

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY GUWAHATI

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Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

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(Refer Slide Time: 00:05)



(Refer Slide Time: 00:20)



(Refer Slide Time: 00:25)



Good morning. Let us now continue with the current session of class, which will be actually be on a historical overview of Parsi Theatre. But before that, let me just briefly summarize what we discussed in the previous class.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:52)

Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

- The earliest histories of Indian theatre were Horace Hayman Wilson's three-volume *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus*, published in 1827 in Calcutta, and Sylvain Levi's two-volume *The Indian Theatre*, were clearly influenced by Orientalism, in that they equated Indian theatre with Sanskrit theatre, while dismissing the multilingual nature of Indian theatre, be it Sanskrit and other non-Sanskritic forms of theatre and performance.
- The colonial historiography of Indian theatre follows the Western chronological categories of Ancient, medieval and modern, where Sanskrit theatre lasted from 200 BCE to 1000 BCE, medieval or traditional theatre lasted from 1000 CE to the present and modern theatre from the late 18th century to the present.

So in the previous class, we looked at how lot of early modern Indian theatre even before it was actually self-consciously called or known as modern drew a lot from, was modeled against Sanskrit theatre, and this was of course due to the emergence of Orientalism and Indology as colonial, philological disciplines, right, which were actually interested in reconstructing a glorious uninterrupted ancient Hindu past, right?

So a lot of early Indian theatre, early modern Indian theatre was modeled against Sanskrit theatre what then came to be called as so-called a Hindu theatre was modeled against Sanskrit theatre, and we saw this in let's say the earliest histories of Indian theatre including the Horace Hayman Wilson's three-volume *Select Specimens of the Theatre of the Hindus* published in 1827 in Calcutta and Sylvain Levi's two-volume *The Indian Theatre*, which were clearly influenced by Orientalism, in that they equated Indian theatre with Sanskrit theatre while completely dismissing overlooking the fact that Indian theatre was actually a very multilingual form of performance.

So whether it was Sanskrit plays or non-Sanskrit plays, there was the presence of other Indian languages, which had been completely overlooked and erased in the process of trying to produce a colonial reconstruction of a modern Indian theatre. So what is now known as modern Indian theatre finds its beginning somewhere in the late 18th century and carries on to the present.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:38)

Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

- Sanskrit theatre was modeled on Bharata's *Natyashastra*, the ancient text on dramaturgy, which provided copious data on theoretical and practical aspects of theatre from acting and dancing to music and prosody, the sizes and shapes of playhouses, costumes and makeup, theories of emotions and sentiments, requirements for critics and audiences and so on.
- One of the earliest Sanskrit plays to be translated and studied by Orientalist missionaries and scholars were Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntala*, translated by William Jones and published in Calcutta in 1789, which was actually a multilingual play with lines in Sanskrit, sauraseni, Maharashtri, and Magadhi. And Sudraka's *Mrcchakatika* ('The Little Clay Cart') which again comprised of many other languages that were lost in translation.

So this modeling of Sanskrit theatre of modern Indian theatre on Sanskrit theatre drew from, of course, Bharata's ancient dramaturgical treaties called the *Natyashastra*, which was a very prescriptive text that provided copious data on theoretical and practical aspects of theatre from acting and dancing to music and prosody besides the sizes and shapes of playhouses, costumes and makeup, theories of emotions and sentiments, requirements for critics and audiences and so on.

It was Kalidasa, the Sanskrit playwright Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntala*, which was translated by William Jones and published in Calcutta in 1789, which along with of course Sudraka's *Mrcchakatika*, which formed the models of Sanskrit aesthetics, which then came to be emulated or imitated by many other playwrights, both before and after Independence, and in the process of translating and disseminating these, these texts, the fact that there were many other languages that were spoken by women, the subordinate male characters of the play, like Sauraseni, Maharashtri, and Magadhi were completely forgotten and overlooked.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:00)

Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

- There were existing traveling folk performative traditions of theatre in precolonial India where theatre overlapped with dance and music. But many of these traditions were dismissed or overlooked by colonial scholars, as crude and low forms of performance art.
- Colonial era theatre drew on western conventions of theatre in terms of lighting and scenography while shunning local forms of theatre as crude. But there was a turn back to pre-modern Sanskrit models of theatre, which came to be revalued as classical because of nationalist aspirations. The attempt was to build an Indian nation that was both traditional and modern through a return to Hindu Puranic traditions. Thus the creation of Indianness was a political issue.
- The establishment of Indology in the mid-18th century enabled the possibility of this return to Sanskrit theatre because of the interest that European scholars had in understanding India's past. Thus Sanskrit texts, both religious and secular, came to be preserved and transmitted.

We also briefly mentioned that there were several folk performative traditions, many of which were travelling itinerant traditions of theatre in pre-colonial India where theatre overlapped with dance and music, right, but again many of these traditions were overlooked or dismissed by colonial scholars as crude and low forms of performance art in the process of trying to produce a colonial idea or notion of what Indian theatre should be, right?

