

## The Migration of a Text: The *Indar Sabha* in Print and Performance<sup>1</sup>

---

KATHRYN HANSEN

**T**raditional modes of communication, particularly those found in India's pre-modern theatre forms, served to entertain large groups of people long before the advent of the mass media. Although theatrical activity spread to the metropolitan areas and accelerated after 1850, it had for several centuries been prevalent throughout the subcontinent, and many linguistic regions possessed well-established genres of theatrical performance. In the northern Indo-Gangetic plain alone, there were first the religious dramas, the Ram Lila and the Ras Lila, which inculcated devotion to sectarian divinities through pageantry, music, and dance. These could take on either a courtly or popular character. Vaishnava dramas were patronized by the royal families of Mithila, Nepal, and Assam, while in Banaras the Ram Lila at Ramnagar came under the maharaja's control at about this time. Less elaborate productions were staged by folk troupes and local residents who intermixed comedy and social satire with stories of the gods. In the secular realm, entertainments ranged from the skits performed by Naqals, Bhands, and Nats to the poetic dramas written in Braj, Marwari, Punjabi, and eventually Hindi and Urdu. Again royal patronage was significant: Rajput kings supported the Khyal theatre in eighteenth-century Rajasthan, and the Rani of Jhansi's husband, Gangadhar Rao (r. 1835–1853), presented *Shakuntala* and *Harishchandra* at court. Meanwhile in the coastal cities, new styles of urban theatre emerged out of the encounter with British imperial culture. The modern stage, first in English, then in Bengali, developed a following among the gentry of Calcutta. In Bombay the Parsis spearheaded a more popularly oriented movement that soon fanned out over the country.

These activities collectively constitute what Raymond Williams has called a "community of forms", an historically specific set of practices located in an evolving social environment<sup>2</sup>. By the 1880s and '90s, changing conditions in social life, politics, the economy, and technology combined with evolving literary and artistic trends to restructure this community of forms. One outcome was the rise of a popular Hindi/Urdu theatre tradition, Nautanki, about which I have written at length<sup>3</sup>. Nautanki can best be understood as an intermediary form of theatre, a conduit in the cultural flow connecting more urbanized areas with the hinterland. As this theatre conveyed stories, poetic genres, tunes, beliefs, and values from one level of society to another, it bridged the villager and the city-dweller, the educated and the illiterate, the Hindu and the Muslim. A portable and

permeable art, Nautanki crossed boundaries and created an interstitial cultural space.

Popular consumption of theatre has played a significant role in producing shared values and symbols for at least the last several hundred years. Although denigrated by the reformists, cultural phenomena like the lowbrow Nautanki created the connective tissue of images, tastes, and values that underlie the success of the mass media in the twentieth century. In this essay also, I extend the investigation of how collective identities are constructed, but on a different, somewhat broader geographical canvas. The drama known as the *Indar Sabha*, reprinted scores of times, translated into many languages, and alive on the stage through the 1940s, transcended linguistic, temporal, and social boundaries in a way that prefigured the Hindi/Urdu popular cinema. It is no coincidence that it was transformed into a pan-Indian phenomenon by Parsi troupes from the commercial centre that later produced 'Bollywood' and the world's most prolific film industry. Moreover, in relation to ideas of portability and permeability, the 'post-modern' characterization of contemporary popular culture is appropriate for this early modern landscape as well. Taking the performance and textual history of the *Indar Sabha* as a case in point, it becomes apparent that notions of migration, diaspora, and hybridity are as relevant to an understanding of late-nineteenth-century popular consumption as they are to more recent cultural practices.

#### *Amanat and the Lucknow Court*

The *Indar Sabha* (The Assembly of Indra, hereafter IS) appears at a transitional moment in the history of northern India. On the most widely accepted account, it was composed in 1853 by Agha Hasan Amanat (1816–1859), a poet attached to the court of Wajid Ali Shah at Lucknow. Although the rule of the Nawabs of Awadh was to come to an inglorious end within a few short years, Wajid Ali was a generous and creative patron of the arts, and his reign left a brilliant legacy in the fields of dance, song, and drama. He nourished the Indo-Muslim style of Kathak, took the light classical song-form Thumri to a new level, composed poetry under the names of 'Akhtar' and 'Piya', and adapted both Persian-style romances (*masnavi*) and Vaishnava dramas (*lila*) for his own royal performances. Famed for his hedonistic habits, among the British he gained notoriety for spending more time in his harem, which he called a *parikhana* or 'house of fairies', than attending to affairs of state. The bloodless annexation of Awadh in 1856 besmirched his reputation permanently and left later Indian nationalists with acute memories of loss and guilt<sup>4</sup>.

In the eclectic style prevailing at his patron's salon, Amanat assimilated Ghazals, Thumris, and Awadhi folk songs to a narrative base drawn from several popular masnavis, creating an original work that is still counted as the first drama in Urdu literary history. Since the 1920s, Urdu critics have debated the origin of the IS and the influences that may have contributed to it. The dominant agenda of these critics can be said, perhaps not unfairly, to focus first on the problem of the Islamic taboo on theatrical representation and, secondly, to determine the rank of this specific drama within the Urdu literary canon.

My purpose, on the other hand, is to consider the larger life of the IS as a phenomenon that cut across boundaries, whether of religion, class, linguistic community, or the category 'literature' itself.

The nature of the boundary between courtly and popular performance arenas in the nineteenth century, however, requires some comment if one is to comprehend the movement of the IS across it, and in this sense the career of Amanat may prove instructive. A large and rather consistent body of opinion asserts that Amanat was commissioned to write the IS by the Nawab after the model of Western opera, and that the first performance of the drama occurred on the royal stage in Qaisar Bagh. Adding to this, some commentators say that Wajid Ali Shah played the title role of King Indar in the debut. This view, accepted by the English-language historians of Urdu literature, Ram Babu Saksena (1940), Annemarie Schimmel (1975), and Muhammad Sadiq (1984), as well as a host of critics writing in Urdu, stems from Nur Ilahi and Muhammad Umar's *Natak Sagar* (1924), a compendium of world drama and the first such to be written in Urdu<sup>5</sup>.

