

Parsi Theater, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay

IN its remarkable century-long history traversing the colonial and nationalist eras, the Parsi theater was unique as a site of communal harmony. The Parsi theater began in Bombay in the early 1850s and fanned out across South and Southeast Asia by the 1880s. During the twentieth century, major Parsi theatrical companies flourished in Lahore, Delhi, and Calcutta, exerting a huge impact on the development of modern drama, regional music, and the cinema. Parsis, Hindus, Muslims, Anglo-Indians, and Baghdadi Jews consorted amicably in both residential and traveling companies. Although company ownership usually remained in Parsi hands, actors were drawn from many communities, as were professional writers, musicians, painters, stage hands, and other personnel. As Sōmnāt^h Gupta makes clear, it was

Parsis, non-Parsis, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians who spread the art of theatre by founding theatrical companies, who built playhouses and encouraged drama, who became actors and popularized the art of acting, who composed innumerable dramas in Gujarati, Hindi, and Urdu, who composed songs and defended classical music, and who wrote descriptions of the Parsi stage and related matters.¹

Audiences similarly were heterogeneous, comprised of diverse religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups and representing a wide range of class

¹Sōmnāt^h Gupta, *Pārsī Thiyētar: Udbhav aur Vikās* (Allahabad: Lōkbhāratī Prakāshan, 1981), dedication (*samarpan*), p. 5.

positions. Sections of the public were catered to by particular narrative genres, including the Indo-Muslim fairy romance, the Hindu mythological, and the bourgeois social drama, yet no genre was produced exclusively for a particular viewership. Companies maintained a mixed repertoire and switched easily from a serious drama set in one social milieu and language to a farce in a completely different register. These shifts were paralleled by a diversity of song genres and performative novelties such as dances, skits, and other set pieces within the body of the play. The Parsi theater was eclectic and open-minded in its borrowings from culturally embedded local forms. One of the chief complaints against it was that it dissolved the boundary between high and low art, absorbing what was topical, catchy, and entertaining without regard to canons of taste.

This eclecticism contrasted with the close fit between earlier religious dramas and communities of believers, and with the modern theaters in Indian languages addressed to specific linguistic communities. In devotional theater forms like the *Rās Līlā* or *Rām Līlā*, the actors entrusted with impersonating the gods were prepubescent Brahmin boys. Sexual purity and high caste were required because audience members worshipped them as incarnations of the divine. In Parsi theater versions of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*, on the contrary, actresses like Gohar and Mary Fenton, a Muslim and Anglo-Indian respectively, played the roles of *Sītā* and other heroines, while Parsi and Muslim men played the parts of *Rāma* and *Krishna*. The glory of Hindu mythic figures had been a mainstay of Parsi theater since the *Indar Sabhā* arrived in Bombay from post-Mutiny Lucknow. The heteroglossia of the *Indar Sabhā* was mirrored in countless dramatic texts of the period.² Many Parsi plays, including the popular episodes from the Hindu epics, were written in Urdu dialogues with songs in Hindi. As a counterpart to this, in the Gujarati-language plays of the Parsi theater, *ghazals* in Urdu were commonplace.

When one goes to study the history of the Parsi theater, however, the picture derived from the secondary sources in Indian languages (and works in English based upon them) is highly distorted by communal sentiments reflecting religious and linguistic alignments that postdate the heyday of the Parsi theater in Bombay. Authors writing in Urdu laud the Urdu playwrights' contribution and slight the Parsis who wrote in the

²Kathryn Hansen, "Heteroglossia in Amānat's *Indar Sabhā*," in *The Banyan Tree: Essays on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages*, ed. Mariola Offredi, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), pp. 97–112.

Gujarati language. They exalt dramatists like Ḥashr or Aḥsan as being on par with Shakespeare, while portraying the Parsi company managers as crude capitalists. According to commentaries in Hindi or Gujarati, by contrast, the Urdu playwrights were hack writers, mere *munshīs* who copied from each other and sold themselves to the highest bidder. The Parsi pioneers are praised as brilliant actors and reformers, who brought modern drama into circulation throughout the Subcontinent. A selective presentation of data characterizes almost all of the accounts, impeding a correct assessment of the composite character of the Parsi theater.

A close examination of the evidence in the parallel streams of Urdu, Gujarati, and Hindi scholarship is necessary to reveal the memories and amnesia, the voices and the silences, that have hitherto constituted knowledge about the Parsi theater. This essay proposes to unpack the communalized views of Parsis, Muslims, and Hindus writing in these three languages (as well as in English), while providing the researcher with a guide through the most frequently consulted Indian-language sources on the Parsi theater. If a serious appraisal is to be made of the Parsi theater—and given its significance for cultural formation in South Asia such an appraisal is undoubtedly overdue—it must cut across linguistic lines in contemporary South Asian literary scholarship. Deep divisions among Indian-language communities and the literatures they have come to claim have had the effect of parceling out the Parsi theater and scholarship on it. To draw upon the Urdu sources alone, or the Gujarati, or the Hindi, would be to expose oneself to communal readings of history. The theatrical past can only be reconstructed through awareness of the communal discourses that have inflected the production of knowledge upon it.