Colonial era theatre grew on Western conventions of theatre in terms of lighting and scenography while shunning these local theatrical forms as crude, and there was again a turn back as I mentioned earlier to pre-modern Sanskrit models of theatre, which came to be revalued as classical because of nationalist aspirations. So there was an attempt by the nationalist elite to create a form of theatre, which drew from pre-modern Sanskrit traditions of performance and at the same time trying to actually address rather modern contemporary issues that concerned the nation to be, of course, it included a whole host of issues like widow remarriage, sati, you know, female education and so on and so forth, right?

(Refer Slide Time: 05:40)

Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

- Even later histories of Indian theatre like Hemendra Nath Das Gupta's four-volume, *The Indian Stage*, published in Calcutta between 1944 and 1946, and Ramanlal Kanaiyalal Yajnik's *The Indian Theatre*, did not acknowledge the presence of other theatre performance traditions in India. Many of the later histories of Indian theatre written after Independence continued to emphasize the lasting importance of Sanskrit theatre on Indian theatre. continued to Many actors did not have a sense of western forms of theatre and acting, and incorporated folk techniques into their performances despite the growing modernization of Indian theatre.
- Under the rule of the East India Company, the early playhouses were set up in Calcutta. In 1775 was Calcutta Theatre, the Chowringhee Theatre in 1813, the Sans Souci Theatre in 1839, which were patronized by colonial officials.

Later, even later histories of Indian theatre like Hemendra Nath Das Gupta's four-volume, *The Indian Stage*, which was published in Calcutta in the mid 19th century just before Independence and Ramanlal Kanaiyalal Yajnik's *The Indian Theatre* did not actually acknowledge the presence of other theatre performance traditions in India. Many of the later histories of Indian theatre written after Independence again continued to emphasize the lasting importance of Sanskrit theatre on Indian theatre, and many of these actors who actually acted in these early plays did not have a sense of what these western forms of theatre were and they naturally, of course, incorporated many folk techniques into the performance despite the growing modernization of India theatre.

It was under the rule of the East India Company, when the early playhouses were set up in Calcutta. In 1775 was Calcutta Theatre, the Chowringhee Theatre in 1813, the Sans Souci Theater in 1839 and so on, which were actually patronized by colonial officials, right?

(Refer Slide Time: 06:31)

Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

- The colonial idea of theatre understood theatre as an enclosed space with a raised proscenium stage before rows of seats. It made theatre a spectacle to be watched by the audience who were at the same or higher level than the stage.
- Colonial theatre was an elite cultural art form that was patronized and frequented by the colonial western and Indian elite, particularly the Parsis of Bombay, who sponsored the early theatre companies.
- It was only in the late 19th century that theatre spread as a form of mass entertainment in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras to schools and colleges. Theatre became a commercial, ticketed event and there was a new distinction between the actor-manager and the director.

The colonial idea of theatre, and this becomes very important even in the case of Parsi Theatre, the colonial idea of theatre was understood as an enclosed space with a raised proscenium stage between rows of seats. It made theatre a spectacle to be watched by the audience who were at the same time, who were at the same or at a higher level than the stage.

Now this is important to actually note because it's in the proscenium arch under the or within the proscenium arch that you have a reproduction of scenery, scenography. You have a backdrop, and you have a front, front drop. You have actors who are standing in front of a backdrop, and it takes the form of a framed picture, which again addresses or gestures towards the multiple possibilities of perspectivalism, the kinds of perspectives that a spectator can have when a play has been performed in an enclosed space on a raised platform. And colonial theatre in its initial beginnings was patronized and frequented by the colonial Western and Indian elite, particularly the Parsis of Bombay who were very important, crucial traders, bankers, and philanthropists.

And it was only in the late-19th century that theatre actually spread as a form of mass entertainment in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras to schools and colleges when it became a commercial, ticketed event, and there was a new distinction between the actor-manager and the director, right?

(Refer Slide Time: 08:11)

Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

- The mere importation of the proscenium theatre did not modernize Indian theatre. Indian theatre in the 1770s was still an elite form of entertainment that was limited to small British populations in the three presidency cities of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta.
- The early plays that were staged in the latter decades of the 18th century addressed social issues like polygamy, child marriage, opium addiction, faith sanctioned violence, the plight of Indian women and so on. Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nildarpan*, which was a polemical attack on the exploitative British indigo planters, was banned as seditious, and precipitated the passing of the Dramatic Performances Act in 1876 to curb seditious and patriotic tendencies.

Now let us just go into and you know let's briefly also discuss what Parsi Theatre was exactly. Let's provide you with a historical overview of Parsi Theatre.

Now I will be quoting in the session largely from certain important scholars of theatre like Kathryn Hansen and Anuradha Kapur who have been very crucial in trying to historicize and conceptualize Parsi theatre precisely because it is a form of theatre which presents many challenges. There are many challenges to the conceptualization and methodology of Parsi theatre. Okay.

Now, firstly, it's important to not identify or associate the Parsi community with Parsi theatre entirely. The Parsis who were the followers of the Prophet Zoroaster, right, and they immigrated from Iran to Gujarat over a 1,000 years ago, settled in Bombay in the 18th century, and many of these prominent Parsi families made fortunes as bankers and traders. Their social interaction with colonial elites, exposure to English language theatre, and entrepreneurial skill included or inclined Parsis to organize the first modern theatrical companies in South Asia.

