieve much fame, the notable exception to this being female impersonators. Unlike their forebears in folk theatre, these were young men of social standing. D.N. Parekh, who played Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, became a medical doctor and lieutenant colonel in the Indian Medical Service. Framji Joshi, the female lead in *The Lady of Lyons*, became superintendent of the Government Central Press.¹²

During this preliminary phase, Parsi amateurs regularly performed at the Grant Road Theatre and occasionally at Elphinstone College and elsewhere. Educated youths formed clubs and attracted sponsorship from wealthy citizens. Audiences were attracted through publicity in the newspapers, and a rudimentary theatrical public came into being, closely identified with the middle and upper classes of the Parsi community. Most of the serious dramas were presented in Gujarati.

⁹ *Kaiser-i Hind*, Mar. 25, 1888, p. 342, trans. Sucharita Apte.

¹⁰ Mehta (1960): 204–6.

¹¹ The earliest published plays from the Parsi theatre are in Ranina (1865).

¹² Hansen (1998): 2292.

Farces used a variety of speech registers, including Hindustani, to caricature different ethnic groups. Through theatrical activity, Parsis were able to buttress their economic position with an image of cultural cosmopolitanism. They also established a public sphere in which issues of group identity, history, reform, and morality could be debated. The early Parsi theatre helped to consolidate and legitimize Parsi influence in the metropolis, even as it planted the seeds of an entertainment culture that was to extend far beyond Bombay and its founder community.

Expansion and Professionalization, 1868–1891

In the next few decades, the theatrical enterprise underwent major economic, social, and aesthetic reorganization. Drama companies were restructured as profit-making concerns. Actors, playwrights, musicians, and stage crew were recruited, hired on contracts, and paid regular salaries. Theatre companies and private publishers issued dramatic texts and songbooks, selling them to add to ticket sales. The largest companies started touring at home and abroad. As new technologies of stagecraft were adopted, theatrical effects became more and more spectacular. To meet the demands of more diverse audiences, dramatic construction, plot types, and language usage shifted over this period.

This efflorescence was made possible by urban growth, prosperity, and social change. It also owed much to the favorable reception accorded theatregoing as a respectable activity. Playwrights expounded upon the moralizing effects of drama and encouraged audiences to appreciate its pedagogical utility. In the preface to his Gujarati *Romeo and Juliet*, Delta praised “the blameless amusement of theatre [that] enlarges the mind, gladdens the heart, cools the eyes, and speeds morality.”¹³ K.N. Kabra exhorted his spectators to consider the playhouse (*natakshala*) as a schoolhouse (*vidyashala*), only superior to it. Title pages of printed plays displayed the dictum, “Rational entertainment, in which popular amusement was combined with moral instruction and intellectual culture,” attributed to Prince Albert.¹⁴

¹³ Delta (1876): Preface, trans. Samira Sheikh.

¹⁴ See Kabra (1869): title page.

During this time, audiences became more inclusive in class and ethnic composition and less specifically Parsi. Both trends were promoted by company owners: these remained exclusively Parsis. The actors who emerged now as celebrities, pre-dating the cinematic star system, were also Parsis. Even the first actress of note, Mary Fenton, although of Irish ancestry, married a Parsi and adopted a Parsi name. The Parsiness of the companies was heralded on tours outside of Bombay. Local companies often adopted the rubric “Parsi” or added “of Bombay” to their names, even when based elsewhere.

And yet the special relationship between the Parsi theatre and the Parsis of Bombay gradually weakened. The use of Urdu, a primarily North Indian language, was introduced in 1871 and quickly caught on. As Urdu romances and musicals proliferated, Gujarati was no longer the sole medium of Parsi-produced drama. *Shahnama* historicals were joined by other genres, not only Indo-Muslim adventure stories and fantasies but also topical contemporary plays or “socials.” The repertoire grew in a number of directions, and plays came to be written and even performed by non-Parsis, diluting the Parsiness of the Parsi theatre.

The most influential and long-lived companies date to the beginning of this period. Foremost was the Victoria Theatrical Company, established by K.N. Kabra in 1868. Among its original four owners was Dadi Thunthi, who thirty years later would become Jayshankar Sundari’s mentor in Calcutta. The second great company was the Alfred Theatrical Company, founded in 1871 by Framji Joshi. The third was the Elphinstone, the only company from the 1860s that survived and turned professional.