Interestingly, by the time of the *Natak Sagar*'s publication, Ilahi and Umar's notions had already come under fire by Abdul Halim Sharar, the reputed chronicler of the Nawabi era. In the *Natak Sagar* itself they included a long passage from an essay that Sharar had previously published in *Dil Gudaz*, together with their detailed refutation of it. A similar article by Ilahi and Umar, published in the journal of the Anjuman-i Taraqqi-i Urdu in 1924, provoked another rejoinder by Sharar<sup>6</sup>. Sharar maintained that Amanat, rather than taking orders from the Nawab or any foreigner, on his own initiative had imitated the court entertainments called *rahas* or *ras*, enactments of the dalliance between Radha and the *gopis* and Lord Krishna, in which the king reputedly acted with his favourites<sup>7</sup>.

In 1927, Masud Hasan Rizvi 'Adib' added his voice to Sharar's, basing his arguments on what he considered the first edition of the play, to which Amanat had appended a commentary (*sharh*). Later research by Rizvi took shape in two lengthy volumes under the title *Urdu Drama aur Istej* (1957). Bristling at the notion of Western influence, Rizvi rather sweepingly asserted that no European had access to the Nawab. He denied that Amanat was ever present at court, citing Fasahat, Amanat's younger son, who in 1926 wrote that aside from his father's attachment to a Sufi sanctuary from which he received a stipend, he had no connection to any *darbar*<sup>8</sup>. Further, Rizvi presented evidence from *tazkiras* and the poet's oeuvre to show that Amanat suffered paralysis and from the age of twenty could not speak. In the commentary to the IS, for example, Amanat had written that he had become housebound because of his condition, and from this Rizvi attempted to establish that he was never actually present at court. Finally, Rizvi quoted Amanat's first son Latafat to the effect that his father had composed the IS at the request of his own friends<sup>9</sup>. In the absence of any mention of Amanat in Wajid Ali's many writings, Rizvi concluded that there was no royal command behind the drama and no court performance.

Rizvi'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 the IS. It is not difficult to see how denying foreign contact, particularly at the moment of origin, fits a particular kind of nationalist narrative. Without belabouring the issue further, it seems likely that both views contain some truth. The event of composition might have occurred over a period of time and amidst a combination of circumstances: Amanat's probable presence at court (whether mute or no), suggestions circulating about a new operatic style, his desire to capture the Nawab's favour (possibly unsuccessful), and performances inside and/or outside the royal circle. The disgrace attached to the Nawab's name by nationalists could help explain the later disavowals by Amanat's sons. Perhaps they were attempting to legitimize their father's achievement.

Regardless of the merits of the two sides' claims, what stands out most strikingly is the fact that popular opinion until the 1920s firmly associated Amanat and the IS with the Nawab of Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah. Although in 1924 the issue of the drama's origins did become a topic of debate within a small scholarly coterie, in the period of its greatest public following the IS carried with it a history that linked it to the court at Awadh and to the flamboyant personality of the Nawab. That history was recounted eagerly by audience members, by theatre personnel, and by educated observers alike. Writing in 1889, John Campbell Oman, a professor of natural science at Government College, Lahore, reported after viewing a performance of the IS in Anarkali that it was "composed, it is said, by a Mussulman poet, by command of Wajid Ali Shah . . ." <sup>10</sup> The opinion of the *Natak Sagar* authors was based largely on the oral traditions of Khurshedji Baliwala, a famous actor of the nineteenth-century Parsi theatre <sup>11</sup>. A. Yusuf Ali, in an article for the Royal Society of Literature in London, called Wajid Ali Shah and Amanat "co-founders" of the modern school of Hindustani drama <sup>12</sup>.

The widespread perception of royal origins could be a significant factor in explaining the IS's popularity, insofar as spectators believed they were beholding a direct link to the Awadh court and its hedonistic ambience. The famous drama enjoyed the reputation of offering something real, something historically verifiable about the monarchical past. Moreover, this was a past transformed, brought closer to the audience by having crossed an imagined boundary between the court—where it had its putative origins—and the populace—where it was presently situated.

### *The Structure of the Play*

Turning now to the text itself, it naturally divides into two parts. The second of these comprises the story proper, in which the Emerald Fairy (Sabz Pari) falls in love with an earthly prince (Gulfam), tries to bring him to Indar's heaven, is caught by the king and plunged to earth, and finally gains readmission and is united with her beloved. The god Indra first appears in the *Rig Veda* and is still associated with rain and fertility in folk beliefs and songs <sup>13</sup>. By late medieval times he had evolved into an emblem of the lordly monarch, often depicted surrounded by a harem of beautiful dancing girls. This Hindu



icon, with its symbolic potency for India's Muslim kings, is wedded in the IS to a story of Islamic origin. The theme of fairy-mortal romance had long been a staple of the narrative genres in Urdu and Persian known as *quissa*, *dastan*, and *masnavi*. Amanat may have modelled his plot on two *masnavis* that achieved particular popularity earlier in the nineteenth century. The romance of prince Benazir and princess Badr-i Munir as told in *Sihir ul-bayan* by Mir Hasan (1727–1786) was, in 1805, one of the first Urdu books ever printed. It could be the source for such scenes in the IS as the fairy's first encounter with the sleeping prince, his befuddled awakening in the fairy world, the imprisonment of the prince in the well, and the disguise of the fairy as a *jogin*. A later work, *Gulzar-i Nasim* by Daya Shankar 'Nasim' (1837), itself a reworking of the prose tale *Gul-i Bakawali* or *Mazhab-i Ishq* by Nihal Chand, was said to be an effort at repeating Mir Hasan's success<sup>14</sup>. From it Amanat may have borrowed the description of Indar's court, the king's anger upon learning of the fairy's love for a mortal, and other passages.

What sets the IS apart from its antecedents is the very simplicity of the story line. Whereas long *dastans* contain embedded worlds with innumerable conquests and love affairs, even the shorter tales generally include a subplot with a second pair of lovers, useful for complications such as jealousy, mistaken identity, and so on. The IS plot is restricted to a single pair of lovers, and the only serious obstacle they face is the king's hostility. One aspect that the IS shares with the earlier narratives, on the other hand, is the presence of an active female *ashiq* (lover) in the character of the *pari*. Paris in these stories pursue their male love-objects, declare their infatuation openly, carry them away through the air, and kiss or touch them uninvited. Born of fire, possessed of the ability to appear and disappear at will, they exert a kind of powerful control over the hero, not unlike the demanding, high-status Beloved of the Urdu *ghazal*. The difference is that the Beloved of the *ghazal* remains Other—distant, veiled, unobtainable. The *pari* is all too near, forward, and potentially overpowering.