What is also important to note is that although the companies remained under Parsi management well into the 20th century, actors and actresses were increasingly drawn from the ranks of Muslims, Hindus, Anglo-Indians and Baghdadi Jews. They were professional writers, musicians, painters, and other creative personnel who were often non-Parsis. Parsi theatrical performances

only occasionally referred to Parsi religion or culture, and this is a study of Parsi theatre from Kathryn Hansen's essay *Languages on Stage, Linguistic Pluralism and Community Formation in the Nineteenth-Century Parsi Theatre*.

So it's important to realize or note that in terms of audience, the Parsi theatre's appeal extended far beyond the Parsi community in the course of its new century of development, and an additional challenge to studying Parsi theatre Hansen argues is the fact that it's spread across a wide range of languages. Parsi drama was written and produced in Gujarati, Urdu, and English. And the -- while the literature in Urdu much of the secondary literature on Parsi theatre in Urdu favors Muslim playwrights and assimilates non-Muslims to the rubric of Urdu theatre whereas a corresponding body of writing in Gujarati and Hindi ignores the Muslim contributions or subsumes it within the nation's ideology that equates Hindustan and Hindustani with Hindi and Hindu.

So one can read about Parsi Gujarati theatre, the Parsi Urdu theatre and the Parsi Hindi theatre in literary histories, but rarely gets a sense of the whole is what Kathryn Hansen argues that there was a significant presence of the Parsi theatre in locations such as Calcutta and Madras, so the significant presence of Parsi theatre in locations such as Calcutta and Madras were absent whereas there was a lot more significant and conspicuous in Bombay as well as locations outside India including Ceylon and Burma.

So Parsi theatre refers only or primarily to the Parsi entrepreneurship, the management of theatre companies by elite Parsis, and not so much to the content or the form of these plays, right, or even in terms of the actors and the crew members who made up the theatre production also. So it's important to then think of Parsi theatre as a category, as a form of theatre that crosses linguistic lines, which are now formally drawn or established across South Asian literary scholarship.

So although the Parsi theatre was produced within a cosmopolitan entertainment economy at a time when linguistic and communal identities were fluid and overlapping, contemporary understanding of the phenomenon has arisen under the shadow of the subcontinent's religious and ethnic antagonisms, right? So it's important to then remember that Parsi theatre had a pluralist polyglot nature. It was composed of multiple languages, ethnicities, religions, right, in terms of the actors, the crew members, the language in which the play was performed, and it is

not what has now become a rigidly demarcated linguistic zones of culture and literary and performance production.

We see the heydays, the peak of Parsi theatre from 1853 to let's say the early decades of the 20th century. So the early amateur Parsi theatre clubs and professional companies in Bombay made use of English, Gujarati, and Urdu for the productions. Many of the prefaces of these plays were written in Gujarati or Urdu and contained a lot of information about the playwright's choice of language and relationship to their public.

And it is also important to remember that Parsi theatre as it emerged as a multilingual phenomenon did not in some sense of argue for the standardization or the purity of any one particular language, right? There was an instability of standard or accepted forms of literary language. There was the diversions of prose and poetry, and the perception that the demand to distinct idioms was completely erased or blurred, and lots of fluctuation in regard to the choice of script, right? In fact, many of the prefaces to these plays mentioned or discussed the playwright's choice of a particular language, and its reception, and the situation under which the play was being performed, produced and performed.

So it's, so, for example, initially, the Parsi play is being performed in English, but then by the middle decades of the 19th century English was sidelined, and the primary rivalry then began to occur between Gujarati and Urdu plays. There were several Urdu plays, Parsi plays that were written in the Gujarati script, right? And this, of course, suggested that the actors, the playwright may not have had literacy in Urdu even at a time when Urdu was being spoken within certain elites of circles, but these were Urdu plays written in the Gujarati script.

In the -- so, initially, you had the establishment of the Grant Road Theatre in the 1870s and 80s in Bombay, which initially produced English language Parsi plays, and then there was an extension of the Grant Road Theatre in more enlarged playhouses like Gaiety and Novelty near the Victoria Railway Terminus. Established theatre companies like Elphinstone, Victoria, and Alfred, which were initially involved in the amateur dramatics became increasingly profitable for the Parsi owners.

They began staging by professional actor-managers, right, became lavish as scenery, costumes, and musical style were coordinated for spectacular effects, and it's in this time of efflorescence

that theatrical companies undertook the regular commissioning of dramas for performance and the text of this commissioned plays were published under the company's name in book form, right? So it is important to see how theatre was being institutionalized during this period when plays were being written, and transcribed, and printed in the form of books and disseminated.

Some of the early notables many of whom are Parsis, like Balkrishna, Shankarseth or Jamset Jeejeebhoy, Jaganath Shankarseth and Framji Cowasji were some of the early Parsi and non-Parsi notables and philanthropists, many of whom also traders and bankers who collected subscriptions and petitioned the Governor of Bombay for a new theatre. So the Grant Road Theatre, which was founded by these notables was opened in 1846 on land donated by Shankarseth with a generous contribution from Jeejeebhoy.