The actor-director came into his own in this phase of development. The most successful companies—the Victoria, the Alfred, the Elphinstone—were identified by their charismatic managing directors: K.M. Balivala, K.P. Khatau, and C.S. Nazir. Balivala starred in *Sone ke Mol ki Khurshed* in 1871 and became the Victoria’s director in 1878.¹⁵ As the theatre professionalized, a larger proportion of its actors was drawn from the lower classes. Khatau, Nazir, and others lived in Dhobi Talao, a poor neighborhood located in the city center. Khatau,

¹⁵ Gupt (2005): 157–9.

a singing tragedian, was born to an indigent Parsi family. He joined the stage in 1875 and took over as manager of the Alfred Company in 1886, running it successfully for thirty years. Khatau was playwright Betab's boss and a major influence on his writing career.

The top companies vied with each other to obtain the best scripts, engage the most popular actors, and produce the grandest spectacles. Companies would send spies to view and learn by heart their rivals' new plays. Sometimes they planted disruptive elements in the audience to create mischief. The newspapers often served as a forum for mutual antagonisms. Writing under pseudonyms, company directors would attack each other in print. Even painters of curtains and scenery were enlisted in disputes. When the mercurial Dadi Patel wished to insult his rival Nazir, he had a drop scene especially prepared. It pictured himself as a beautiful youth and Nazir as a huge snake, recalling Lord Krishna subduing the serpent-demon Kaliya.¹⁶

Jealousies developed within companies too. Many a time an actor in pique would break away and start his own company, enticing his colleagues to come with him. The new actor-manager claimed that his was the original branch of the company, or he would devise a new company name that was easily confused with the old one. Thus, the Victoria sprouted two offshoots in the 1870s: the Original Victoria led by Dadi Patel, and the Empress Victoria of Jahangir Khambata, as opposed to the pre-existing Victoria, which continued as the Parsi Victoria or the Balivala (Balliwala) Victoria.

From 1868 onward, fierce demands were made to book the Grant Road Theatre, the most desirable playhouse in Bombay. Rival companies rented it out on different nights of the week. As an alternative method of earning revenue, companies began touring outside the city. The Victoria Company started the trend with its tour to Hyderabad in 1872. With the coming of transcontinental railways, theatrical companies hired special bogeys and sometimes took over entire trains for their luggage, trappings, performers, and laborers. The Victoria visited Delhi, Lucknow, Calcutta, Banaras, Jaipur, Lahore, and Poona in the 1870s. In the 1880s, Balivala led an excursion to Mandalay in Burma; the Elphinstone Company ventured across the seas to

¹⁶ Ibid.: 179.

Colombo, and the Victoria followed; visits to Penang and Singapore began; and the Victoria Company sailed to London, England.¹⁷

The supply of playhouses in Bombay eventually improved. The Victoria Theatre was constructed on Grant Road at the recommendation of Dadi Patel, although it was reserved for his company. Dadi Thunthi also established a theatre there, and several other playhouses came up nearby.¹⁸ Grant Road was located at what was then the extreme northern boundary of Bombay. Its position in the Native Town attracted a mixed crowd of Indian spectators. The long journey for a night's amusement, however, was difficult for European theatregoers and elite Indians residing to the south.

The addition of theatre houses in the affluent Fort district was thus welcomed. Opposite the massive Victoria railway terminus, two European-style playhouses opened. The first was the Gaiety Theatre, built by Nazir. The second, the Novelty Theatre, was constructed by Balivala and his partner Moghul. Both had impressive painted curtains and large stages; the Novelty seated 1400. The upmarket location of the Gaiety and Novelty stimulated elite taste for theatrical entertainment. Gujarati and Marathi dramas as well as European shows were featured alongside Parsi theatre fare at these venues.



1. Victoria Theatre, 1870


¹⁷ Ibid.: 116–21.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 36–40.

