

A Qualitative Investigation on the Evolution of Parsi Theatre in India

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Abstract: *Parsi Theatre was a kind of movement in the field of modern theatre. It developed during 1850 to 1930. Parsis were businessmen and business was their sole purpose but their interest in music, art laid the foundation of modern theatre. Plays of these Theatres were the result of mixture of European dramatic culture and Indian culture. Parsi theatre has an important place and played an important role among several factors that helped the birth of modern theatre. Parsis took theme not only from Indian writers but from western writers such as Shakespeare and others. They coloured European plays in Indian theme. Parsi paved the path for development of Indians theatre in coming time. Bollywood also took inspiration mostly from parsi theatre*

Key Words: *Pasi, Theatre, Cultural, stage, playhouse.*

The credit for bringing and evolving Parsi theatre in India goes to non other than parsis and it is a well considered fact that the beginning of the theatre in Indian sub continent was at large by Parsis. Parsi theatre brought socio economic and cultural development which was occurring in the 19th century especially in Bombay. Public sphere urban activities cultural philanthropy and social reform were the contemporaries issues of Bombay city that gave birth to Parsi theatre. In the very beginning the theatre was popularized and promoted as a civic and cultural activity but in later years profit became the main motive. Parsi theatre became completely professional and commercial late in 1870. In order to make a public position for themselves, rich Parsi merchant engaged in public activities. Such cultural activities had been accomplished by many parsi merchants like Jamsetji Jeejabhoy, Dadabhai Noroji and others have been documented at length. An important reason for the Parsi to achieve power in the public sector of Bombay was the cosmopolitan nature of the city itself. In other words, the lack of any progressing tradition encouraged a minority group like Parsi community to gain important position at the centre of the social, economic, cultural and public life of Bombay.

Parsis were the precursor of modern theatre in India. No doubt this community contributed a lot in many field whether in atomic energy or in medical field, aviation, or in business. Parsis were famous for their sense of humour and specially their interest in plays and Natak and Nautanki Who can forget the name of Homi Bhabha Godrej etc. Parsis were the precursor of Indian modern theatre. The form of theatre of which they initiated is known as Parsi Theatre.

To define Parsi theatre is not easy because Hindi, urdu and Gujrati writers subsume under their respective literary tradition. Urdu writers affirm that Parsi theatre should be included in Urdu theatre on the other hand some scholars define parsi theatre belongs only to parsi community. Somnath Gupt's definition of Parsi theatre is the most comprehensive:

The phrase 'Parsi theatre' signifies the playhouse built and operated by the Parsi community, along with Parsi playwrights, Parsi dramas, Parsi stages, Parsi theatrical, companies Parsi actors parsi directors and so on. Also included are those playwrights and actors who were not parsis, but who worked on salaries basis for the parsis theatrical companies. Further, those companies, owners, and actors are counted who, while not being from the parsi community and not being residents of 'Bombay' to their theatre companies in orders to show their connections to the Parsi theatre.¹

Theatre and drama is nothing new for Indians. Folk theatre was in existence from the early times. Indian took interest in European drama. Parsi took interest in English drama. In 1850 students of Elphinstone College used to enjoy theatre activities on Sunday night. Later these performances became so popular that they began to earn profit. It led birth to Parsi theatrical companies keeping in mind commercial profit.

Somnath Gupt asserts Dhanjibhai's idea that the Parsi Thetrical Company was the first company to be established in 1853. According to newspaper sources this company was known by various names such as parsi theatrical companies, Parsi Theatre, Parsi Dramatic corps. It performed only six plays. Anand Lal writes about the beginning of the Parsi theatre,

"The first Parsi theatre Production is normally dated to October 1853, by the Parsis stage players at Grant Road Theatre. Beginning as amateur groups that soon turned professional, many new troops were launched in this period of rapid expansion when audience grew large, made up mostly of Bombay's middle class."²