Indian financial and civic leaders through these acts embraced theatre as an object of cultural philanthropy and demonstrated their status and taste laying the foundation for much broader participation by the Bombay populace in years to come. Until 1853, all the performances in the Grant Road Theatre were in English. The performers of English theatre included both amateur British actors residing in the cantonment and civil lines and professional touring artists from England, Europe, and America. And then 1853 also saw the first Parsi theatrical company plays, like Rustam, Zaboli and Sohrab, which is produced in Gujarati, and it's only after the waning of English theatre that you had the emergence of Gujarati and Urdu language plays.

What's also important to note that there are a lot of these players in Gujarati also drew a lot from folk performative traditions like Bhavai and Yakshagana rather than merely a purely western methods, but the Grant Road Theatre was located in the native, in the fort area of Bombay, in the native, so called the native part of town, and that made it difficult for a lot of British English audiences to actually watch the plays. But, in fact, for the very reason Grant Road Theatre then became open primarily accessible, accessed primarily by Indian audiences, and the Grant Road Theatre advertised precise times for ticket sales, seating, starting and finishing the show. There were new structures of capital that reconfigured the theatre as an economic institution, and the introduction of joint-stock companies and the marketing of tickets as opposed to patronage by local elites.

So what one, one saw initially before the emergence of Parsi theatre in a big way was the fact that there were these British sponsored notch performances by feudal elites, right, and this was

then replaced by a new commercial, commercialized, institutionalized form of theatre in the form of the Grant Road Theatre initially through the introduction of joint-stock companies and marketing of tickets, and also the emergence of the director as opposed to the actor-manager.

So in its earliest years, Parsi theatre developed a penchant for producing plays based on Shakespeare. So according to the newspapers, Parsi theatre productions of Taming of the Shrew, the Merchant of Venice, Two Gentlemen of Verona and Timon of Athens, which were all of course translated into Gujarati were performed in the Grant Road Theatre between 1857 and 1859. Even some of the other sites for performance, especially Elphinstone College became a fairly anglicized space for theatre performances. There were large number of English plays at the Grant Road Theatre, but there were also many other plays, Shakespeare's plays being performed by the Shakespeare Society who were largely students of English literature and drama from Elphinstone College. And so there was initially at least this impulse to try, and translate, and enact Shakespeare in English to adapting Shakespeare Indian languages and its environments.

So the Grant Road Theatre in its initial days aligned itself both with the English educated elite and the Gujarati and Urdu speakers of several classes, and the theatre advanced with prestige and profitability while ensuring that its public need not struggle with a foreign tongue. So there is a attempt to try and bridge the gap between English, English language plays and local languages like Gujarati.

Now when -- with the emergence of Gujarati language plays, Parsi theatre in some sense reinvented itself. There was an attempt by these early Parsi dramatists to resort to English versions of the Shahnama. This was done as an attempt to try and reconstruct a glorious Parsi past, which aligned itself with a mythical history of Persia. So, therefore, there is need to try and trace back one's cultural roots to the Shahnama and in also identifying Firdausi as the ancient king of the Parsis.

So the very well-known and pre-eminent Gujarati playwright K. K. Kabra, again considered Firdausi as the Father of Persian Poetry, and he kind of acknowledged Firdausi as the source, almost the glorious source of Parsi culture and made him one of the major characters in many of his Gujarati Parsi plays, and this is what Kabra has to say in a preface to his book Jamset. Due to the fact that the playwright unfortunately does not know the Persian language, he has not been able to take direct advantage of the poet Firdausi's interesting and effective language, and to

compose parts to play he is taking a little necessary help from English translations of Rustam and Sohrab by Matthew Arnold, Atkinson, and other gentlemen and the first chapter of the Gujarati version of the (inaudible), and the writings of Mansukh for which we express gratitude.

So what's interesting about this is that these Parsis were trying to actually identify themselves as distinct from the growing nationalist movement, which was increasingly becoming or styling itself as Hindu and also from the British Colonial Raj, and its attempts to try and convert many of -- many sections of the Indian population to Christianity and to align themselves with Christian themes and Christian myths.

So here you have a Parsi, the Parsi community, which is alienated from its cultural roots and even from the language it spoke Parsi, but in the process also trying to reconstruct for that very reason unique and distinct cultural history by identifying Firdausi as the source of that cultural history and literary history.

So the choice of the Shahnama as the source of many Parsi plays, early Parsi plays should be seen in relation to the so-called Hindu theatre, which was establishing itself in Bombay, and of course the so-called Hindu theatre was being seen as the national theatre of the Hindus, and it drew a lot from the Ramayana and the Puranas for its own performances.

So this aspect in the sense that this impulse by Parsi playwrights to draw from the Shahnama for its own early performances in some sense also contradicts or undermines the fact or the belief that Parsis were largely British loving and imitated British mannerisms, behavior, clothing and so on. So it was not as if the Parsis were merely anglophilic, British loving, colonial loving, had -- nearly had commercial and financial links with the colonial state or merely assimilated European cultural traits, but were also trying to in some sense create its or recreate its own cultural past.