The reduction of the narrative and, possibly, the construction of feminine agency could point to a rudimentary form of realism, a reading buttressed by the popular commentarial tradition. For generations, it has been maintained that the character of Indar in the drama is based on the historical figure of Wajid Ali Shah. Some interpreters extend the verisimilitude to the other characters as well. Gulfam's tenderness and passivity are hereby explained as the character traits of his real-life counterparts, the princes at the court. The effete environment in which they moved supposedly deprived them of manliness and fortitude. The Sabz Pari similarly is said to resemble the courtesans of Lucknow. She is depicted as full of daring, vision, and determination. Additionally, she uses a form of women's speech (*zanani boli*) that identifies her as a member of a particular stratum of Lucknow society<sup>15</sup>.

This interpretation gains support from the first (and in certain ways more original) part of the drama, in which Amanat recreates a *darbar* that resembles Wajid Ali Shah's own.

In the opening scene, Indar enjoys himself as he attends to a succession of lovely fairies who, one by one, enter and perform a series of songs and dances before him. In this royal assembly, termed variously *sabha*, *majlis*, *mehfil*, and *jalsa* in the text, the character Indar is interpellated as deity, king, patron, poet, and lover. One moment a fairy takes on the voice of a gopi in a Hori (a Braj Bhasha song-form celebrating the spring festival) and chides Shyam (Krishna) for drenching her with coloured dye:

*Pa lagi kar jori  
Shyam mo se khelo na hori.*

Clasping your feet I beg of you,  
Please Shyam, don't play Holi with me!

Next she mourns the absence of her lover (*piya*, 'lover', was one of Wajid Ali's pen-names) in the genre specific to the rainy month of Savan:

*Bijari ki chamak tarpave darave  
Bin piya ghata nahin bhave.*

The lightning crashes, my body thrashes.  
Without my Beloved/Piya, I cannot endure the rainy season.

Or in the characteristic pose of an Urdu ghazal she complains of her beloved's haughty neglect:

*Takara ke sar ko jan na dun main to kya karun,  
Kab tak firaq-i yar ke sadme saha karun.*

What should I do but dash my head [against the wall of your indifference]?  
How long should I bear the blows of separation from the Beloved?

He, the passive but powerful Beloved, emerges as a multivalent object of desire.

'Hindu' and 'Muslim' referents overlap as the king's identity slips between Indar, Krishna, and Nawab. The language of the songs and verses moves back and forth easily between Urdu, Braj, Awadhi, and Khari Boli. Whether one chooses to think of the IS as a self-consciously syncretistic work or an unconscious reflection of the hybrid culture of the Lucknow court, the distance between it and its sectarian antecedents—the Vaishnava drama and poetry, the Sufi romantic allegories—is striking. The mystical overtones are absent or converted into erotic pleasure bordering on parody. Although the current meanings of the word 'secular' are not entirely appropriate in this context, over the course of time the IS was unproblematically consumed by diverse audiences regardless of their religious or communal affiliations. The relevant point is that the potential for this pluralistic pattern of consumption is specifically encoded in the play's formal means of

representation.

Indar's very presence on the stage invites the spectator into a generic courtly setting within which the drama unfolds. Given the structure of the play within the play, the audience's sense of being a witness—indeed a participant—at court travels with the performance regardless of where the stage is set or who enacts the role of Indar. The text thus suggests an enduring feature of nineteenth-century popular culture as it manifests in countless expressive media. This is the fascination with royalty and its symbolism of splendour and sensual pleasure, even as the political fortunes of the aristocracy were on the decline. The courtly aesthetic with its opulent sets, costumes, etiquette, diction, and abundance of feminine beauty dominate the era, providing a point of identification initially for the pleasure-seeking nobility but eventually for spectators of more humble origins.

Indeed, the post-feudal aesthetic would prove to be far more persuasive with the large populace than the shifts in literature and art towards depiction of the new urban elite and its concerns. The reformists may have spurned this nostalgia for the monarchical past and devalued works of popular theatre that represented it, but feudal attachments remained strong among the public well into the twentieth century.

With the breakdown of the structure of royal patronage after the annexation of Awadh and the post-1857 consolidation of British power, sophisticated styles of music, dance, and poetry moved out, often through the mediation of popular theatre, to a restructured entertainment economy. Earlier, in the days of Shuja ud-Daula, Lucknow had witnessed an enormous influx of musicians and singing courtesans, a process which accelerated in Wajid Ali Shah's time. Then, after the fall of Awadh, there ensued an exodus of the court and the harem to Matiya Burj in Calcutta. With performers formerly employed at court turning to the rapidly growing theatre industry (and later the cinema) for survival, dance and song genres such as Kathak dance, Thumri, and Ghazal-singing entered the popular arena, where they were readily consumed by audiences attracted by their aura of prestige.

#### *The Spectator as Consumer of Visual Culture*

Searching the text for clues to its performance and reception, one is struck by the strong visual element which is conveyed at two levels: (1) through the language with its concomitant suggestions of costume, and (2) through illustrations to the various printed editions. The illustrations call for separate treatment, to which I will return. Even audiences unfamiliar with the printed book would have been struck by the colour-coding contained in the script and carried into the production by the stage directors. In the first part, the *sabha* section per se, the four fairies are named after monocoloured gemstones: Pukhraj (topaz), Nilam (sapphire), Lal (ruby), and Sabz (emerald). Each fairy is attired in clothes appropriate to her colour and sings songs that describe her beauty, referring to that colour and its association with seasons, festivals, flowers, trees, and other elements of nature. Thus the Topaz Fairy sings an item known as Basant (spring) in the raga Bahar

(spring), celebrating her yellow outfit and referring to marigolds and the new blossoms of the mustard plant (*sarson*).

As the pageant proceeds, the fairies assembled on stage form a rainbow. Their songs suggest an abbreviated *barahmasa*, a favourite song-genre of the nineteenth century depicting the twelve months of the year. Their serial performances could also be said to constitute a fashion show, an early Miss India contest, wherein acting and singing talent are joined with contrasts in appearance and style. It is quite possible that this initial section of the drama foreshadows the variety show, now a ubiquitous genre of transnational Indian popular culture. Opening acts in which song and dance items are performed to settle the audience and warm them up for the main fare are a common feature of the Nautanki, Tamasha, and other 'traditional' musical theatres, and could be either antecedents or heirs to the IS's practice.