Its owner was Gustadji Dalal .It was supported by Dadabhi Naoroji, K.R. Cama Dr. Bhau Daji Ardeshir Moos and others .The first drama that was staged was Rustom and Sohrab. There were at least twenty dramatic companies which were managed by parsis named “The Zoroastrian Thetrical club” “The Student Amateur club” “The Victoria Natak Mandali” “Natak Uttejak Company” and “The Alfred Natak Mandali”Baronet Thetrical company. All these companies have similarities in spite of differences. These companies differences in technique and sources but they were common in point of choosing of subjects, matter and theme. They were same in production style like melodramatic and sensational plots, songs and dance mixing and use of technology. They had healthy Professional competitions and for this purpose they imitated popular plays of another companies with some minor changes

In the initial stage Bombay was the centre of business. Bombay was the main industrial area and theatre house was centre of social cultural formation. Businessmen were the pioneers in establishing commercial theatres. Parsis were the great merchant as the shetias think t themselves as cultural agents in the big city. They were investors and profited by their investment in theatrical world. Their theatres were financed by Sheatis who bought and sold shares in them to increase their money. The play house opened under English management and therefore language of performing was English. Grant Trunk Road theatre was known as the locus for Indian theatrical productions. For the next three decades Grant road and its Theatre were synonymous with the parsi theatre. The most creative period of Indian Parsi theatre was from 1850-1950. It changed the whole dramatic flavor of Indian theatre. Parsi Theatre dominated Indian culture for 100 years. Its most fruitful period was from 1870-1890 and it changed the attitude of people about the theatre.

A new theatre was known as the Gaity theatre was built in Victorian Terminus. In the beginning, there was geographical division between the European business and residence in the south to the home town in the north. This area was dominated by rich businessman specially Seths, parsis Bohras. These wealthy people allures an interest in theatre and they were well situated to find the fondness of the British for the stage.

In 1803 fire broke out to the northern fort district, business were forced to live in a separate home town. A significant reclamation plan was the completion of Grant Road in 1839.New theatre was build up on that place. It was famous the Theatre Royal or simply the Play House (Pila House) only building on the street at the time of its opening. According to K N Kabraji, the journalist it stood “as an oasis in the desert.”

It was first start in Gujrat and its credit goes to parsis. Parsi Theatre brought new techniques in theatre. They created amateur and professional groups , which they handled with managerial skills. They wrote new drama theme brought new kind of operas. They introduced new stage technique. First Urdu plays and operas were written and staged by Parsi companies. It was under direction of Victoria Natak Mandali Kaikushru Kabraji, Dadi Patel, Behramji Fardunji, Marzban Nusserwanji, Merwanji Khansaaheb were the some names which cannot be forgetton. In new generation there were also some talented name i.e. Adi Marazban, Pheroze Antia, Erach Pavri. Mostly actors were drawn from Bombay’s lowers classes. They lived in Dhobi Taloo a narrow street. Kavasji khatu, Jehhangir Khambata was famous who lived there. Jehangir Khambata was on peak of his career and he visited in many countries to see many Shakespear’s plays. He was very famous actor and is known man of theatre. Women role were played by handsome man but there was also exception. Actors and directors were also very famous public figure. Theatre was not only limited to India but extended overseas into southern Asia.

Actually Parsi theatre rapidly developed into moving Natak Mandali. Its most performance was in local language i.e. Gujrati Urdu, Bengali and Marathi. It European style with painted backdrop curtain and trick stage effect. Parsi theatres have their own characteristic before the play begin three actors chant a prayer in group. After the prayer one actor among them present a prologue. Music has also been the important part of the play. At the end of the play thanks was extended to the audience and its culmination with a farewell song. They used the technique of melodrama to create audience appeal. Presentation of play was in British model. This fact cannot be deny that Parsi theatre was mixture of Eastern and western dramatic techniques. They Indianized western pattern of theatre. They borrow theme from Shakespeare. Success of Parsi Theatre lies in popularizing Shakespeare in India. Parsi theatre indigenized them. Although they took many themes from Shakespeare but it was not a translation or adaptation on the other hand it was cultural adaptation. Character situations, costumes and locality were coloured in Indian form.