In these years, a fierce competition erupted between two Parsi theatrical companies, the Elphinstone and the Victoria. Each wished to exceed the other in its revival of a specific musical pageant, the *Indar Sabha*. This was an Urdu romance from 1853 that had originated in the court at Lucknow. The rage for the *Indar Sabha* increased the popularity of Urdu among spectators. The piece continued to be produced for decades all over India, being translated into various languages and often reprinted.¹⁹

Long awaited Programme
 At 9-45 p. m. From Saturday 11th June 1938 At 9-45 p. m.
At SHIVANANDA THEATRE
 The New Parsi Coronation Theatrical Co., of Calcutta,
Proudly presents
Indra Sabha
 (IN HINDUSTANI)

Featuring:-
Master Nissar,
Miss. Mukhtar Begum,
Miss. Ramdulari,
Miss. Sultana,
Miss. Alquab,
Miss. Razia,
Mr. Manecklal,
Mr. Nenuram,
& others



MASTER NISSAR

Master Nissar,
 who acted as GULFAM
 in Madan's Film, will play
 the part of Gulfam on
 the stage.
*This Drama needs no
 introduction*
INDRA SABHA
 Means
Songs and Dances
 IMAGINE
 you are in
Indra Sabha
 How will you enjoy
 So we have arranged
INDRA SABHA
 Please come and enjoy

Special Purdah arrangement for Ladies
Daily at 9-30 p. m. Sundays at 6-30 p. m.
RATES 5 10 0, 3 6 0, 2-4-0, 1-2-0, 0-7-11, 0-3-11
LADIES 3 6 0, 2 4 0, 1 2 0, 0 12 0
 The Youngman Press, Indian Street, B. City.

2. *Indar Sabha* Handbill

¹⁹ See Hansen (2001).

Having served as a lingua franca in British India, Urdu was used for education and governance in the nineteenth century. More importantly from the point of view of stage history, the language connected the Parsi theatre to well-endowed narrative and lyric traditions. The first Urdu plays were fanciful romances or adventure tales full of desirable women, supernatural beings, and heroic struggles. Such material, derived mainly from Persian and Urdu *dastans*, proved appealing on stage. Urdu and the Islamicate court culture in which it was embedded also conveyed rich strains of poetry and music. Plays in Urdu were full of ghazals, lyric poems exuding love and desire. Even dialogues and soliloquys took the form of rhymed prose, with lines ending in multisyllabic refrains following poetic convention.

The shift to Urdu was linked with a greater use of music, and many plays in Urdu were advertised as “opera.” These plays made use of Hindustani ragas and *talas* for their ghazals and other song genres. The musical settings were imported from the salon or *kotha* of North India, heir to refined amusement in the post-Mughal period.²⁰ Parsi-Urdu dramas featured a number of visual innovations as well. Stories abounding in giants, spirits, and magic weapons were the forerunners of the “action” film. The fantasy was another common genre, focusing on erotic attraction between denizens of different realms: fairies, mortals, demons. Both types of narrative made sophisticated use of stage apparatus such as trapdoors, flying machines, lighting effects, and multiple curtains. Transformation sets executed by mechanical devices also came into vogue, and painted curtains were sometimes replaced by three-dimensional constructed sets. The addition of technology to stage production was understood as an advancement in knowledge and linked to scientific progress. Special value was placed on “realistic” displays such as live horses and running water. A reviewer found fault with a production of *Ali Baba* for not meeting the expectation of numerical realism: he wanted all forty thieves on stage. Still, his disappointment seems to have been compensated somewhat: he praises the company for importing a living tree from England.²¹

These strides in visual realism coincided with the rise of another kind of spectacle—that of “woman.” The quest for verisimilitude was

²⁰ Hansen (2003): 401.

²¹ *Kaiser-i Hind*, Feb. 16, 1890, p. 11, trans. Sucharita Apte.

even more complex in this case. Female characters were customarily represented by male actors, and by the 1870s female impersonators had become valued company assets. Those who earned kudos were known by the role they had performed to acclaim: Pestanji Madan became Pesu Avan, after his character Avan in *Pericles*. Young men of pleasing figure and superlative voice became especially important as music gained a greater role on the Parsi stage. J.F. Madan, who later in life founded a Calcutta-based entertainment conglomerate, got his start playing women's roles. He was considered a fine singer and danced the *jhumar* gracefully with a pot on his head.²² Naslu Sarkari, famed for his sweet "cuckoo" voice, regularly took the female parts opposite Khatau as leading man. Another famous impersonator, Kavasji Contractor, was affectionately called Bahuji, meaning "young wife, daughter-in-law."

Simultaneously, female performers began to appear on the Parsi stage. In 1872, one Latifa Begam was abducted from backstage following her performance for the Parsi Theatrical Company. In another anecdote, Dadi Patel brought four female performers along when he returned from a tour to Hyderabad. He introduced these "Hyderabadi begams" as the four fairies in his production of the *Indar Sabha*. Balivala also inducted female performers into the Victoria Company.²³

There was initially an outcry from journalists and reformers against women performers. Professional actresses were understood to be immoral and unruly, a stigma on the theatre. On the other hand, in the discourse of colonial modernity respectable family women were considered a civilizing force, and the Parsi theatre had from the outset encouraged attendance by such women. It had devised various strategies, holding women-only or family shows, and even providing childcare. In time, therefore, the appearance of Indian women in public became more acceptable, and perhaps this led to greater opportunities for female performers. By the late 1880s, progressive opinion had softened to the point of favoring women in female roles.