Expanding now upon the idea of generic shifts, it is significant that the IS charts a movement from the art of traditional narrative with its emphasis on episodic elaboration, extension through itemization, and verbal exhibitionism, to the late-nineteenth-century genre of musical drama that characterized several regions of South and South-east Asia. Here narrative is attenuated, and the action is not plotted so much as incidental to set pieces of song, dance, and poetry that seek repeated rounds of audience applause. The second movement is the accompanying shift from a private space to a public arena for entertainment, and with it a move from an aural/oral to a visual manner of consumption. Dastans with their endless illusions (*tilasm*), although recited in company, were often enjoyed within the realm of personal fantasy, aided by consumption of opium<sup>16</sup>. The theatre replaced the visions in the mind with visions on the stage. It constructed several 'gazes' or types of viewing relationship: that between performers on the stage, that between performers and the public, and that among members who constituted that public<sup>17</sup>.

Blending the modalities of 'concert' (*sabha*) and 'poetic assembly' (*mehfil*) with 'exhibition' (*jalsa*, *tamasha*), the IS manifests the intersecting realms of the aural and the visual. The gaze operates here at multiple levels even without the complication of a performance of the IS within the historical court of Wajid Ali Shah. The fairies perform for and bestow their 'sidelong glances' (*tirchhi nigahen*) not only upon the king but also upon the audience. Audience members look at the king and at the entertaining fairies, as well as at each other. And Indar himself presides over and gazes upon all those assembled. These mutual gazes in tandem with the celebration of longing in poetry and song create an 'erotic complicity' between performers and spectators<sup>18</sup>.

Indar's presence, a reminder of the glorious post-Mughal past, could also be described as pedagogical. He instructs his audience in the art of ocular consumption. His position in the drama as patron and admirer of a bevy of colour-coordinated beauties constructs an imagined self, generating the desires of the emerging consumer, not only for theatrical

entertainments but, by extension, for twentieth-century cinema, print journalism (film and fashion magazines), and romantic pulp fiction.

#### *The Performance Record*

Although a reliable written record of the IS's performance history is not available, sufficient highlights of the drama's stage life are preserved to assemble at least a partial picture. Most commentators note that Amanat's drama earned immediate fame and soon appeared on stages all over India. Yet there is a gap between the date of composition, 1853, and what appears to be the first Parsi troupe performance in Bombay in 1864. One can only conjecture how the play reached Bombay from Lucknow. Rizvi, referring to a *qita* of Amanat's in the first edition of the IS, maintains that the drama had already become famous by the time it was published and was widely imitated and committed to memory. Professional troupes were established in Lucknow, fanning out into towns and villages in order to perform it. Performances were known by the names of the troupe organizers, e.g. *Hafiz ki Indar Sabha*, *Jawahar ki Indar Sabha*. Competitions were held, such as simultaneous shows on opposite sides of the Husainabad tank, to see which troupe could attract the largest crowd<sup>19</sup>. Rizvi's assertions are consonant with his interpretation of the IS as an essentially *awami* (people's) phenomenon. However, he fails to address the disturbances in Lucknow in the period 1856–1858, resulting from the fall of Awadh and the 1857 uprising, and what effect they may have had on play production and attendance. Saksena implies that these events caused the migration of the IS, asserting, "With the deposition and deportation of Wajid Ali Shah festivities and frolics at Qaisar Bagh came to an end. *Indar Sabha* [sic] found no home at Lucknow with its turmoil and tribulations and it travelled forth to Bombay."<sup>20</sup>

According to Abdul Alim Nami, the first Bombay performance was presented by the Alfred Natak Mandali in its second phase under Nanabhai Rustamji Ranina and Manikji Jivanji Master in 1864<sup>21</sup>. This Parsi company was one of the first to switch from English and Gujarati plays to Urdu, retaining Muhammad Ali Ibrahimji Bohra as scriptwriter. They also toured Hyderabad and Madras and began regular tours to Delhi, Agra and Lahore in 1861. Although Nami offers no details about the IS performance, he observes that the Alfred was also the first company to employ mechanical devices to create special effects<sup>22</sup>. Another chronicler, Masihuzzaman, does not name the company, but he confirms that a 1864 Grant Road performance was the first in which the IS was presented on a proscenium stage with a frontal curtain. He indicates that the play had been adapted for this purpose by being divided into five scenes. The first scene ended when King Indar goes to sleep after viewing the Sabz Pari's dance<sup>23</sup>.

The next memorable performance was the 1873 Bombay production by the Elphinstone Dramatic Club under the direction of Kunvarji Nazir (aka C.S. or Cooverji Seth Nazir)<sup>24</sup>. Lighting added a new dimension, enhancing the visual effects. According to Memuna Dalvi, "To create the effect of the marvellous, *lime light* [Eng.] was used, so

that as each fairy entered Raja Indar's court, the entire scene was bathed in the light of that fairy's garments. The spectators were beside themselves and burst into spontaneous applause." (translation mine) The music also received special attention, with the whole apparently being performed in one "rag-ragini"<sup>25</sup>. Gulfam was played by N.N. Parakh, Sabz Pari by Shyavaksh Rustamji Master, and Indar by Khurshedji Behramji Hathiram<sup>26</sup>.

If Somnath Gupta's chronology is accurate, it was in the following year that Nazir introduced the IS to Calcutta theatre audiences during a tour of the long-lived Victoria Natak Mandali, one of the most successful troupes of this period. In Bombay, the company had already earned considerable fame by presenting Gujarati plays directed by K.N. Kabra, but when Dadi Patel took over in 1871, he began experimenting with dramas in Hindustani, often translations from Gujarati prepared by Edalji Khorji. The concept 'Urdu opera' achieved popularity with the company's production of *Benazir Badre Munir*, written by Nasharvanji Meharvanji Khan and starring Khurshedji Baliwala and Pestanji Framji Madan (1871). In 1872, at the invitation of Sir Salar Jang, Dadi Patel led the troupe on a royally sponsored visit to Hyderabad, which included a special performance in the palace harem. In 1873, C.S. Nazir took over the company<sup>27</sup>.

The circumstances of the Calcutta performance were the following:

From Lucknow the troupe arrived in Calcutta, where they stayed in a Parsi family mansion. Before 1874, no Parsi theatrical company had visited Calcutta. Nazirji rented the Lewis Theatre on Chowringhee Road, later known as the Royal Theatre.

Bengalis are of course extremely fond of music, and they awaited the Parsi singers with utmost eagerness. Several eminent Bengali singers invited the Parsi singers to their homes, where they discussed a number of matters pertaining to music. At that time in Bengal, the organ [Eng.] was commonly used, whereas in Bombay the tabla and sarangi were favoured, with only occasional use of the fiddle [Eng.]. The effect of these discussions was that the Parsi musicians were deemed deficient in their knowledge of classical music, leaving a bad impression on the Bengalis. Baliwala clearly indicated this deficiency to Kunvarji Nazir, and he became disheartened and perplexed. Then he took the bull by the horns and began preparations for the opera IS. He sent telegrams to Delhi summoning Dadibhai Ratanji Thunthi, Dr. Narsharvanji Navroji Parakh, and Dosabhai Dubash. The speciality of these three was that they could enact the IS anywhere, under any conditions. They had particular expertise in this drama.