So Parsi theatre appropriated many techniques of Victorian Stagecraft and fed off the imperial image of the raj. What is overlooked is that there was a certain vocal sector, a very vocal sector of the community, which responded to challenges of modernity by using drama for the revival of vernacular traditions, right? In engaging with the history, they identified with Iran, Gujarat, and India rather than the west. Demarcation of the community's boundaries by these practitioners served as an instrument for the ideological work of resisting colonial hegemony and upholding cultural distinctiveness.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:06)

Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

- The beginnings of Modern Indian theatre can be traced back to Parsi Theatre. Parsi theatre was the dominant form of entertainment in urban India from 1860s to 1930s. Early colonial era theatre companies were owned by elite Parsis, many of whom were wealthy bankers, traders and philanthropists.
- The term 'Parsi Theatre' is itself a conflicting one as the actors who joined these companies were Muslims, Hindus, Anglo-Indians and Baghdadi Jews. Their plays were also multilingual and performed largely in Gujarati, Marathi and Urdu and English too.
- These plays were designed along western notions of stagecraft like backdrop scenery, and were divided into acts and scenes.

Now so as I mentioned earlier, the Parsis were in some sense felt the need to position themselves as uneasily between the growing heat of the nationalist Hindu Movement and the Christian colonial power on the other hand, and I also mentioned earlier that many of these Parsi plays drew a lot from local folk dramatic forms, like bhavai, the lavanis and ballads in Gujarati and Marathi, which were associated with Malharis and Tamasha, other folk forms as well as ghazals in Persian, Urdu, and Gujarati, songs based on bhakti poets like Kabir, and Horis, Thumris, Tappas, and other secular songs, and the content of these volumes of these plays, which included all these local folk forms suggested a very composite oral culture that was now being circulated in print and made accessible to an urban audience, and this in some sense contributed to the institutionalization of a Indian theatre, modern Indian theatre.

The advent of Urdu is another important aspect of Parsi theatre, especially because the acceptance of Urdu as a language of the stage was in some sense an attempt to try and enrich its own theatrical performances by drawing on the -- the high status art forms that were associated with Urdu and Parsi.

Some of the most highly educated Parsis attached to early theatre, like Dadabhai Sohrabji Patel or 'Dadi Patel M.A.', as he was popularly known was the first person to actually receive a Masters of Arts degree from the University of Bombay, and he was the one of the early pioneers

to push Parsi theatre towards adopting Urdu as a language of performance and drama, and he was the one who actually popularized opera as a new form. He introduced scientific stagecraft, again a quotation from Kathryn Hansen's essay. He professionalized the company by offering full-time salaries and began the practice of touring even before railway lines were completed to the Deccan, right? So you can imagine what an important presence Dadi Patel had on early Parsi drama.

Many of the early actors in Parsi theatre were young boys, Parsi boys who played both male as well as female roles, but largely female roles, and they attended Madrasas where they studied Persian and Arabic. This is, of course, for their own performances. So the acquisition of Persian and revival of historical ties to Iran in some sense may have Kathryn Hansen argues foster feelings for Urdu. So even though the knowledge of Urdu was lacking among playwrights, actors, and spectators, when the language is first produced in stage, there was still an attempt to try and embrace Urdu as a language of performance and also the fact that Urdu and probably more largely speaking or more importantly speaking Persian had access to other traditions of art, of music and dance, which are very important in enriching Parsi theatre.

There were two claims that were made for the introduction of Urdu. First, Urdu was seen as the overarching language beyond specific communities. They were extending the audience for Parsi theatre. Second, Urdu was thought to connect the theatre to rich narrative and lyric traditions enhancing its literary stature and pleasurability. What seemed unimportant to the writer was any association that Hindustani Urdu might have to specific group of speakers. It was rather the absence of territorial boundaries is detachment from limiting notions of community that recommended Urdu as a theatrical medium. And as I mentioned earlier, there was a whole generation of Urdu dramas for the Parsi theatre which were being printed in Gujarati script. The Arabic script only began to be used for printed Urdu decades, a decade later in the 1860s and '70s.

There was also an intense rivalry between the two leading companies, theatre companies of the early 1870s, the Victoria Theatrical Company and the Elphinstone Company. In fact, there was a very strong rivalry between them over the production of Urdu plays. So there was, for example, Kunvarji Nazir's production of *Sone ke Mol ki Khurshed*, the first Urdu play, *Sone ke Mol ki Khurshed*, which was performed by both the theatrical companies. There was Nurjahan

translated into Urdu by Aram, another important playwright and translator, and there was Benazir Badremunir produced in 1872. There was also a translation of Khori's Hatim Tai, which was produced in 18 -- which was -- which again where -- where Dadi Patel himself starred in the lead to great acclaim. Then there was Aram's second opera, Jahangir shah aur Gauhar and of course the most important Indar Sabha, which is again a very important Urdu play, which in some sense established the very tradition of a modern playwriting and performance in Urdu, and this was performed as an opera with special lighting and musical effects at the Elphinstone Company.