The question remained, which women? The burden of representing Indian womanhood could not be borne by all. One journalist argued in favor of a particular actress by citing her marital status and class

²² Patel (1931): 257, trans. Sushma Merh-Ashraf.

²³ Ibid.: 181–2, 358.

background: "We are happy to know that the female artiste whom the owners have employed is a respectable woman. She is a good singer from North India. She does not belong to the lowly groups who constitute the singing profession. She is a married lady with children . . . This is enough proof of her respectability."²⁴ Ideally, actresses should be respectable women, but the Parsi community's own women had to be kept strictly apart from the acting profession, else they would be branded as disreputable and damage the reputation of the entire group.

So, "other" women, non-Parsis, were the preferred category from which actresses were recruited. One possibility was the class of courtesan-entertainers, who were primarily Muslim or chose to represent themselves as such. Another was the foreigner or "madam" actress. Earlier, in Calcutta, English actresses had emerged from the ranks of officers' wives and daughters and participated in amateur theatricals. European actresses also traveled to India specifically to work in colonial society. Mrs Deacle, who was recruited for the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta, subsequently moved to Bombay to manage the Grant Road Theatre. Under the stage name of Grace Darling, she played a Parsi woman opposite actor-manager Nazir.²⁵

There was a precedent, then, for the first white woman to achieve celebrity in the Parsi theatre. The offspring of Jannette and Matthew (an Irish soldier), she was born in Landour and baptized as Mary Jane Fenton. Nothing is known of her upbringing and education. She was on tour as a magic lantern entertainer when Khatau discovered her in the 1870s and began tutoring her for roles on stage. Fenton's appearance in public created an immediate sensation, buttressed by rumors of her intimacy with Khatau. Her touching singing, accurate pronunciation of Hindi and Urdu, and ability to mimic Parsi modes of femininity were an instant hit. She later changed her name to Mehrbai, married Khatau, and bore a son named Jahangir.²⁶ Nevertheless, her presence in the Alfred Company was a source of discord. Several of its owners objected and eventually left the company to form their own. Even a madam-turned-Parsi could not quell the anxieties associated with performing women.

²⁴ *Kaiser-i Hind*, Mar. 23, 1890, p. 10, trans. Sucharita Apte.

²⁵ Das Gupta (1934): 207–14, 268–70; Patel (1931): 17–18.

²⁶ Gupt (2005): 164.

Such scandals notwithstanding, the Parsi theatre became a renowned and seemingly permanent fixture in the city's cultural life during this period. Although it competed with Gujarati and Marathi drama troupes for space in the urban playhouses, the Parsi theatre offered its audiences an unprecedented degree of spectacle and an ever-changing repertoire. Its audiences were no longer dominated by Parsis. As touring companies roamed the countryside, Parsi theatre shows appealed across linguistic and ethnic lines, communicating through the universal languages of song, dance, and mime. Traveling actors absorbed influences from their contact with others, inspiring countless local imitators. Regardless, the cosmopolitan core of the popular art remained intact, and its economic foundation was fundamentally secure.

Challenge and Opportunity, 1891–1931

During the third phase of Parsi theatrical history, many of the trends of the previous decades continued. This is the period during which our autobiographers make their entrance. As before, new companies arose to challenge the dominion of the established troupes. Most significant was the New Alfred Theatrical Company, founded in 1891. It became the flagship company of the twentieth century, employing both Radheshyam Kathavachak and Fida Husain in its heyday. Betab too was affected by its extraordinary influence. The Parsi theatre extended its outward reach, with many companies traveling widely, shifting their operations away from Bombay. Numerous companies sprang up in the provinces, and the Parsi theatre's organizational practices and presentational style exerted a major influence on vernacular drama all over India.