Urdu Sources

The first Urdu book to treat the Parsi theater was *Nāṭak Sāgar* by Nūr Ilāhī and Muḥammad ‘Umar, published in 1924. At the time of its writing, professional Parsi theatrical companies had been active for fifty years and were still a prominent feature of the cultural landscape. The major actor-managers of the nineteenth century, Bālivālā and Khaṭāū, who were associated with the two most famous companies, the Victoria and the Alfred, had only died eight or ten years earlier, and the *Nāṭak Sāgar* authors had seen their memorable performances themselves. Playwrights like Ḥashr

and Aḥsan were still producing new work. The appraisal of the Parsi theater in *Nāṭak Sāgar* is therefore of a living phenomenon, which although considered noteworthy is said to be in decline, having fallen from its achievements under the illustrious leaders of the previous generation.

In *Nāṭak Sāgar*, Parsi theater is placed within a global historical perspective. The authors devote individual chapters to theatrical developments in each European country beginning with ancient Greece and extending to Iran, Turkey, China, Japan, Africa, and Australia. Within the chapter on Indian theater, the Parsi theater is sandwiched between a forty-page description of Sanskrit drama and sections on Hindi and Bengali drama. The entire narrative is framed by a preface in which, following Aristotle, the authors establish the human penchant for mimesis and argue that drama is indispensable to a just society. Whereas the authors deplore the present condition of drama in India, they urge its revival, because only a healthy stage can enable a nation to resist tyranny, especially the tyranny of religious fanaticism as exemplified by Italy's Pope, France's priests, and England's Puritans.³

The history thus aims, in the broadest sense, to define the canons of dramatic art and rescue the modern Indian drama within the discourses of reform and rational statecraft. Notwithstanding, the authors generally follow the *tazkīra* mode of unqualified praise, especially when discussing deceased figures like the playwright Amānat or the actor Bālivālā. Living dramatists like Ḥashr and Bētāb, on the other hand, are meted with criticism and held accountable for flaws in their use of language and construction of plots. The manner of the *tazkīra* is also noticeable in the introduction of every playwright first by the name of his father and then his mentor (*ustād*), and by the tendency toward long lists of works produced.

As is characteristic of Urdu literary histories, Parsi theater is discussed under the rubric "Urdu drama." The language of the Parsi theater, the authors allege, was Urdu from the very beginning, although this was not the Urdu of Delhi or Lucknow but an Urdu mixed with Gujarati, Hindi, and Purabi (Awadhi).⁴ The chronology begins with Amānat and the *Indar Sabḥā*, which it is claimed was commissioned by Navāb Vājid 'Alī Shāh

³Nūr Ilāhī and Muḥammad 'Umar, *Nāṭak Sāgar* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdū Akādēmī, 1982), preface (*dībāčā*), p. 3.

⁴*Ibid.*, main text, p. 363.

and based on European opera.⁵ After the fall of Awadh, the *Indar Sabhā* arrived in Bombay and was taken up by Parsi theatrical companies. The Parsi contribution is understood in two stages: (1) the interest of Parsi schoolboys in dramas on their community's history, and (2) the activity of businessmen to turn theater into a commercial enterprise. A pioneering figure, Seth Pestan Framji (probably Pestanji Framji Madan), the founder of the Original Theatrical Company and an Urdu poet himself, receives prominence in the *Nāṭak Sāgar*. The early period of playwriting and performance in Gujarati, however, is completely overlooked.

The subsequent developments in the Parsi theater are organized into a succession of theater companies and a lineage of playwrights. The founders of the companies, some of their leading actors, and their geographic locations are briefly mentioned but little is said of specific companies' innovations. The playwrights discussed are Raunaq, Zarīf, Ṭālib, Aḥsan, Bētāb, Ḥashr, 'Abdullāh, Bēg, Maḥshar, and some minor figures. A particular focus of discussion (and one repeatedly observed in the Urdu sources) is upon language, its evolution in terms of poetry and prose, and its "misuse," especially in recent dramas that mix Hindi and Sanskrit words. Passages are cited at length from various plays to illustrate the development of a felicitous Urdu idiom. While the authors claim to be above petty quarrels between Hindi and Urdu, they consider it a mark of progress that Ṭālib introduced songs in Urdu instead of the customary Hindi ones. Aḥsan Lakḥnavī's language is adjudged as pure (*pākīza*). Ḥashr's decision to challenge Bētāb on his own ground by writing mythological plays in Hindi is painted as a huge mistake.

The dominant thrust of the treatment is thus to establish the literary canon of Urdu drama. Beyond a brief mention of costumes and scenery, very little comment is made upon staging. The authors show little interest in or awareness of the English influence upon the Parsi theater. They do not favor the double-stranded plots that were common in the Parsi theater, because the subplot tended toward bawdy humor. Considering the immature state of cinema in 1924, it is noteworthy that the authors vehemently oppose its influence on the theater; cinema is viewed as sensationalistic, immoral, and a direct threat to the stage.

Ram Babu Saksena's *A History of Urdu Literature*, first published in 1927, is heavily indebted to Ilāhī and 'Umar's compendium, and much of

⁵Kathryn Hansen, "The Migration of a Text: The *Indar Sabhā* in Print and Performance," *Sangeet Natak* 127–8 (1998), pp. 4–6.

the chapter “Urdu Drama” is a direct translation from *Nāṭak Sāgar*. Opinions regarding the *Indar Sabhā* and its origins, on Urdu as the language of the drama, and on the strengths and weaknesses of the various playwrights, are borrowed wholesale. The *taẓkira* approach is preserved, together with nearly identical lists of plays for each playwright. The bulk of the chapter serves to establish the dramatic literary canon, although to his credit, Saksena shows interest in matters of stagecraft and presentation as well.