So there was, Urdu was given the certain importance because it was seen as a language of aesthetics in terms of poetry and song, but it is also seen as a link language that linked many other theatrical traditions together. Many of the early Urdu poets, school teachers and manipulators saw in Parsi theatre an opportunity to benefit the earnings and approached the companies themselves. Of key significance is courtly employment, which is always precarious, but even more so after the events of 1857, the poets and entertainers found a welcome source of income in the Parsi companies, right? The Parsi companies were a big source of income for the Urdu poets, school teachers and manipulators who were interested in acting as well as scripting these early Urdu plays.

And as I mentioned earlier, the Indar Sabha, right, important play by Agha Hasan Amanat of Lucknow, which was performed in 1853 again was very important in trying to define and establish a new tradition of Urdu Playwriting. And of course by 1890, many of these Parsi theatre plays were being printed in Arabic script from Agra, Meerut, Kanpur, Delhi, and Fatehpur. They have been performed by all the important theatrical companies including Victoria Theatrical Company, the Alfred Company as well as the Elphinstone Company.

So to continue with our discussion, right, it's -- it was the -- it was actually Agha Hasan Amanat's Urdu play Indar Sabha, which is performed in Lucknow at around 1853, which actually set off a virtual landslide of theatrical performances across Uttar Pradesh reaching as far as Lahore and Dhaka.

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- Many of these plays were published with detailed prefaces by the playwrights that illuminated their choice of language and relationship to public.
- The Indian elites in Bombay, which included the Parsis, were invited to attend English-language Bombay theatre also known as Theatre on the Green. Later an appeal was made by various notables like Jamshed Jejeebhoy, Jagannath Shankarseth and Framji Cowasji to found Grant Road Theatre, which was located in the Fort area of the 'native' town, to cater to the need for non-English language Indian plays. Until 1853 all performances in Grant Road Theatre were in English.
- Between 1865 and 1890, English was sidelined and the rivalry was between Gujarati and Urdu plays.
- Grant Road was later supplemented by enlarged ones such as Gaiety and Novelty near Victoria Railway Terminus. Established theatre companies like Elphinstone, Victoria and Alfred left behind their roots in amateur theatre and became more profitable for their Parsi owners. Shakespeare's plays were adapted.

There was a practice of writing for theatrical performances in Urdu even earlier, but it was not entirely synonymous with playwriting as it was evolving in Bombay because a play by definition now had come to be something that was divided into acts and scenes. So this whole idea of dividing a play into acts and scenes was clearly a western introduction, formal introduction into playwriting.

So even some of the later Urdu plays, which were written by Muslim playwrights were in some sense using Urdu to its advantage, right, because the choice of Urdu was not merely restricted to those who were erudite and elite, right? There was, in fact, also an understanding that Urdu could be used, could be expanded to include more than just a language of a community, but an entire vocabulary of pleasure, which was not limited by any territorial boundary.

So that was in some sense the importance of Urdu in Parsi theatre because it was a link language, which went beyond caste, community and territory, and it was also important in terms of providing access to new vocabularies of pleasure and aesthetics in terms of songs, and dances and poetry.

Now to go to the next point, it's -- it's very important to remember that all the early actors in Parsi theatre were men, and it were basically, they were basically boys, young boys whose voices probably are not cracked in the ages of 10, 11, 12, 13 who performed these female roles.

Now it is true to a certain extent that women were forbidden from acting on stage. There was a lot of stigma attached to the performance of women on stage precisely because once women were made visible on stage, they were seemed to be of loose, disreputable character, right? But it is also important to contextualize the entire question of young boys or men performing female roles in the larger context of making certain notions of femininity and women who are visible on stage.

So it wasn't just a question of trying to invisibilize women on stage, not make them accessible to the male gaze, but at the same time to be able to perform femininity on stage through young boys many of whom were trained in to actually emulate women and not as any kind of woman, but a certain ideal notion of womanhood. So if on the one hand you had young boys or men performing womanhood being female impersonators, on the other hand, this was also complemented by the presence of Anglo-Indian and Jewish actresses on stage many of whom masqueraded as Hindu and Parsi heroines, especially at a time when Hindu women were not allowed to perform on stage without being stigmatized.

So one needs to locate female impersonation within a larger widely circulated standard of what constituted femininity, female appearance, and a very modified code of feminine conduct. So it's not just the notion that impersonators and outside actresses served as expedient surrogates when the presence of Indian actresses on stage would have endangered the urban theatre's reputation, but that now you had masquerades of gender and race. Remember we are talking about young boys or men performing women, right, performing a certain ideal notion of womanhood, but also questions of race because you had Anglo-Indian and Jewish actresses who were trying to pass off, in fact, they also took on or adopted Hindu names and were passing off as Indian women even if they appeared to be fair skinned and possessing modern ways of behaving and being.

So you had masquerades of gender and race, which were now productive of new ways of looking up on the female form. So practices of gender and race impersonation, again, this is from Kathryn Hansen's essay: *Making Women Visible: Gender and Race Cross-Dressing in the Parsi Theatre* where she argues that practices of gender and race impersonation enlarged the performative possibilities within which theatre managers, dramatists and publics would experiment with the unfamiliar procedures of imagining and viewing women.