Innovations and artistic growth marked this period. The companies reached more heterogeneous audiences and employed a more variegated cast of artistic personnel. New languages and genres found favor with spectators who were often less cosmopolitan than the Bombay public. As religious reformers and nationalists sought to enforce puritanical restrictions on popular entertainment, the Parsi theatre lost some of the moral high ground it had claimed. A new social conservatism emerged in companies such as the New Alfred, marked by stern adherence to traditional gender norms. Yet these

pressures led to creative advances too. Female impersonation reached a pinnacle of artistic perfection, embodied in the graceful enactments of Jayshankar Sundari. The mythological genre was invigorated to address spectators who now understood themselves as Hindus. Hindi as a language of the Parsi theatre thrived among North Indians, reaching far-flung audiences such as the Marwaris of Calcutta. Simultaneously, Urdu drama flourished as never before. It left a popular legacy that found a receptive haven in the early sound cinema.

The New Alfred Company encapsulated the tensions of this period. It prospered under the directorial hand of Sohrabji Ogra, a Parsi who also played comic roles. One of its managers, Manikji Jivanji Master, was a Parsi, but its actors and musicians were mainly Hindus and Muslims from outside Bombay, especially Gujarat and North India. The New Alfred pursued a policy of gender segregation and forbade actresses from appearing on stage. It imposed strict rules with regard to training and disciplined behavior within the company. This principled approach buttressed its reputation as a source of wholesome family entertainment. The New Alfred's staid image impressed the Hindi literateur Premchand, and nationalist leaders such as Madan Mohan Malviya and Motilal Nehru attended its performances and praised them.

Like its parent company the Alfred, the New Alfred traveled across North India and far west into what is now Pakistan. The companies' successes in this territory were aided by the fact that Urdu had become the prevailing language of the Parsi stage. Many Urdu playwrights were employed as *munshis* and contributed to the sizeable corpus of dramas that were performed and published. The North Indian orientation was reinforced by the recruitment of actors, musicians, dancers, and artisans from UP and the Punjab.

Simultaneous with this development, the Gujarati-language theatre was becoming increasingly popular in western India. Aided to no small extent by stars like Jayshankar Sundari, the Mumbai Gujarati Natak Mandali and other companies began to threaten the Parsi theatre on its old turf. Although Gujarati productions were stylistically similar to those in the Parsi theatre, the two were now differentiated by language and community. The Gujarati theatre was identified with its Hindu patrons and performers, whereas the Parsi-Urdu theatre had become

infused with Indo-Muslim culture and was linked now to Muslims as well as Parsis. In the face of a looming divide between the two, the mythological, a genre laden with Hindu religious and nationalist meanings, entered the Parsi theatre.

Through the efforts of Betab and Radheshyam, epic and devotional themes from Hindu tradition were revived and adapted for the Parsi stage. The mythological provided the companies with a vehicle to recapture a pan-Indian audience and unify it under the banner of national identity. It also entailed a shift of language. With the appearance of Betab's *Mahabharat* in 1913, Hindi was, for the first time on stage, seriously proposed as an alternative to Urdu. Announcing itself triumphally, the language of the new dramas was rich in Sanskritisms and printed in the Devanagari script.²⁷

Cross-currents also developed over the representation of gender and were manifest in the rivalry between the two top companies—the Alfred and the New Alfred. The New Alfred was established, it is said, in protest at Khatau's showcasing of Mary Fenton. After the split, Khatau regained control of the Alfred and sponsored a series of star appearances featuring Fenton.²⁸ The shows were a hit, Fenton's cachet as a foreigner adding to her allure. The “madam” phenomenon continued to gain ground in the twentieth century. Women understood as European or Anglo-Indian were commonly employed by theatre companies. Their racial identities were often blurred, perhaps on purpose. An actress like Patience Cooper, who starred in Radheshyam's and Agha Hashr's plays in Calcutta, was usually thought to be an Anglo-Indian of mixed parentage. She was actually from the Baghdadi Jewish community, a group that had settled in India in the early nineteenth century. So was Sulochana, the stage-name of the actress Ruby Myers.²⁹

The New Alfred responded to the vogue for actresses by taking the phenomenon of female impersonation to a higher level. The company found a new source of artistic energy in the Nayak or Bhojak community of Gujarat. This was a hereditary group that specialized in music

²⁷ Hansen (2006).

²⁸ Hansen (1998): 2293.

²⁹ Ibid.: 2297.

and dance. In the late nineteenth century, urban theatre companies began to send agents to villages in Gujarat for the purpose of recruiting Nayak boys. When these boys arrived in Bombay or Calcutta, they were trained to become professional dancers and sing in chorus lines dressed as females. The most outstanding from their ranks matured into the leading female impersonators of the day.