The second source of Saksena’s chapter is A. Yusuf Ali’s essay, “The Modern Hindustani Drama.” Writing in English in 1917, Yusuf Ali considers Hindustani to comprise both Hindi and Urdu, embracing the newer nationalist understanding of the *lingua franca* rather than the nineteenth-century identification of Hindustani with Urdu. However, he falls into the Urdu camp of historiography, in that the theater he discusses (without naming it as such) is the Parsi theater and its dramas are said to be those of the Urdu authors. Unlike Ilāhī and ‘Umar, he focuses on staging and the sociology of performance instead of dramatic texts. His article is valuable as a sort of colonial ethnography, a document based on observation as well as anecdote. He mentions the discrepant class and caste positions of company owners, actors, and audiences, and the different patron relations pertaining to urban and mofussil companies. Yusuf Ali also establishes a genealogy for modern drama, identifying five antecedent streams beginning with Sanskrit drama and ending with the English stage, which are recapitulated in Saksena. Although religious and folk plays are mentioned, Parsi Gujarati drama is completely absent, as is playwriting in modern Hindi, and most actors are said to be Muslims. Predictably for an author educated in English, Yusuf Ali emphasizes adaptations made of plays by Shakespeare.

Ilāhī and ‘Umar, Saksena, and Yusuf Ali all share a reformist perspective on Urdu drama comparable to the stance of Ḥālī and Āzād on Urdu poetry. Despite its many flaws, Urdu drama is announced as “on the road to progress,” and numerous prescriptions are given for its betterment. Influenced by the notion of national drama prevalent in Europe, the authors understand the possession of modern drama to be a necessary adjunct of a civilized nation. None of these authors links the Urdu drama to the imagined nation of the Congress Party or the Indian nationalist movement. Its salience is more within the colonial context, as a vehicle for the moral improvement of the community. “Progress” will be achieved when the imitation of Nature replaces the obsession with fantasy and otherworldly concerns identified with premodern Urdu literature.

The erotics of classical Urdu poetry are roundly condemned; they must be abandoned for “the romantic, healthy, and full-bodied love between man and woman.”⁶ The Urdu *ghazal*, which like other genres was adopted into the performative texture of the Parsi theater, is treated at best with ambivalence, at worst with outright disdain. For the dramatic medium, prose is urged over poetry, and even rhyming prose (a mainstay of dialogue in Parsi theater) is rejected. The popularity of the oral culture of Urdu poetry and its suitability to an emerging Indian-language theater are overshadowed by the concern to develop a progressive, reformist practice in line with nineteenth-century European dramaturgy.

The reputed chronicler ‘Abdu ’l-Ḥalīm Sharar considered the origins of Urdu drama within his larger cultural history of Lucknow. His pieces on drama published in the Urdu journals *Dil Gudāz* and *Risāla-e Urdū* were included in 1927 in *Guzashta Lakḥnā’u*, translated by E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain as *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*. Sharar maintains that Amānat, rather than taking orders from the Navāb Vājīd ‘Alī Shāh or any foreigner, on his own initiative had imitated the court entertainments called *rahas* or *rās*. He thereby establishes a linkage between the *Indar Sabḥā* as an Urdu dramatic genre and Indic enactments of the Rādḥā-Krishna romance, refuting the allegation of European influence.

Although Sharar was not directly concerned with the Parsi theater, his propositions have significantly influenced later writers on the subject. His genealogy positions the origin of Urdu theater in the pre-colonial past, within the composite culture of urban, secular north India. The Parsi theater is understood as a colonial product that derived its strength from this prior base.⁷ Together with the assertion that “Urdu theater . . . is generally referred to as Parsi theater,”⁸ this logic enables later authors like Amaresh Mishra to develop the notion that the Parsi theater originated in

⁶A. Yusuf Ali, “The Modern Hindustani Drama,” *Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature*, 2nd series (1917), p. 83.

⁷“The foundations of Urdu drama were definitely laid in Lucknow and from there became current throughout India.” E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain, trans. and ed., *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1976), p. 85.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 259.

Lucknow.⁹ This opinion still enjoys currency, in spite of the lack of evidence that Parsi theatrical companies or patrons existed in Lucknow and the fact that Parsi theater performances occurred independently in Bombay in 1853, the year of the first performance of the *Indar Sabhā* in Lucknow.

In an article in *The Urdu* in 1927, Mas‘ūd Ḥasan Rizvī “Adib” added his voice to Sharar’s, rejecting the idea of Western influence on the composition of the *Indar Sabhā*. Later research by Rizvī took shape in two lengthy volumes under the title *Urdū Ḍrāmā aur Istēj* (1957). Rizvī is perhaps the first historian in the Urdu line to buttress his arguments with references to print sources. He presents evidence from Amānat’s commentary (*sharḥ*) to the *Indar Sabhā*, as well as from *taẓkiras* and Amānat’s other works, and he also exhaustively surveys the writings of Vājid ‘Alī Shāh. Rizvī’s position has been influential among the newer generation of Urdu scholars, who perhaps are more eager than their forebears to establish the indigenous roots of Urdu drama. Rizvī’s denial of foreign contact, particularly at the moment of origin, establishes a nationalist narrative, as does his notion of Amānat as founding a “people’s theater” (*‘avāmī istēj*). However, Rizvī has virtually nothing to say on the subject of the Parsi theater, except as an instrument for prolonging the stage life of the *Indar Sabhā*.