The IS was performed successfully in Calcutta. The part of Raja Indar was played by Dadi Thunthi, Gulfam by Dr. Parakh, and Lal Dev by Dosabhai Dubash. Dadibhai Thunthi's singing, acting, and attractive appearance impressed the audience tremendously. But jealousies cropped up among the actors. Dosabhai Mangol and Khurshed Baliwala, who ordinarily played the roles of Indar and Gulfam respectively, were upset that they did not get a chance to perform.<sup>28</sup>

(translation mine)



After Calcutta the troupe performed in Banaras, where Bharatendu Harishchandra might have been among the spectators. Dadibhai Thunthi assumed the Victoria's directorship in 1876, and one of his innovations was to introduce a jalsa or musical prelude before every drama in the company's repertoire, in which every singer in the cast presented a song and they all joined in a chorus at the end. This practice, obviously imitated from the IS, caught on with the audience and was adopted by other Urdu-language companies<sup>29</sup>. In 1876, the Victoria company toured Calcutta, Banaras, Delhi, Lahore and Jaipur. In 1878, they went as far as Rangoon and Singapore, and in 1881 they performed for the King of Mandalay. They also enjoyed the patronage of the maharajas of Jaipur and Patiala<sup>30</sup>. Khurshedji Baliwala was now at the helm, and following on these successes, he led the troupe to London in 1885 for the Colonial Exhibition. Their first tour of Ceylon was in 1889, where the IS was among a number of popular Urdu plays performed. In the same year, the company had two dramas translated for performances in Sinhala; they returned to Ceylon in 1916–17<sup>31</sup>.

The accounts of casting assignments establish that the female parts in the IS were consistently played by men until the 1870s. One practice of the day was that actors acquired as stage names the roles that had made them famous. Pestanji Jijibhai Batliwala, an outstanding female impersonator, was known as Pesu Pukhraj, on account of his part as the Topaz Fairy in the IS<sup>32</sup>. Male company proprietors feared the stigma that would attach to their shows if women from the singing and dancing trades were allowed onto the stage. But women were eager to get it on the action. While the Victoria company was away on tour (in 1872 or 1874), the Parsi Natak Mandali defied the ban and put on a performance of the IS with Latifa Begam, an accomplished singer and dancer, presumably in the role of the Sabz Pari. At the play's conclusion, just as she entered the wings, she was abducted by a Parsi man. Throwing his overcoat over her costumed body, he whisked her into his waiting carriage. The company owners did not have the courage to confront him. Latifa's disappearance created a sensation and was widely discussed in the newspapers, as a result of which the introduction of women on stage received a setback. But soon Amir Jan and Moti Jan, two Punjabi sisters, replaced Latifa with the company<sup>33</sup>.

Baliwala's chief rival, Kavasji Palanji Khatau, also came to fame on the strength of his performance in the IS. Jahangir Khambata and Khatau employed a Bohra scribe to adapt the IS for the Empress Victoria Natak Mandali, founded by Khambata in Delhi in 1876. The cast consisted of Khatau (Gulfam), Naslu Sarkari (Sabz Pari), Dorab Sachin (Pukhraj Pari), Kau Kalgir (Lal Dev), and Kavasji Handa (Indar). The Delhi IS was a huge hit and was followed by *Laila Majnun*, *Gul Bakavali*, and *Khuda Bakhsh*. It was at one of these performances of the IS that Khatau and Miss Mary Fenton, the daughter of an Irish soldier, had their fateful meeting. When Khatau took over the Alfred Company in 1886, Mary Fenton became his chief actress, creating controversy but also attracting much attention to her renditions of Hindustani songs<sup>34</sup>.

A number of other troupes were well-known for their performances of the IS. The Star

of Punjab Theatrical Company of Lahore, founded in 1875 and owned by Babu Nabi Bakhsh, had the IS as its most successful production. The Indian Ladies Theatrical Company (Bombay) featured Jamila, a Jewish woman who played the role of the Sabz Pari, allegedly surpassing all competitors. The IS was the most popular play of the Shining Star Theatrical Company of Karachi. The Empire Theatrical Company of Burma staged the play in Singapore in 1912. In the 1920s, the IS was regularly featured by the Great Eastern Parsi Theatrical Company and the Nizam Theatrical Company in Rangoon. As late as the 1940s, companies in Bombay such as the B.N. Theatrical Company and the Sun Moon Light Theatrical Company were distinguished by their performances of the IS<sup>35</sup>.

Moreover, touring troupes reached Nepal, Guyana<sup>36</sup>, and, as already mentioned, England, Singapore, and Ceylon. The eminent Nepali dramatist Balakrishna Sama (b. 1902) remembers growing up in a well-to-do Rana family where Parsi troupes performed in the palatial residence of his grandfather, General Dambar Shumsher (Pradhan 1980:5). Submitting a petition to the Prime Minister of Nepal in the 1920s, Sama reported, "Even in the [Nepali] darbars Hindi and Urdu language plays are taught. Indarsabha, Gulbakavali, Laila Majnu, Shiri Farhad, etc."<sup>37</sup> In his plea for royal patronage of Nepali literature, Sama argued that money was flowing out of the country as people flocked to theatre houses in Calcutta and Bombay<sup>38</sup>. Another source indicates that a performance of the *Indar Sabha* was staged, perhaps at the Royal Imperial Opera House in Kathmandu, in 1901 by one Manikman<sup>39</sup>.

The IS was similarly carried to Singapore and Malaya by Indian performers. According to Indonesian scholars, theatre troupes known locally as Wayang Parsi, employing men and women, arrived as early as the 1870s<sup>40</sup>. The performance of the IS normally took two nights, evidently corresponding to the two parts of the drama. The songs, set to Hindustani melodies but using Malay words, became so popular that the play was widely enacted not only at weddings and celebrations of high-level officials but among the people. Performances were preceded by rituals and recitation of mantras by a *sutradhar*-like specialist called Aband Penduang.

