Week 1: Introduction to Modern Indian Drama

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Lecture 1

- 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.

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- 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') comprised of many other languages that were lost in translation.

- 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 Sanskritic 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 Europeans scholars had in understanding India's past. Thus Sanskrit texts, both religious and secular, came to be preserved and transmitted.
- 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. 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.
- 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.

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- 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.
- Theatre scholar Ananda Lal argues that Rabindranath Tagrore was the pivotal figure in Modern Indian drama, in terms of his imaginative stagecraft modeled after Sanskrit aesthetics that attempted to transform Western theatrical modes of domestic realism and picturesque entertainment. His plays were controversial for the time, as they dealt with female sexuality, the orthodoxies of Hinduism, untouchability, anticipated environmental concerns and revisited Buddhism as a pacific faith.
- Tagore was also known for introducing women to the stage, which included women even from 'respectable' families at a time when male actors impersonated women.

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Lecture 2

- 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.
- 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 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.

Lecture 4

- Dadabhai Sohrabji Patel or Dadi Patel, M.A., was a wealthy intellectual who became the secretary of the Victoria Theatrical Company in 1869, who commissioned the first play in Urdu, although knowledge of the language was initially lacking among playwrights, actors and spectators. He popularized opera and professionalized theatre, with full-time salaries and introducing 'scientific' stagecraft.
- Urdu plays were initially written in Gujarati script. Urdu was favoured also because of its traditions of poetry, music and song. The most important Urdu play that set off a new tradition of play writing in Urdu was *Indar Sabha* by Agha Hasan Amanat in 1853.
- Although Hindu women were largely forbidden from acting on stage, there were male impersonators who played women, Anglo-Indian and Jewish actresses on stage.
- The performance of femininity on stage was a visual construction of bourgeois respectability on stage that contained her sexuality and created a new interiority identifying the ideal woman with her capacity to suffer.

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- Parsi theatrical companies traveled far to Ceylon, Calcutta, Rangoon, Peshawar and Sindh. Writers, actors, company managers, musicians, etc. belonged to a mix of caste, class and religious backgrounds.
- Much of the anecdotal evidence of female impersonation is drawn from Kathryn Hansen's translation of Somnath Gupta's scholarly Hindi monograph on Parsi theatre, which was based on the theatre notices of on-time actor and photographer Dhanjibhai Patel and the autobiographical pieces of female impersonators like Narayan Prasad Betab, Fida Hussain.
- With the establishment of the Victoria Theatrical Company in 1868, Parsi theatre became more professionalized when compared to the earlier nautch performances by feudal aristocrats. Men with a pleasing figure and voice were required. When the Victoria Theatrical company split, the former manager, Dadi Patel, took all the leading female impersonators with him to form the Original Victoria Theatrical Company, leaving the next manager at a loss.
- Female impersonation continued into the 20th century. There are few records of these actors' lives, with the exception of the non-Parsi actors like Jayshankar Sundari (1888-1967) and Bal Gandharva (1889-1975).
- The female impersonator averted the potential slander and criticism directed to a transvestite. It thinly cloaked an aggressive heterosexual masculinity, and by performing the wronged woman, the female impersonator was rendered harmless and worthy of sympathy.
- The belief that men could 'do' gender better than women, perpetuating the control that men had over the theatre system, and the public control over the female body and its representation.
- The Anglo-Indian and Jewish actresses who played women, passed off as Indian while embodying modernity through their fair skin and modern ways.
- There was an opposition to the partcipation of women on stage by the eminent Gujarati playwright K.N. Kabra who formed the Natak Uttejak Mandali in opposition to the Victoria Theatrical Company that encouraged female involvement. But he also encouraged women to watch plays. The New Alfred Theatrical Company, which split from the parent company in 1891, again opposed the presence of women on stage.
- Dadi Patel employed many muslim women in his production of Indar Sabha.
- The Anglo-Indian women who began acting in Parsi Theatre adopted Hindu names, which signified an act of subordinating the Anglo-Indian actress, the feminine

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embodiment of the West, to the Indian male gaze. The actresses were cast in the image of the houri or pale fairy, a familiar Indo-Islamic trope.

- The photographic image of the actresses on billboards and magazines, were titillating in their impact, leading the public to believe they would witness foreign actresses perform. The Anglo-Indian actresses were thus both native as well as exotic Other.
- Indian modern theatre drew from local folk traditions like Yakshagana, Tamasha, Ras Lila, Nautanki, Bhavai, Jatra and Khayal. Many of the post-Independence dramatists like Habib Tanvir and Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar turned to folk traditions as what they thought was the essence of Indian theatre. The aim was to establish the importance of the actor as opposed to the urban playwright and the communal involvement and ritualistic action of rural societies. Hindi and Urdu theatre traditions drew from primarily religious (Ram Lila or Ras Lila) traditions or secular ones (Nautanki or Svang).
- Three of the most significant pre-Independence playwrights were Bharatendu Harishchandra, Jayshankar Prasad and Rabindranath Tagore.
- All shunned commercial theatre as antithetical to their aesthetics.
- In her book on Harishchandra, theatre scholar Vasudha Dalmia shows the impact the German playwright Bertolt Brecht's dramatic form and techniques had on Harishchandra and other contemporary and later playwrights.
- Harishchandra was inspired by Sanskrit theatre and wished to recast Sanskrit theatre in a modernist idiom even as he drew from popular forms.
- Dalmia argues that Harischandra's political and social satires of co-existed with a future vision of the nation that echoed with Rajput models of sovereignty.
- But his critiques of society were tempered by the merchant-Rajput nexus that he was a part of. He was himself from a wealthy family of merchants.
- Harishchandra called drama a drishya kavya or visual poetry that suggested the poetic-literary quality that drama held for him.
- Harishchandra believed his plays should be educative and reformist. His plays were mostly in Braj Bhasha, and he adapted Sanskrit plays and recast them in a contemporary setting.
- Some of his historical plays offered a Hindu, Aryan vision of history that perceived Muslims as invaders.

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- Harischandra like Jayshankar Prasad was constrained by the fact that there was no major metropolis like Calcutta or Bombay in the Hindi-Urdu belt of north India where theatre could be patronised and institutionalized by the nationalist elite.
- Jayshankar Prasad also belonged to a family of influential merchants.

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