The disassociation of Urdu drama from its putative European antecedents is a welcome corrective to the colonialist narrative that emerges from *Nāṭak Sāgar* and pervades the literary histories of Saksena, Sadiq, and even Schimmel. Nonetheless, Sharar’s and Rizvī’s conflation of Urdu drama with Parsi theater continues the pattern of denying the heterogeneous character of the Parsi stage. It either subsumes all of the Parsi theater’s activity under the heading “Urdu drama” or excludes non-Urdu linguistic and cultural elements. Moreover, the fixation upon the *Indar Sabhā* as the “first”—and therefore the most authentic—drama in the Urdu tradition exemplifies the same project of canon formation as that undertaken in *Nāṭak Sāgar*. The difference is simply that the search for a useable past here manifests as a preference for data that fit a nationalist configuration of cultural and political identity rather than a colonial reformist agenda.

⁹“The origins of the mass popular Parsi theatre ... are traced to the Urdu theatre of Lucknow.” Amaresh Mishra, *Lucknow, Fire of Grace* (Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 1998), p. xiv.

In his four-volume *Urdū Thēṭar* (first three volumes published in 1962, the fourth in 1975), ‘Abdul ‘Alīm Nāmī presented a revised version of his doctoral dissertation, which became the first comprehensive history of the Parsi theater in Urdu. His signal effort to incorporate the minutiae of performances, actors, companies, and dramatic literature set a new standard, and his work is the primary reference for later authors. Nāmī’s sources, listed at the end of volume 1, include numerous nineteenth-century travelogues, English, Gujarati and Marathi newspapers, administrative papers and diaries of the East India Company, catalogues from the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum, books on English and Marathi theater, as well as Dhānjīb^hā’ī Paṭēl’s Gujarati history of the Parsi theater (see below), articles from Urdu journals *Navā-e Adab* and *Ājkal*, Amānat’s *Dīvān* and Rizvī’s *Lakḥna’u kā ‘Avāmī Isṭej*.

Unlike the authors already discussed, Nāmī is not interested in apologizing for the theater or exercising judgment in the selection of a canon. Rather, an infectious enthusiasm for the subject pervades the work, producing if anything a lack of discrimination and an excess of detail. Nāmī acquired a substantial collection of playscripts, some through bribery and illicit dealings as he himself confesses, and his study relies upon these texts as well as the oral lore of the theater imbibed with life-long residence in Bombay. Notwithstanding the advance in methodology represented by the use of such sources, later studies have identified numerous errors in Nāmī’s history.

The organization of the four volumes is as follows: (1) historical background, typology of dramas; (2–3) playwrights and their dramas; (4) Parsi theatrical companies. Volume 2 divides the playwrights into the periods 1853–85, 1885–95, and 1895–1920, whereas Volume 3 treats the period 1920–30. The periods are constructed somewhat artificially to separate the authors by religious community. Thus in the section devoted to 1853–85, Nāmī lists only Parsi and Hindu dramatists. Early Muslim dramatists like Raunaq, Zārīf, and ‘Abdullāh are put in the period 1885–95, although records indicate that their plays were published beginning in 1880. The study is the first in Urdu to acknowledge the Parsi contribution to the creation of a dramatic literature, and the early dramas are correctly described as written in Gujarati, or if in Urdu, translated from Gujarati. These Gujarati plays, however, are still assimilated under the rubric “Urdu theater.” Nāmī’s treatment includes information about who commissioned the play, the date, the company that performed it, the cast, and often a summary of the plot.

In the fourth volume, Nāmī places Urdu drama within a complex

history of Bombay theater including the older English theater and the new Marathi-speaking companies. He establishes the early history of the Parsi theater (1853–55) by reference to newspaper articles and reviews published in English, presented here in Urdu translation. The Parsi companies proper are dealt with in two sections, 1857–1900 and 1901–65. Within each section, companies are listed in alphabetical rather than chronological order. For the nineteenth century, Nāmī lists 58 companies, all but one being based in Bombay. A further 220 companies, many located outside Bombay, are enumerated for the twentieth century. Companies that were founded in the nineteenth century but continued to be active in the twentieth are listed in the first section. A company such as The Alfred is given eight entries, reflecting each change in management and the successor company, The New Alfred. If such multiple listings are subtracted, the nineteenth-century section details only 29 companies (or fewer, because of overlaps in membership).

This volume contains much useful albeit scattered information. The discussion includes mention of the use of spectacular stage effects (“machines”), female impersonators, rivalries between companies, company travels, and reasons for break-ups. Anecdotes attached to specific plays or performers capture a sense of the popular lore about theater in its time. Problems of delineating language and community, however, remain. As an example, Nāmī repeatedly says that the companies turned to Urdu performance as a way of securing profits. He claims that Muḥammad ‘Alī Bohrā’s involvement with the Alfred Company led to its adopting Urdu, but the two plays that initially made the company popular in the 1870s were by Farāmroz and were performed in Gujarati. Bohrā might have preferred Urdu, but the assumption that because he was a Muslim he knew Urdu is unfounded. Most Bohras at that time spoke a form of Gujarati, and Parsis often had as much education in Persian and Arabic as Bombay Muslims.