Such an enumeration can only be considered partial, for theatre companies were established in every major city in the subcontinent from Peshawar to Madras to Dacca<sup>41</sup>. And wherever Parsi theatre was found, the IS was not far behind. The IS phenomenon dominated the popular theatre world until the era of the talking cinema. When the Parsi companies did not produce it entire, they used a scene or two as a curtain-raiser<sup>42</sup>. In 1917, A. Yusuf Ali, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, reported that the IS "still holds its own on the Hindustani stage after a run of seventy years, and its universal popularity is proved by the numerous but unsuccessful imitations made of it. Most companies even now include it in their repertory."<sup>43</sup>

The widespread impact of the IS can be judged in a different manner by the negative opinion registered against it by the literati. It is not surprising that although Muhammad

Husain Azad includes Amanat the lyric poet in *Ab-i Hayat*, Amanat the dramatist and the IS find no place in this seminal work of modern Urdu criticism, dated 1880<sup>44</sup>. Bharatendu Harishchandra, known to Hindi literary historians as the 'father' of Hindi drama, was working in Banaras in the 1880s to create an alternative to popular theatrical spectacles like the IS. Mentioning specifically the "Bhand, Indrasabha, Ras, Yatra, Lila, Jhanki, etc.", he called them "corrupt, that is, there is no theatricality left in them"<sup>45</sup>. Although it is not known whether he actually saw a production of the IS, he certainly saw a number of Parsi plays. While his amateur stage was simpler and more restrained, Bharatendu nevertheless absorbed the influence of the popular style in his plays *Bharat Durdasha*, *Chandravali*, and *Nildevi*, where the characters introduce themselves, praise their own beauty, and sing Thumris and Ghazals in the dialogues<sup>46</sup>.

#### *The Printing History*

Evidence of the IS's travels can be confirmed independently by examining its extensive printing history. Print technology and vernacular printing in particular came into their own in this period. The colonial regime, recognizing the political threat posed by the new medium and concerned to tighten its control, passed the Press and Registration of Books Act in 1867 and established a repository at the India Office Library, which today contains many editions of the IS and other nineteenth-century dramatic texts. As catalogued by J. F. Blumhardt in 1889 and 1900, the library has 27 Urdu editions of the play published between 1853 and 1890, 11 editions in Devanagari (1870–1889), six in Gujarati (1867–1896), and one in Gurumukhi (1878)<sup>47</sup>. Additional editions contain both Amanat's IS and Madari Lal's *Indar Sabha*, a drama written in imitation of it (ten Urdu editions, one Devanagari, 1869–1889), and individual editions of Madari Lal's IS (three Urdu editions)<sup>48</sup>. (See Appendix.)

The India Office Library information undoubtedly contains gaps, and other sources such as Rizvi and Rosen list additional editions, especially for the years between 1853 and 1967, when systematic government collection was not yet underway. Nonetheless, the data are sufficient to indicate that, beginning shortly after its appearance in print, the IS quickly became an unprecedented bestseller. If the IOL statistics are definitive, its publishing peak was reached in the 1870s; during that decade 41 editions were published from Agra, Kanpur, Delhi, Lahore, Patna, Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras.

Beyond the IOL catalogues, an even wider sphere is indicated by the record of translations of the IS into other Indian languages. The library of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London contains a Sindhi version published in 1902<sup>49</sup>. In south India, translations or adaptations were made into Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada. A. N. Perumal lists no less than ten versions of the play *Intira Capa* in Tamil, the first published in 1886<sup>50</sup>. Some of these have fanciful names, e.g. *Fire IS*, *Lotus IS*, *Mountain IS*<sup>51</sup>. Further research is required to establish the context for these dramas and the meaning of their distinctive sobriquets. For Kannada, two references have been

located: *Indrasabha Natakavi*, by V. P. Guru Siddappa (1893)<sup>52</sup> and *Indracapa*, translated by Tateri Ranga Rav (1915)<sup>53</sup>. In Telugu, several versions of plays entitled *Indracapam(u)* are extant, published in the mid-twentieth century<sup>54</sup>.

The India Office Library contains an edition of a Sinhala IS dated 1893, published at Colombo by B. J. Preravana. It is described on the cover as one of the most interesting of the dramatic stories performed in Colombo by a group called the Lanka Drama Society, composed of men from Kollupiti (a place within the current city limits)<sup>55</sup>. Several other Sinhala dramas published in the 1880s include *Sattiangini Nattyaya*, described in the India Office bibliographical records as an “Indian love story versified in ‘Hindustani’ metre for the Sinhalese stage”, and *Nattal Peraliya*, “A farcical play in five acts: ‘Christmas brawls’ in ‘Hindustani’ metre”. The composition of these dramas and their publication as books appear to follow visits by popular theatre troupes from India, which in turn spurred the formation of local theatrical companies.

Yet more interesting is the Malay translation, entitled *Syair Indra Sebaha*, by Mohammad Hassan bin Nasaruddin, published in Singapore in 1891. Two editions of the lithographed text are found in the British Library, both published by Haji Muhammad Siraj, a prolific nineteenth-century Malay publisher. A modern edition was prepared by Khalid M. Hussain and published together with introductory notes and a facsimile of the original by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, in 1992. The illustrations to the 1891 text are very well done and show interesting cultural adaptations. In one picture, women wear knee-length skirts, short-sleeved blouses with buttons, and high heels. In several, the characters exhibit Chinese features of dress and hairstyle. Some pictures also show Western military costumes. One wonders about the kind of music that accompanied the performances, for in one picture we see a violin being played in the Western style, while several illustrations of the Emerald Fairy as a *yogini* show her holding the dual-gourd Veena upside down.

In the German translation and scholarly essay by Friedrich Rosen, published in Leipzig in 1892, we note a somewhat different consumption pattern—that associated with nineteenth-century orientalism. Rosen provides a detailed genealogy, philological analysis, and literary approximation of the original for an erudite audience. As such, the IS was one of the few pieces of Urdu literature available in German translation at the time. Even in Germany, however, the drama could not leave behind its close links with popular performance. Rosen’s translation was transformed into a libretto for *Im Reiche des Indra*, composed by Paul Lincke, which according to Annemarie Schimmel became an “oft-played” operetta<sup>56</sup>.

