

Kathryn Hansen (editor and translator), Somnath Gupt (author). 2023. *The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development*. New Delhi: Seagull Books. xx + 255 pages, 31 illustrations. Paperback. \$ 24.50/£ 19.99/Rs. 599. ISBN: 978-1803092003. Available at: [www.seagullbooks.org](http://www.seagullbooks.org)

In this second edition of the translation of the classic study on Parsi theatre by Somnath Gupt, professor Kathryn Hansen casts new light on the history of Parsi theatre by enhancing the translated and annotated edition of 2005, already a fundamental source on the scholarly treatment of the topic. A cornerstone of South Asian culture, the substratum of popular Indian cinema, and a precursor of the modern Bollywood film industry, Parsi theatre has long been neglected and misunderstood. The impact of Parsi theatrical tradition on Indian cultural heritage is paramount. Not only did Parsi theatre deeply inform modern drama, but it also impacted Indian popular cinema, moulding the talkies. Its influences crossed the borders of India and reached several areas of Southeast Asia where new dramatic styles saw the light thanks to Parsi touring troupes. Despite the developments brought about by Parsi theatre and its contribution to different cultural domains, this field of study struggled to achieve recognition and started to be acknowledged only in the 1990s when scholars such as Anuradha Kapur, David Willmer, and Kathryn Hansen herself undertook critical research on the subject.

In the foreword to the first edition included in the present volume, Hansen outlines the main features and developments of Parsi theatre. Originating in Bombay in 1853, it evolved into different travelling companies which toured across princely and colonial India, also becoming popular in Southeast Asia. Plays were mainly in the local languages, prevalently Gujarati, Urdu, and Hindi; the stage used to be in the European-style proscenium. In evaluating the significance of Parsi theatre within Indian culture, Hansen emphasises the need for reliable scholarly resources in English that led to the translation of Somnath Gupt's work *Parsi Thiyetar: Udbhav aur Vikas* published in 1981 by Lokbharati Prakashan (Allahabad). In the translator's words, this book

is the best single reference for the early period of Parsi theatre history. It covers the antecedent phase of English theatre in eighteenth-century Bombay and extends through the end of the nineteenth century (p. xiv)

An English edition of the above-mentioned book in Hindi became even more necessary when considering that Gupt's work is outstanding in its references to primary and secondary literature consisting of heterogeneous materials in several Indian languages and English including:

advertisements, reviews, English newspapers, The Bombay Times, The Bombay Courier and Telegraph, and the Gujarati newspapers, Rast Goftar and Kaiser-e Hind; early autobiographies and memoirs, like Jahangir Khambata's work, Maro Nataki Anubhav (My Experiences in the Theatre); and compendia of theatre lore published in Gujarati and Urdu, such as those by Dhanjibhai Patel (Parsi Natak Takhtani Tavarikh or the History of the Parsi Theatre) and Abdul Alim Nami (Urdu Thetar) (p. xv)

Furthermore, Gupt's work appears free from linguistic, ethnic, or religious bias and acknowledges different cultural contributions to the art of Parsi theatre. However, Hansen, aware of the limits, lacunae, and discrepancies of Gupt's book, rendered it more accessible and consistent by supplying missing information through useful editorial additions, providing some necessary corrections, removing redundancies, and improving a complex and prolix descriptive style.

*The Parsi Theatre* has nine chapters and one appendix and it is enriched by several illustrations (thirty-one), twice the number of photographs included in the original text, without attribution.

Chapter 1 closely looks at the Bombay Theatre, the antecedent of the Parsi theatre, dating back to 1776. Different documents are quoted concerning the Bombay Theatre the history of which is retraced in three main phases up until the establishment of the Grant Road Theatre in 1846. Its features, building, scenery, lighting, management, and audience are described in the following section along with details concerning ticket prices and audience tastes.

Chapter 2 retraces the origins of Parsi theatre. From 1853, following an increase in the number of Parsi and Hindu spectators, plays began to be performed in local languages (p. 28).

Chapter 3 explores the development of Parsi theatre inextricably linked to theatrical companies, both amateur and professional. The shortage of playhouses in Bombay led, on the one hand, to the establishment of itinerant theatre and, on the other, to the construction of new playhouses. A list accompanied by a short description is provided in a dedicated section. Another section presenting the most significant Parsi playwrights has been chronologically rearranged by the editor and followed by an alphabetically ordered list of minor dramatists.