Given the rather unwieldy nature of Nāmī’s study, subsequent authors have attempted to digest the same material and present it in a single volume. A good example is ‘Ishrat Raḥmānī’s *Urdū Ḍrāmā kā Irṭiqā*, written in 1968, and itself the basis for later reiterative accounts. Raḥmānī’s analysis is unremarkable, except for its dependency on Nāmī and earlier authors. Chapter 8, “Parsi Theater and Urdu Drama,” takes the history of Parsi theater through the nineteenth century. The following chapters reveal the shift in emphasis away from Amānat, the founding figure, toward Āghā Ḥaṣhr Kāshmirī as the quintessential Urdu dramatist. Raḥmānī wrote an entire book on Ḥaṣhr, and here he incorporates much

of his earlier research. Other twentieth-century playwrights (Bētāb, ‘Abbās, Maḥshar) receive passing recognition.

A landmark set of twelve volumes edited by Imtiyāz ‘Alī Tāj and Viqār ‘Azīm represents the culmination of the productive phase of Urdu scholarship on the Parsi theater. Published by the Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab of Lahore between 1969 and 1975, the series entitled *Urdū kē Klāsiki Ḍrāmē* encompasses the full Urdu texts of 35 plays written for the Parsi theater, plus extensive introductory matter, notes, and appendices. Tāj, himself a noted playwright, set out in the 1960s to collect and transliterate the corpus of early Urdu dramas that initially were published in Bombay in the Gujarati script. During his lifetime he was able to see to publication the first six volumes of this ambitious project. Thereafter Professor Azīm took over and added six more volumes. The series includes representative works attributed to Marzbān, Ārām, Zārīf, Raunaq, Murād, Ḥabāb, ‘Abdullāh, Bēg, ‘Abbās, Ṭālib, and anonymous playwrights. An additional two volumes containing five plays by Āghā Ḥashr were published under the same banner, edited by ‘Ishrat Raḥmānī (1987, 1997).

Tāj’s most important contribution was to locate and study published texts of the earliest stratum of plays. Unlike preceding scholars, he attends to verifying the dates of publication and likely authorship of the dramas, although problems of identification inevitably remain. He ferrets out biographical data about the playwrights, providing a level of documentation unmatched earlier. By transliterating and publishing the texts in the Urdu script, he in a sense completes the project of assimilating the Parsi theater to “Urdu drama.” The publisher, a governmental agency for the advancement of Urdu, collaborates in the process of canonization, and the dramas are styled “classical,” enhancing their prestige. Notably, Tāj performs the service of recirculating plays whose old editions had almost completely vanished into oblivion. That this recirculation occurs in post-Partition Pakistan reminds us of the persistent value attached to the concept of a national drama, and of the need for a body of literary texts that can represent the drama in university syllabi and research archives.

Although Tāj complies with the project of canon formation, he does not erase the mixed heritage of the early playwrights associated with the Parsi theater. Tāj does not *translate* the texts; the heterogeneous registers present there remain. Given the symbolism of the narrative of origins, it is significant that Tāj ignores Amānat’s *Indar Sabḥā* and considers *Sōnē kē Mōl kī Khurshīd*, a translation by B. F. Marzbān of a Gujarati play, the first Urdu drama. He details the role of Dādībḥā’ī Paṭēl, the pioneer actor-manager of the Victoria Theatrical Company, in commissioning this play

and beginning the rage for Urdu in the Parsi theater. Tāj identifies Ārām as a Parsi who was the first Urdu playwright to work for the companies as a professional *munshī*; he appraises his grasp of Hindustani as poor. Raunaq is described as a Muslim of possible Deccani or Gujarati origins. The first generation of north Indian Muslims to write for the Parsi theater does not arrive until Murād, Ḥabāb, and ‘Abdullāh.

Tāj further contextualizes the Parsi theater within the social history of Bombay and its cultures of performance. He draws not only on Nāmī but on underrecognized scholars like Maimūna Dalvī and Saiyad Ḥasan, and he includes Urdu translations of portions of memoirs such as *Mhārō Nāṭakī Anubhav* by Jahāngīr Khambātā. Another important feature of the collection is the inclusion of the authorial prefaces (*dībāḥā*), which address the play-reading public and have much to say of the playwrights’ intentions. Tāj also refers, when appropriate, to his own experiences as a spectator at performances of popular plays. He appears to have had access to bibliographic records of the India Office Library and even ordered editions of plays from the collection for perusal.

Under ‘Azīm’s editorship, the introductory matter focuses more on biographical data in the *taẓkīra* mode and on evaluation of the dramas and less on their performance history. ‘Azīm critiques the plays as though they were meant to be read as literary texts, and he shows a penchant for enumeration, e.g., the counting of scenes and their length. The value of the later volumes in the series is thus somewhat reduced. Despite this and the probability of errors of transliteration and analysis, the series as a whole stands as a fitting tribute to a bygone era in theatrical history.

Gujarati and Hindi Sources

Writing on the Parsi theater in Gujarati goes back to its beginnings, when the weekly Gujarati newspaper *Rāst Gofṭār* (founded by Dadabhai Naoroji in 1851) published theatrical notices, reviews, and advertisements to help build an audience for the fledgling theater. The most important among the Gujarati weeklies was *Kaysar-e hind*, established in 1882. Essays by Dhānjībḥā’ī N. Paṭēl (1857–1937) on the Parsi theater were published serially in it for 97 weeks. Of these, 68 were collected and published as *Pārsī Nāṭak Takhtānī Tavārikh* by Kaysar-e Hind Press in 1931. The book included approximately 150 photographs of Parsi actors. The insider status that Paṭēl enjoyed as a playwright, actor, and poet, and the fact that

his life span coincided with that of the Parsi theater, enabled him to document it with intimate, firsthand knowledge.¹⁰ Paṭēl's volume is an indispensable sourcebook for its nineteenth-century phase, and it has been the foundation for later studies in Gujarati, Hindi, and Urdu (Nāmī and his successors, see above).