The publishing record becomes somewhat fuzzy after 1900, but there is little question that the play’s life as a printed text continued late into the twentieth century. This is established by my own purchase of a cheap Devanagari edition published by Agrawal Book Depot in Delhi, from a footpath in Jaipur in 1983. The recently acquired Nami Collection at the Library of Congress in Delhi may help to fill in the gap. According to

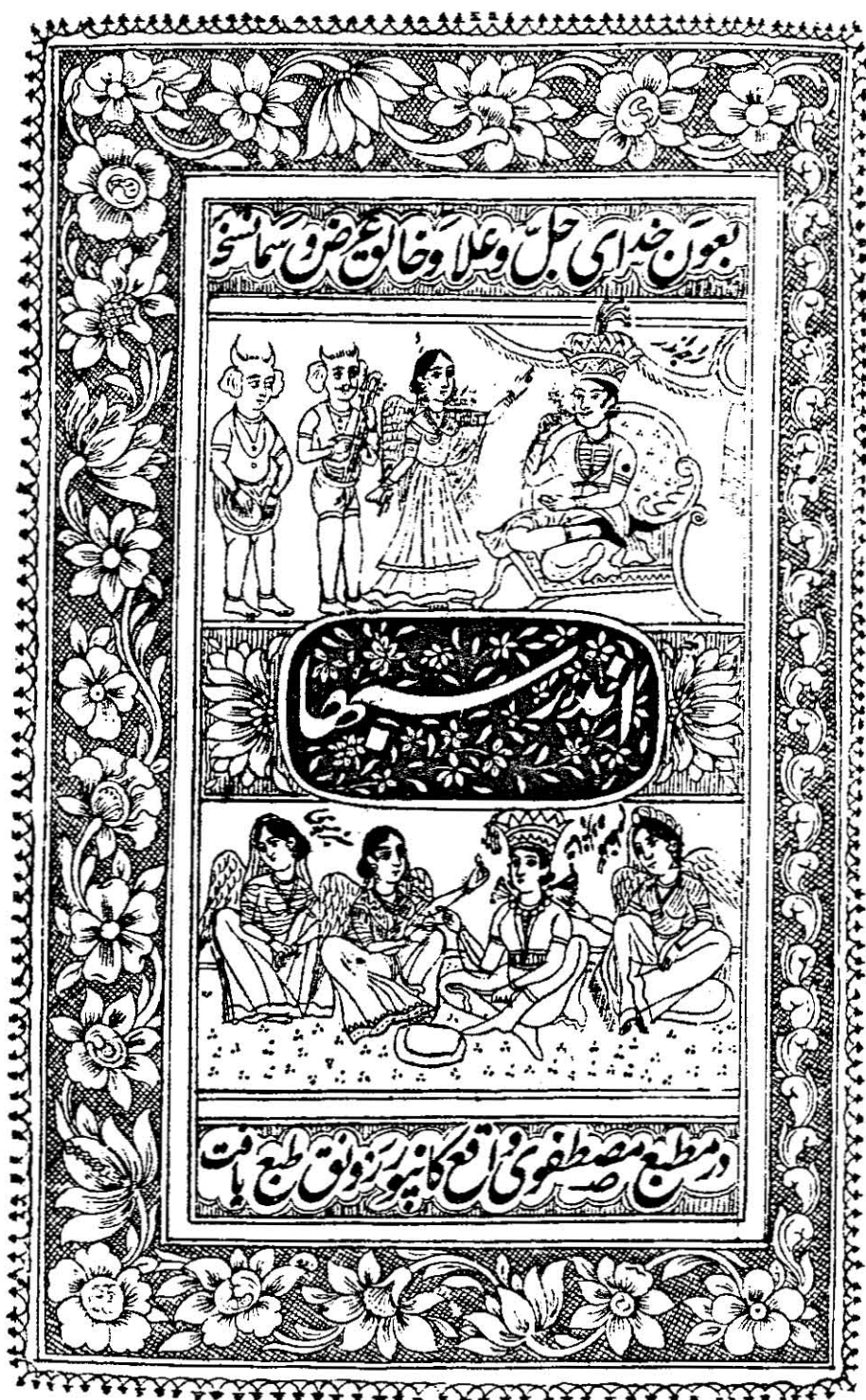


Fig. 1. Title page of (possibly) the first published edition of the *Indar Sabha*, in Urdu, Kanpur 1853.  
 Courtesy British Library, London.



Fig. 2. Sindhi edition of Indra Sabha Amanat, edited by Nevand Mal and published in 1902.



मेरी तरबत पे ताना चौदनी में क्यों है न मृगीरा। यह किसने चादरे महताब में धँवा लगा पा है  
अपौ सिन्दूर का दीकान ही मेहराब आबरु में। चिराग उस शम अरुने ऐन काबे में जलायो है  
नही बेवजह पे हमहि बकियाँ आती है झुरकत में। किसी सहबूब को तो आप अमानत याद आय है

**फिकरे सज़ परी की दरखास्त में जबानी राजा इन्द्र के**

काटी रात भजे में सारी। बैठ भरे पहलू में प्यारी।

बहुत लड़ाई दूने जान। अब है सज़ परी का ध्यान

लाओ सज़ परी को

**आमद सज़ परी की बीच सभा के**

आती नये अन्दाज़ से अब सज़ परी है। लब सुख है पर सज़ है पोशाक हरी है

फिरोज़ह उसे देख के खा जाता है हीरा। चेहरे में ज़मुरद से सिया जलवागरी है।

जिन उससे खिजास्त के सबब उड़ नहीं सके। परियों को सदा शर्म से बे वालों परी है।

जैवर की है क्या शान छरहरे से बदन पर। इक शाख है नागुक किशिगूकों से भरी है।

हँसता है ज़मुरद पर सदा धानी दुपहा। क्या इन्द्र के इक बाल से सज़े को चरो है

आमद की खबर सुन के हँसीनों में नहीं दम्। जोश मोहे महिफिल में चिराग सहरी है।

उस्ताद अजब आशिको माशूक के हैं नाम। शहजादा वह गुलफाम है यह सज़ परी है



Fig. 3. Devanagari edition of *Indrasabha Amanat*, published by Munshi Naval Kishor, Kanpur 1906.

Courtesy Bruce Pray.

PERSIAN PALY  
Entitled  
INDRESABHA.

ඉන්ද්‍ර සභා

හා හා ක වා ක්‍රමය.

කොළඹ පිටි ග්‍රාමවාසී සත්පුරුෂ මහතුන්ගේ  
ල ඩිනා හා වා ස මා ග ම

පිළිස්

කොළඹ මල්වත්තේදී දක්වත්ව යෙදුන  
හානා කථානු දතුරෙන් ඉසා රසවත් කථානුකෘත්ව  
මෙම "ඉන්ද්‍ර සභා" කථානුකෘත.

ඩී. ජේ. ප්‍රේමානන්ද

පිළිස්

කොළඹ ග්‍රන්ථකාශ සහකාරයෙහි  
ද්විතීයිකවනලදී.