It is very surprising to note that high level of standard were shown by the early theatre companies for their play production. Seating arrangement was high above the stage, positioning the players with an expensive picture frame and separating them from the audience. For shifting the scene large painted curtain were used. Staging was very developed in Parsi theatre. Seats arrangement according by class and row declares for starting and stopping. Many fatalities were provided such as refreshments rooms and recess increased a sense of decorum to the preceding in the hall. Playhouses were set up in such a way that governess look after the children. Scenes were divided into deep and shallow scenes. It was the main characters tics of parsi theatre. In deep scenes the dramatist presents serious subject matter while shallow scenes contains light situation and for comic relief to audience. Girish Karnard expressed his views on the deep and shallow scenes.

The stagecraft of the parsi model demanded a mechanical succession of the alternating shallow and deep scenes. The shallow scenes were played in the fore ground of the stage with a painted curtain –normally depicting a street –as a backdrop. These scenes were reserved for the ‘lower class’ characters with the prominence given to

comedy They served as the link scenes in the development of the plot, but the main purpose was to keep the audience engaged while the deep scene scenes which showed interior of palace royals parks and others such visually opulent ,sets were being changed or decorated.³ Gorgeous costumes were used by actors. gas lights were used for lighting. There were also family shows in which special performance for women. So parsi theatres were very popular among middle class. The price of ticket was 2.50 to 3 for a box to less than a rupee for a place in the pit. As the spectators include Hindus Muslims and non parsis. A favorable response was shown by loud praise, shouting with a demand “once more”. There were many clumsy way To show disliking like hurling of chapples rotten fruit empty liquor bottles also to show disinterest shouts “shame shame”

Contribution of Parsi theatre lies to introduce western plays and technique in India. keeping in view the taste of Indian audience they translated English plays into Indian languages Indian and Urdu plays were captured the attention to Parsi theatre. They know the very well Hindu and Muslim audience. Somnath Gupta writes, “Then faries, princies, devils, and wizards from Muslim tales became more attractive than English spirit nd ghosts and the Parsi stage presented patrons with such highly successful plays as Inder sabha, Farrukh Sabha Havai Majlis and Benazir Munir”⁴

They also took interest in Hindi and Sanskrit literature for Hindu audience by choosing stories from them. Gupta says,

“When the Parsi theatrical companies turned their attention towards the Hindu spectators. They had plays written on such stories as Harishchandra , Gopichand, Mahabharat, Ramlila, and Bhakti Prahalad, which they subsequently performed.”⁵

They selected many types of theme for their plays. Anand Lal says,

“The form was highly eclectic and of unlike parts, taking stories from the Persian legendary Shahnama, the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata , the fabulous Arabic Arabian Night, Shakespearean tragedies and comedies, and Victorian melodrama.”⁶

Thus plays of Parsi theatre were the mixture of Eastern and Western dramatic technique. They started a new theatre which was neither based on pure western theme nor on eastern theme. They can be called as hybrid theatre .They impressed Indians with this unique mixing of eastern and western.

Karnard Theatre in India explains the area of Parsi theatre and writes.

“The plays dealt with the subjects ranging from Middle Eastern romance to Hindu myths and the adaptation of Shakespeare, but the treatment avoids all religious and ethical nuance. Secularism was a fashionable concept...”⁷

Secularism as a concept was present at that time on stage because mostly writers were Muslims and audience were Hindus. Karnard says

The secularism was partly necessitates by the ethnic heterogeneity of the new entrepreneurial class. In Bombay, for instance, the enterprises were financed by the Parsis, who spoke Gujarati. But the commonly understood language was Urdu, popularized by the Muslims chieftains who ruled over most of India since the sixteenth century. Naturally many of the writers employed by the Parsi theatre were Muslims and the audience were the Hindu !⁸ Parsis used many dramatic technique to show religious theme on stage. At that time love theme was the favourite theme but Parsis know very well religious subject will attract the particular class of people They were very careful in selecting subject matter for their plays.

It also inspired Indian Freedom movement in 19th century because mostly dramas were based on social issues. One of them famous Natak company was Uttejak Mandal staged 1100 shows over sixteen years. They were educated people and their aim was to make society better and theatre was the best medium through which they can make connection with common people. The purpose of theatre was carried out moral and social message for audience.

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