The most important Urdu dramatists of Parsi theatre are listed in Chapter 4 along with their concise biography and description of the plot of their principal plays. Mahmud Miyan Banarasi 'Raunaq' (1825-1886) wrote famous works like *Benazir Badremunir*, *Jafa-e Sitamgar*, and *Zulm-e Azam*. Husaini Miyan 'Zarif', wrote poetry and adapted plays of other playwrights, turning old popular plays into new works. Munshi Vinayak Prasaad Talib, the author of several plays, such as *Sangin Bakavali*, *Ali Baba aur Chalis Chor*, *Nigah-e Ghaflat*, and *Ramlila*, was criticised by Gupt for the use of Urdu dialogues between the characters of Ram and Sita. Narayan Prasad Betab (1872-1945) penned the successful play *Mahabharat* which was performed in Delhi in 1913 and marked the end of the prevalence of Urdu in

Parsi plays. Agha Mohammad Shah ‘Kashmiri’ (1879-1935), well-versed in Hindi and Urdu and a profound connoisseur of both Hindu and Muslim mythology and tales, is regarded by Gupt as the greatest Parsi playwright; he also founded the Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company. Mahdi Hasan ‘Ahsan’ was another prolific Urdu playwright who composed the Urdu dramas *Bhul Bhulaiyan*, *Dilfarosh*, *Khun-e Nahqon*, and *Bazm-e Fani* based on the plots of Shakespeare’s works, respectively *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. Other major playwrights mentioned include Abbas Ali ‘Abbas’ (1889-1932), Mohammad Ibrahim Ambalavi ‘Mahshar’, Joseph David, Pandit Radheshyam Kathavachak, and Muhiuddin Nazan.

Chapter 5 offers a broad view of Parsi theatrical companies and their history, whereas Chapter 6 considers Parsi actors; a separate section is devoted to early actresses of Parsi theatre, initially strongly opposed and contested by the public.

Other elements of Parsi theatre are the subject of Chapter 7 which gives insights into the audience, the relationship between the playwright and the spectators, the performance space, stage scenery, costumes, and music. Initially composed mainly by Parsis and Iranis, Urdu dramas came to be more popular than Gujarati plays from 1870 leading to an expansion of the audience that came to encompass Hindus and Muslims, as well as British (p. 199). Gradually different classes of spectators were included, especially middle and lower working classes. In the early phases, Parsi theatre revolved around historical and religious dramas until satirical plays and adaptations of English dramas started to be staged. Patriotic and Hindu devotional plays were performed as well. Given the heterogeneity of the spectators and repertoire, Gupt defined Parsi theatre as ‘democratic’ (p. 202).

Chapter 8 explores the impact that the Urdu play *Indar Sabha* written by Saiyad Agha Hasan with the pseudonym ‘Amant’ had on theatre. The play, a *rahas* (‘circle-dance’) was translated not only into both Indian and non-Indian languages. Its influence extended to the composition of several *sabhas* and *majlis*, spectacular musical dramas with divine characters as their protagonists.

The last chapter evaluates the impact of the Parsi theatrical companies on Indian culture. Early Hindi cinema was deeply informed by several elements of Parsi theatre, from the extensive use of Urdu to music, and dance sequences. Films such as *Alam Ara* (1931)—considered the first Indian ‘talkie’—and *Khun-e Nahaq* (1935) are adaptations of Parsi plays.

The book concludes with an appendix on *The Beginnings of Hindi Drama in Bombay and Maharashtra*. This last section dwells on Hindu theatre and explains how, around 1846, dramas in Indian languages, especially Marathi, began to be staged in Bombay, as suggested by descriptions found in the newspapers of the time (*The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce*). Gupt in the last section of the

volume stresses that the first play to be performed in Hindi in Bombay, in 1853, was *Raja Gopichand and Jalandhar* by Vishnudas Bhave.

Kathryn Hansen filled the gaps of incomplete information left by Gupt by consulting a large number of records of the British Museum and India Office Library where old printed plays are kept. The editor/translator's experience and deep knowledge of the subject have resulted in a comparative analysis of Gupt's text with previously published and unpublished material not quoted by the author. Hansen has aptly identified and acknowledged original sources and the reliance upon other authors in exhaustive and informative footnotes. Overall, she has improved, simplified, and updated the original work by Gupt by placing it within a consistent explicative framework.

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