Paṭēl's narrative extends from the founding of the Pārsī Nāṭak Maṇḍalī in 1853 through the era of Mary Fenton and Kāvas Khaṭāū (the 1890s). It is not strictly chronological. Rather than focusing on theatrical companies or playwrights as the Urdu sources do, Paṭēl chooses leading actors, some of whom became famous managers, as pivots for discussion. He clusters information about the companies and their memorable performances around these personalities, giving a vivid picture of the star status that Parsi performers enjoyed in their time. The careers of K.S. Nāzīr, K.N. Kābrā, Dādī Paṭēl, K.M. Bālivālā, Dādī Ṭḥunṭhī, Kāvas Khaṭāū, Sohrāb Ōgrā, and Mary Fenton dominate the history, but countless minor actors and actresses are also discussed. Paṭēl is particularly informative on the subject of female impersonators (known as *strī pārt*), who formed a highly visible minority within the pool of acting talent.

Dates of performances and travels outside of Bombay are carefully inserted in Paṭēl's history and can be assumed to be accurate because of his close association with the companies and the press. Paṭēl discusses the organizational side of the Parsi companies, profiling the *sēṭhs* who were patrons and naming directors, partners, shareholders, and managing committees. Important and rare details include the names of the early painters of scenic curtains, the involvement of dancers from the traditional Bhavā'ī and Mahlārī communities, and lists of Parsi actors with academic degrees.

As a literary history, Paṭēl's treatment is limited to listing the plays produced by nineteenth-century Parsi playwrights. Paṭēl mentions the translation of plays such as *Sunānā Mulnī Khorshed* into Urdu, but he does not discuss the Muslim *munshīs* and their output. His slight of the Urdu dramatists' contribution to the Parsi theater is comparable to Ilāhī and 'Umar's neglect of the Parsi dramatists. However, since Paṭēl is principally concerned with actors and the live theater, not with texts and a literary

¹⁰In addition to acting on and writing for the Parsi stage until he was almost thirty, Paṭēl composed a famous version of the *Shāhnāma* and performed *kīrtans* his entire life. See H.D. Darukhanawala, *Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil* (Bombay: G. Claridge, 1963), vol. 2, pp. 270–3.

canon, his exclusion is arguably less reprehensible. Still, it is evident that one purpose of Paṭēl's history is to celebrate the achievements of the Parsi community, and non-Parsis (with the exception of Mary Fenton who married a Parsi) have no place within it.

A shorter and more random work, *Purānō Pārsī Nāṭak Takhtō* by Shāvakhshā Dārāshāh Sharōf "Firozgar," was published by Kaysar-e Hind Press in 1950, again as a collection of articles written for the newspaper. Sharōf wrote a number of Gujarati plays for the twentieth-century Parsi-Gujarati theater, and his short pieces look back on the "old" Parsi stage with nostalgia. The lack of chronological and topical order, the notational quality of the entries, the excessive importation of English words, phrases, and clichés, and the tendency to borrow information from Paṭēl's history reduce the value of this book as a scholarly source. The anecdotes, nonetheless, possess a certain flair and provide another set of memories against which other data about the Parsi theater can be compared.

Sharōf is less interested than Paṭēl in mapping the theatrical companies, and he does not take the narrative beyond the 1890s or mention any companies that were formed outside of Bombay. His approach to the dramatic literature is once more straitjacketed by communal criteria. His list of playwrights extends only to Parsis. Reference to Urdu is limited to crediting Dādī Paṭēl with introducing it through the translation of *Sunānā Mulnī Khorshed*. Sharōf cites verses from Āghā Ḥashr's plays and translates them into Gujarati without crediting their author. Similarly, he includes a picture of Kāvās Khaṭāū in Aḥsan's *Khūn-e Nāḥaq* but fails to discuss the Urdu play or its playwright. These examples show that Parsi writers on the theater were well aware of the Urdu playwrights' contributions but chose not to acknowledge them.

The most recent addition to the Gujarati histories of the Parsi theater, Gōpāl Shāstrī's *Pārsī Raṅgbhūmi* (1995), is a readable, well-organized book that provides a good overview, while still revealing the limits of his scholarly tradition. Shāstrī provides a bibliography and footnotes that make transparent his indebtedness to Paṭēl and Sharōf as well as some acquaintance with Nāmī and Saksena. The core of his book is, in the manner of Paṭēl, organized around the theatrical companies and contains little that is new. An examination of Appendix 2, "Parsi Dramas and Dramatists," reveals the same absence of non-Parsis and Urdu plays as in previous Gujarati-language studies. Yet significantly, of the seven popular songs reproduced in Appendix 4, four are in Urdu, one is in Hindi, one in English, and one in Gujarati—without any of the linguistic differences being mentioned or the plays attributed to their respective authors, acts of

naming that would reverse the exclusion of “other” communities.