Amritlal Keshav Nayak was one such who joined the theatre at the age of 11.³⁰ He became Ogra's assistant director in the New Alfred four years later. With his literary proclivities in several languages, Amritlal proved himself a successful song-writer and director. He was also instrumental in bringing a number of other Nayak boys into the New Alfred. Under his guidance, Bhogilal, Purushottam, and Narmada Shankar became its new generation of heroines. They went on to contribute to the development of choreography, stage direction, music, and acting.

The actor Jayshankar Sundari was the most famous Nayak of them all. Although primarily associated with the Gujarati stage, he received his training in the Parsi theatre. His stage roles created prototypes for the ideal Indian woman of the early twentieth century. By embodying feminine sensibility and decorum, his persona exemplified the companionate heroine. Sundari's art was such that spectators insisted he could surpass any woman in his representation of the beauty of womanly suffering. His appeal to spectators of both sexes makes it evident that female impersonators were not simply substitutes for actresses. They coexisted and competed with actresses and could exceed them in popularity and artistry.

Both Sundari and Fenton found social drama the ideal medium for modeling feminine behavior. This genre focused upon domestic matters relating to family and marriage. "Socials" in this period were often written in Gujarati. The most memorable were those of B.N. Kabra, who wrote for the Parsi theatre, and Mulshankar Mulani of the Gujarati theatre. Notwithstanding these efforts, the majority of plays were written in Urdu. Murad worked as the leading dramatist of the Alfred Company under Khatau; he later joined the New Alfred.³¹ Betab's encounter

³⁰ Lal (2004): 313.

³¹ Gupt (2005): 130–2.

with him had a tremendous effect on the budding poet. Another popular playwright was Ahsan, who hailed from a lineage of Urdu poets in Lucknow.³² Although best known for his Urdu adaptations of Shakespeare, Ahsan also wrote the play *Chalta Purza* which was set in contemporary times. Its performance in the New Alfred featured Amritlal Nayak and Narmada Shankar in female roles. Another important Urdu writer was Talib, a Hindu Kayasth from Banaras. He was associated with the Victoria Theatrical Company.³³

The career of the prolific playwright Agha Hashr Kashmiri illustrates the scope of Urdu playwriting in this period.³⁴ Born in Banaras to a family of shawl merchants, Hashr wrote for a series of companies, including the Alfred, the New Alfred, and the Corinthian in Calcutta. He established and ran several companies himself, such as the Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company, but these did not endure for long. He authored more than thirty dramas in all the leading genres: romantic, historical, social, and mythological. Hashr also wrote many screenplays, mostly adapted from his dramas. During the silent film era, his socials and mythologicals contributed to the development of Indian cinema. Later, with the arrival of sound, his work for the cinema industry more effectively incorporated Parsi theatre style. Hashr's dialogues and lyrics for *Shirin Farhad* were famously enacted by the singing duo Kajjan and Nisar. Several of his Shakespearean plays came to life on screen with the famous Parsi actor Sohrab Modi in title roles. His most influential play, *Yahudi ki Larki*, was remade several times as a film.

During these years, Parsi-organized troupes traveled to Lahore, Karachi, Quetta, and Peshawar. Radheshyam reports visiting the Khyber Pass and setting foot in Afghanistan. When Betab was working for the Alfred Company, the troupe toured the hills of Baluchistan. Betab's play *Gorakhdhandha* opened in Quetta. Even Jayshankar Sundari spent eight months in Karachi performing his signature play, *Saubhagya Sundari*. A number of spin-off Parsi theatre companies developed in the western Punjab and beyond. Meanwhile, in the

³² Ibid.: 86–92; Lal (2004): 6.

³³ Gupt (2005): 68–80; Lal (2004): 465.

³⁴ Gupt (2005): 84–6; Lal (2004): 149–50.



3. Agha Hashr Kashmiri

Deccan the Nizam of Hyderabad patronized Parsi-led troupes such as the Helen Theatrical Company, which was photographed by Raja Deen Dayal.

It is noteworthy that the Parsi theatre also established itself firmly in Calcutta. In the 1890s, J.F. Madan purchased the Corinthian Hall and acquired ownership of the Elphinstone Theatrical Company, transferring its operations to Calcutta. This was the beginning of the entertainment empire that developed into the Madan Theatres.³⁵

³⁵ Lal (2004): 241; Rajadhyaksha (1999): 139.