With the rise of the middle-class theatergoing public and the increasing size of the female audience, now remember along the decades of the latter decades of the 19th century, you had even women being allowed into theatre spaces. So you had, you had to in some sense address the spectator as a gendered subject. So how do you perform femininity and womanhood to a gendered subject? How do you provide and offer new ways of seeing and looking and representing?

So not only were male viewers catered to in more complex ways as a long-standing culture of homosociality was contested by notions of companionate marriage, but women were more and more a greater presence in the audience, and it was their presence which required accommodation within the theatre house and whose desires and enjoyment influenced the enactment of gender difference, right?

So for both men and women, performances of feminine identity opened up an arena in which gender norms could be articulated and debated. So theatrical cross-dressing in this period of the 1860s and '70s went beyond the reification of existing gender boundaries or the transgression of those boundaries for the purpose of generating laughter.

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- There was an attempt by Parsi writers and intellectuals to build a history of their own in Gujarati that they traced back to Firdausi, the ancient king of the Parsis. They performed tales from the Shahnama, Rustom and Sohrab, and so on, which equated the Parsi theatre to the mythical history of the Persian homeland.
- There was also the presence of the so-called Hindu theatre in Bombay, which was driven by the notion of theatre for the Hindu people propagated by William Jones and H.H. Wilson's translations from Sanskrit drama. These plays adopted regional folk styles.
- The Parsis were thus not Anglophilic as was assumed as they were keen on carving a distinct cultural identity for themselves through theatre.

So it's not just -- so the whole idea of cross-dressing of being a transvestite on stage was not just to transgress the boundaries of gender or to generate laughter, but to actually provide the

audience with a visual construct of ideal womanhood, which was an image of (inaudible) respectability. So the regulation of the external look of women through the emphasis on fashion and feminine accoutrements was a key ingredient in the semiotic makeover.

So a lot of keen attention was paid to the ways in which these men or boys dressed up, the fashion, their sartorial fashions, their clothes, their behavior and so on. And what's also interesting is the fact that many women who watched these players tried to emulate or imitate these men who performed femininity, an ideal femininity on stage.

So there was an attempt to subsume the overt sexuality of the traditional female impersonator courtesan performer within norms of modesty and cross-dressed performers together with playwright and director crafted a new interiority, right? So what was the new interiority of the man who performed the woman on stage which was to identify the ideal woman with her inner sensibility, which was the capacity to suffer, right? So you had men who performed women who suffered, suffered in terms of being a helpless women, widows, you know, child widows, women who had been ill-treated or abused by their families and parents, who were strapped in bad marriages and so on and so forth.

So it was the performance of women, of femininity as in an image of (inaudible) respectability and modesty, which enabled the mobility of women as social actors. So women, even when women actually began to perform on stage much later, they also had to in some sense suppress their sexuality and perform a certain degree of femininity, which was modest and respectable and that in some sense became their attempt to traverse social spaces and class, class issues.

Parsi theatrical companies travelled widely, right? I mean, they were not just restricted to Bombay, but they also traveled to Ceylon, Calcutta, Rangoon, Peshawar and Sindh, right? And many of the writers and actors, company managers, musicians and stagehands belonged to a mix of class, and caste, and religious backgrounds. The audiences were also equally mixed. Initially British officials, but then military, and then wealthy, Parsi merchants soon joined along with a growing class of educated professionals. There were textile workers, artisans, and small traders who formed a large share of the audience by the end of the 19th century accommodated by low ticket prices that ensured the heterogeneous public.

The overly majority of the early productions of Parsi plays as I mentioned earlier were in Gujarati, Urdu, and Hindi. In addition to these plays, you also had indigenous poetry and songs genres, song material taken primarily from Indian and Persian literary traditions. It's important to note that Parsi theatre employed both female impersonators and actresses for a considerable duration, right? And both these female impersonators as well as the Jewish and Anglo-Indian actresses who played women on stage competed with each other for commercial attention.

So there were two significant frames, which determined the choice of a female impersonator or an Anglo-Indian or Jewish actress. One significant frame or side was the gender performer's body, the medium through which the performer address the public. By the process of refashioning and reworking its appearance, the body was converted into a usable construct for visual pleasure, gender identification and social meaning, and to a large extent this process was within the realm of the performer's choice guided and limited by audience desire and the performer's own capabilities.

Another frame was the offstage arena of public debate, theatrical discourse, and company policy. Here the image of the performer was constructed by social actors who had a stake in the theatre's larger claims to cultural authority and prestige. Meanings were mapped on to the performer's body beyond his or her power to control.

So the point that I think Hansen was trying to make here is that there were two frames, two sides that determined the choice of whether a female -- a male impersonator or a woman actress, female actress performs a female role on stage. One, of course, is the meanings attached to the body, the embodied actor on stage in terms of visual pleasure, in terms of gender identification and social meaning, and to the larger and the other frame or the other side was the larger network of actors, theatrical production houses, and debates, public debates, and company policy, right, which also had to then make a decision on whether to employ a female impersonator or a female actress onstage.