The erasure of the Indo-Muslim component of the Parsi theater assumes a greater magnitude, moreover, in the discussion of the origins of the theater and its components. While speaking of music, Shāstrī mentions only the Sanskrit, folk, and Western streams of influence, omitting the Hindustani tradition of classical singing associated with the performance of Urdu and Braj Bhasha poetry.¹¹ In his chapter on historical background, Shāstrī dwells at length on the Sanskrit dramatic tradition and the Gujarati folk form Bhavā’ī, without touching at all on the *Indar Sabhā* and the north Indian heritage. As a Gujarati, Shāstrī is much more involved in the debate between Parsis and Hindus about which of these two communities should get credit for the origin of Gujarati drama, rather than concerning himself with the possible involvement of Muslims or derivation from Indo-Muslim cultural traditions. Later, he does introduce the major twentieth-century playwrights, Ḥashr, Bētāb, and Rād̥hēshyām, but he subsumes them in a chapter on the effects of the Parsi theater on the Hindi stage, again relegating “Urdu” to “Hindi” as though it were merely a dialect of the national language.

The most accessible and reliable study of the Parsi theater in Hindi, *Pārsī T̥hīyēṭar: Udb̥hav aur Vikās* by Sōmnāt̥h Gupta, was published in 1981, although it appears to have been completed in 1969.¹² It draws upon sources in English, Gujarati, Hindi, and Urdu, makes use of archival records and personal interviews, and if not utterly scrupulous in citing these sources in footnotes, at least acknowledges them in the preface. The dedication is exceptional for its inclusive tone: “This volume is gratefully dedicated to the sacred memory of all those Parsis, non-Parsis, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians who spread the art of theater.”

Almost immediately, however, Gupta takes umbrage with Nāmī, denouncing his nomenclature “Urdu theater” as undesirable, incorrect, and misleading.¹³ In spite of his disagreement with Nāmī and his intention not to repeat information already available in *Urdū T̥hīyēṭar*, Gupta devotes a 44-page chapter to Urdu playwrights, drawing upon Nāmī’s volume 2 and his personal play collection. He also represents the impact of the *Indar Sabhā* with a ten-page analysis. These sections impartially document those parts of Parsi theatrical history elided in the earlier

¹¹Gōpāl Shāstrī, *Pārsī Raṅgbhūmi* (Vadodara: Sād̥hanā Shāstrī, 1995), p. 125.

¹²Both the dedication and the foreword (*dō shabd*) are dated 1969.

¹³Guptā, *Pārsī T̥hīyēṭar*, preface (*āmuk̥h*), p. 13.

Gujarati studies. With the omission of his first chapter, whose contents are entirely based on Kumudini Mehta's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, *English Drama on the Bombay Stage* (1960), the remainder of Gupta's book generally follows Dhānjīb^hā'ī Paṭēl's history. In places he simply abridges and translates Paṭēl, in others he appends material such as the Gujarati prefaces of K.N. Kābrā transliterated into Devanagari. The main drawback of the book is its lack of synthesis and contextualization. The two longest chapters, on theatrical companies and actors, recover extensive lists of names and dates but are tedious to read and could benefit by cross-referencing. Gupta's neutrality on questions of language and community nevertheless distinguishes this book.

Hindī Raṅgmanč aur Paṇḍit Nārāyanprasād Bētāb was published in 1972 by playwright Bētāb's daughter, Vidyāvati Lakṣmanrāv Namra. Originally submitted as a Ph.D. thesis to Poona University, Namra's book turns her father's oeuvre into a subject for scholastic exegesis, rather a feat considering that his songs and plays composed for the Parsi theater and Bombay cinema hardly figure in the Hindi literary canon. Namra turns the tables on Nāmī, deploying the phrase "*hindī raṅgmanč*" in precisely the way Nāmī used "*urdū t^hēṅar*" to refer to the Parsi theater at large. She acknowledges the dominance enjoyed by Urdu at the end of the nineteenth century, as in Chapter 2 where she describes the major Urdu playwrights of the Parsi theater. This section is based on Nāmī, Saksena, and Raḥmānī and contains nothing new.

This historical legacy, however, is set up only to be overturned by her father, whom she praises for bringing the Hindi language to the stage. In passing, she mentions that Bētāb was trained in Urdu poetry. Clearly he was bi- or multilingual, but his claim to fame is, in her eyes, as a Hindi playwright for the resurgent "Hindi stage." The sources for Bētāb's career include his autobiography as well as Rādhēshyām Kathāvāčak's memoirs, *Mērā Nāṭak Kāl*. His plays are analyzed in four lengthy chapters devoted to sources, plot, characterization, and dialogue, a standard format for the doctoral dissertation in Indian literature. A final chapter describes Bētāb's screenplays and film songs. This section is valuable as an archive for studying the interface between the early Indian cinema and the Parsi theater.

The modern Hindi playwright and novelist Lakṣmī Nārāyan Lāl (b. 1925) published *Pārsī-Hindī Raṅgmanč* in 1973. Working independently from Namra, he arrives at the same notion of a dominant Hindi strain within the multilingual Parsi theater. This he dubs the "Parsi-Hindi" theater, and the burden of his book is to trace through a succession of

texts its nationalist spirit, its links with Hindu mythology, and its impact upon the modern Hindi drama. Although he pays lip service to the role of Englishmen, Parsis, and Muslims in establishing the theater, the nineteenth century is quickly skipped over. Lāl focuses instead on the twentieth century and on three playwrights—Rād^hēshyām, Bētāb, and Ḥashr—all of whom are categorized as Hindi authors. In perfect counterpoint to Ilāhī and ‘Umar, Lāl debunks the early part of Ḥashr’s career during which he wrote plays in Urdu, contrasting it with the latter phase when he went to Calcutta, wrote in Hindi, and achieved (according to Lāl) his greatest success.