We have few existing accounts of these early male actors who played women. One of which is the Hindi monograph of Somnath Gupta, which was translated by Kathryn Hansen in 1981, which was heavily based on the theatre choices, notices of one-time actor and photographer Dhanjibhai Patel, and the other source is the Hindi doctoral dissertation of Vidyavathi Namra published in 1972 who was herself the daughter of the Parsi Hindi playwright Narayan Prasad

Betab and Hindi memoirs of Fida Husain, the veteran actor of the Parsi stage edited by Pratibha Agraval in 1986. All these early accounts of -- autobiographical accounts of these female impersonators suggest that they were in some sense very, very necessary for the survival of Parsi theatre at that time.

In fact, the Dadi Patel whom I mentioned earlier who was a leading female impersonator in his own company, the Victoria Theatrical Company and later on when he broke away from the Victoria Theatrical Company to form his own the original Victory Theatrical Company, he took away all his, the most famous female impersonators leaving the original company at a loss. So female impersonators were very important, commercially very important for the time and for the success of plays.

So you also had, for example, other plays that I mentioned earlier, for example, Rustam and Sohrab or Sone ke Mol ki Khurshed, right, where again the important actor Khurshed Baliwala 1852 to 1913 again performed a female and male roles, and many of these female roles that, for example, Khurshed Baliwala performed were roles like saheli or sakhi, right? He performed the companions of the heroine which were a favor or familiar role that many of the early male actors played as women or as young girls.

So female impersonators performed various types of stage roles. One was a romantic heroine, beloved of the hero, and the embodiment of feminine perfection and modesty. So it is important for these young male actors to have a melodious voices and a fine figure to be convincing and successful female impersonators. Female impersonation in Parsi theatre continued well into the 20th century retaining its popularity with audiences and company managers.

There aren't many, again, documented accounts of these female impersonators. What we do have is incomplete is the lives of two non-Parsi actors Jayshankar Sundari 1888 to 1967 from the Gujarati stage and the famous Bal Gandharva from the Marathi musical theatre 1889 to 1975. Both of them, Sundari as well as Bal Gandharva were excelled in the embodiment of feminine sensibility and decorum, and they were the ones who actually created prototypes for the ideal Indian woman.

Sundari launched his career on the Gujarati stage at the age of 12, starring in Saubhagya Sundari as the role, in the role of the auspicious young wife that gave him his stage name. Before that he

was an apprentice for three years in Calcutta with the Parsi theatre company of Dadabhai Thunthi. His first important role was the Emerald Fairy in Amanat's Indar Sabha, and he starred in a number of other Urdu language plays. During his Calcutta training, Sundari perfected the distinctive feminine gait and state entry that secured his fame as a modest yet alluring heroine. In fact, Sundari was so famous that many of the songs that he sang on stage were later on printed on sarees.

Sundari, of course, relied on a method of total identification with women, modeling specific roles on female acquaintances whom he had closely observed. His autobiography provides a rare self-reflective glimpse of the process of transformation from man to woman, and you can actually get this a sense of their -- of the lives from Kathryn Hansen's translations of these actors' autobiographies called *The Stages of Life*.

Here in a biography, Sundari says, "I saw a beautiful young girl emerging from myself. Whose shapely, intoxicating limbs oozed youthful exuberance; in whose form is the fragrance of moon's beauty; in whose eyes feminine feelings keep bringing; in whose gait is expressed the mannerism of a Gujaratin. Who is not a man, but a woman..."

"I saw such a portrait in the mirror...Reflecting the difference the mirror was saying, "This is not Jayshankar. It is a shy and proud Gujaratin. That graceful movement, that acting, that enchantment." A sweet shiver ran through my body's limbs. Momentarily, I thought that I was not a man."

So you see that in the process of actually dressing himself up as a woman and looking at his own image in the mirror, Sundari realizes that he is no longer a man, but a woman.

Similarly, Bal Gandharva also became very popular in Maharashtra as a singing actor, particularly among the students of the Deccan College, as well as in the courts of several Indian princess. His debut was in the role of Shakuntala before the Prince of Miraj in 1905. Like Sundari, Bal Gandharva was also known for his tragic portrayals of female misfortune, and so therefore audiences completely loved his ability to actually emote the tragedy of his heroines.

Bal Gandharva like Sundari also set the standards and fashions for women's dresses and behavior, and his photographic image was used in commodities for the female consumption, especially cosmetics. He popularized sari styles, jewelry such as the nose-stud, the wearing of

flowers in the hair, and carrying handkerchiefs. There were also photos of him in his roles as a middle-class housewife and so on and so forth.

What is actually interesting is that in some of the other plays that Bal Gandharva acted, especially in Manapman, he enters the stage looking rather with his hair set loose like the heroine who was not yet had a bath, and in another scene he dances back to the audience to reveal a long braid. So while these images might seem lascivious or seductive and alluring, these gestures were read -- were not read as crude, but were understood as modest and charming representations of the educated young women of the day. So many of his songs were memorable for their emotional expressivity or especially the projection of certain traditional sentiments of romance and pathos (shringara and karuna rasa). His voice production also was somehow, somewhere midway between male and female registers, like many of the other singer actors of his time.

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