Lāl’s excision of both the Gujarati and Urdu playwriting traditions leaves a very lopsided picture of the Parsi theater. Ignorance of Parsi cultural history is evident in Lāl’s classification of Ḥashr’s *Rustam-o-Subrāb* as a Muslim historical drama. Whereas previous Hindi writers like Gupta and Namra read Nāmī and argued with him, it becomes evident from Lāl’s bibliography that he consulted only one or two Urdu sources; Nāmī is not listed among them. Yet Lāl’s version of theatrical history, so obviously distorted by communal preferences, is widely accepted in Hindi circles. Moreover, his narrative has a ring of truth in that it extends up to 1960, incorporating anecdotes that would still be fresh memories for readers in 1973. One part of the book that may be useful in spite of this bias is the chapter on music and dance.

Conclusion

The scholarship on the Parsi theater in three Indian languages is deeply divided along communal lines. The extensive literature in Urdu favors Muslim playwrights and assimilates non-Muslims to the rubric “Urdu theater,” whereas the parallel body of writing in Gujarati and Hindi ignores the Muslim contribution or subordinates it to the nationalist ideology epitomized by the equation Hindi/Hindu/Hindustan. Whether referring to their subject as “Parsi theater,” “Urdu drama,” or “*hindī raṅgmanč*,” all are writing about the same phenomenon, a theater built by Parsis, Muslims, Hindus and others, and its associated dramatic literature, which was published in Gujarati, Urdu printed in Gujarati script, Urdu in Arabic script, and Hindi/Urdu in Devanagari script. Although the Parsi theater was produced within a cosmopolitan entertainment economy at a time when linguistic and communal identities

were fluid and overlapping, the knowledge of the Parsi theater disseminated through South Asian language-based scholarly traditions has been produced under the shadow of the Subcontinent's religious and ethnic antagonisms.

To be sure, the trend toward the communalization of knowledge traditions is not monolithic. Post-Partition scholars like Tāj and Gupta manage to mitigate the exclusions of the earlier *Nāṭak Sāgar* and Parsi Gujarati writers like Paṭēl and Sharōf. The complications arising from the shifting identification of the Parsis have also upset the simple Hindu vs. Muslim contest. Whereas Parsis were, on account of their origins, formerly associated with Hindu mercantile groups from Gujarat, an identification confirmed by their use of Gujarati, in more recent times they are seen by the Hindu majority as outsiders, as Persians, and almost equivalent to Muslims. The fact that Parsi writing of the nineteenth century, including the large corpus written for the Parsi theater, has almost entirely been erased from the canon of Gujarati literature attests to the marginalization of the Parsis in nationalist constructions of literary formation. As the proverbial third faction, the Parsis who pioneered modern theater in South Asia are in danger of being written out of both the histories of "Urdu drama" and "Hindi stage."

To correct these misrepresentations is not easy, for the Parsi theater was succeeded by forms of dramatic production that adhered more closely to bounded notions of community than the Parsi theater ever did. As the Parsi theater began to wane, "Urdu drama" arose to address specifically the Urdu-speaking and reading communities of northern India and Pakistan. Similarly, "Hindi drama" took up its separate course, harking back to Bhāratendu Harishchandra in the nineteenth century and linking him to the movement for urban theater in Delhi, Allahabad, and Calcutta. The establishment of the Sahitya Akademi in India and the bestowing of government patronage hastened the project of defining dramatic practice in relation to regionally bounded linguistic communities now pitted against each other in competition for the resources of the nation-state. Nonetheless, the theatrical substratum underpinning the forms was shared, a common legacy of the Parsi theater that continues to unify the commercial stage and popular cinema across languages.

It is critical to present-day cultural politics in South Asia to emphasize that the Parsi theater did not produce the religious antipathies that have lately become so destructive. The Parsi theater was not devised by

the colonial rulers as a tool of “divide and rule,” nor as a means of robbing the Subcontinent of its indigenous dramatic traditions.¹⁴ It was a hybrid formation that consolidated local expressive arts within a pan-Indian style of representation made possible by urban growth, the emergence of bourgeois society, and new technologies of theatrical production and perception. Growing from the entrepreneurial energy of one community, the Parsis, the Parsi theater incorporated the love of theatricality and the abundance of theatrical talent that are widely distributed throughout South Asia. It is knowledge *about* the Parsi theater, circulated in scholarly writing in Urdu, Hindi, and Gujarati, that has perpetuated a communalized understanding of this highly significant theatrical form. The scholarly literature in these languages is extremely valuable and cannot be dismissed simply because of its omissions and distortions. Rather the investigator needs to proceed with open eyes, reading across the linguistic divide, and resisting the habit of constructing the past in the image of the present. □

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¹⁴“The western drama and theatre entered our country as elements of the culture of the conquerors, who, in a well-planned manner, deliberately tried to prove that compared to the Western the Indian culture was inferior, trivial and undeveloped....The new theatre which began in our country in the middle of the nineteenth century was, if not a total imposition, almost entirely an imitation of the western theatre.” Nemichandra Jain, *Indian Theatre: Tradition, Continuity and Change* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1992), pp. 65–6.

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