1893

Fig. 4. Title page of the Sinhala edition of 'Indresabha', Colombo 1893.  
Courtesy British Library, London.

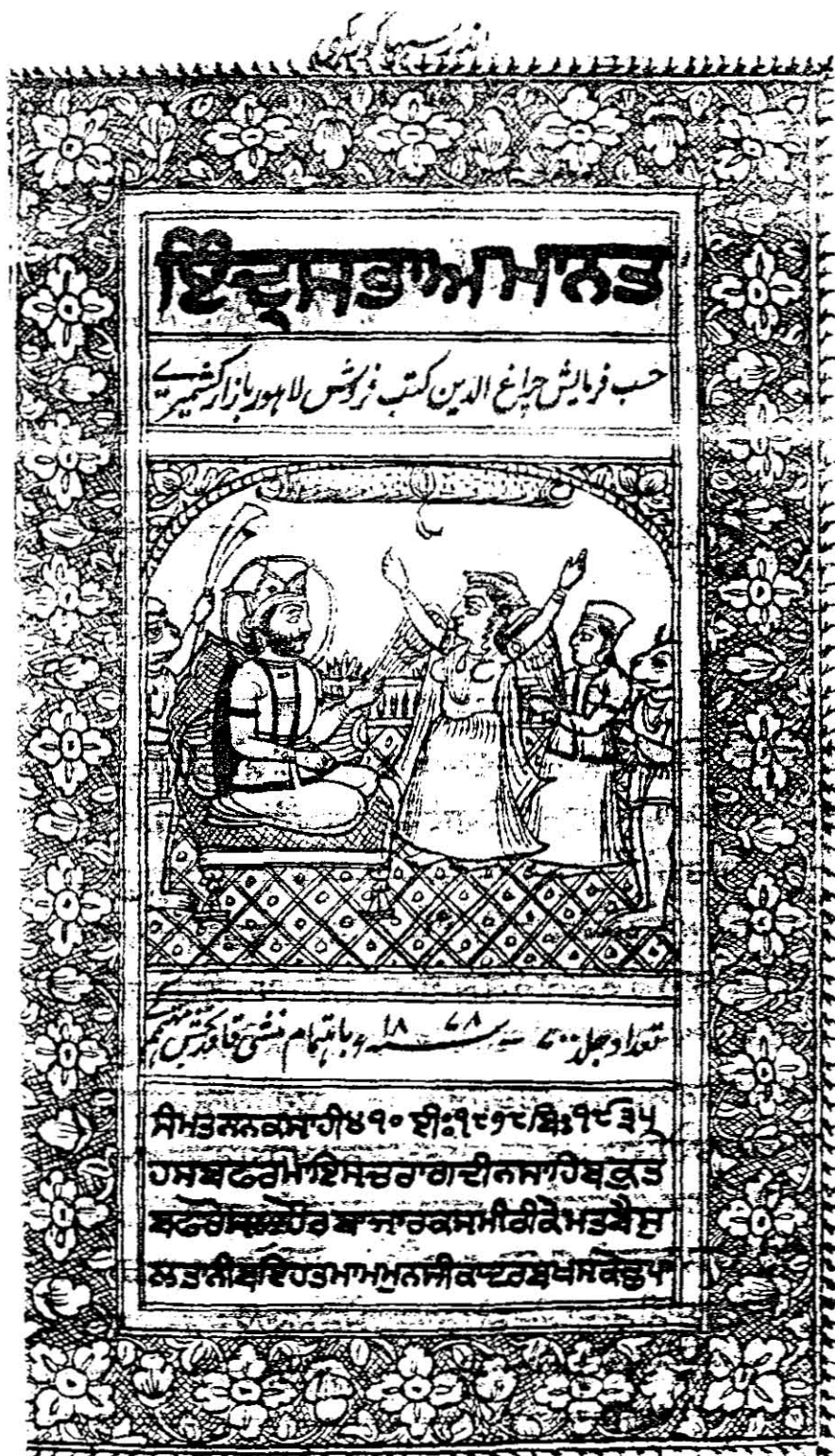


Fig. 5. Gurumukhi edition of Indar Sabha, Lahore 1878.  
 Courtesy British Library, London.

# इन्द्र सभा अमानत

मूल्य १-५० पैसे



कल्पानन्द स्वामी मयूर

अग्रवाल बुक डिपो, खारी बावली, देहली

Fig. 6. Title page of a cheap Devanagari edition published by Agrawal Book Depot in Delhi, purchased from a footpath in Jaipur in 1983. Source: Kathryn Hansen.



جواب  
 میرا سنگدب میں لکون کلندر  
 لاؤ تم ہر کو صدی جا کر  
 ابد کچھ کچھ پر کی کی پنج سہاگے



سہاگین دوست اندر کی آمد ہے  
 نہ شی کو چھپے لازم ہن صورت بیل  
 فروغ حسن سے آنکھ کو خواب کو روشن  
 روز انو بیٹو قرینے کو ساتھ غفل میں  
 زمین پہ آئیں گی راجہ کے ساتھ چہ پان  
 غضب کا کا نا ہے اور پنج جوق کا  
 بیان میں راجہ کی آمد کا کیا کوئی ستاد  
 بری ہمارے انکے انہر کی آمد ہے  
 اب اس زمین میں گل تر کی آمد ہے  
 زمین یہ مسرور کی آمد ہے  
 پر کیے دیو کے لشکر کی آمد ہے  
 ستاروں کے مسالوں کی آمد ہے  
 مبارقہ عشر کی آمد ہے  
 جگر کے جان کے دیو کی آمد ہے

چو لو کہ اپنے حسب حال زبانی راجہ اندر کے  
 راجہ ہوین تو کم کا اور آخر میرا نام  
 سو سے میرے دیو سے و کانوئی  
 تخت چچا و جنگا جلدی سے اس آن  
 بن پر جو کے دیو کے مجھے نہیں آرام  
 جلدی سیرو اسے سہاگرو تیا  
 جھکوب ہر بیٹا غفل کے دربان



مغل راجہ میں کچھ پر کی آتی ہے  
 جگسا سہاگینہ کہیں خواب میں دیکھا ہوگا  
 دولت حسن ہے جو جانیکا عالم مسور  
 رنگ ہرزہ حنیو نکات کیوں نہ ستاد  
 سارے مشوق کی سراج پر کی آتی ہے  
 آدمی زاد وین وہ آج پر کی آتی ہے  
 کرنے اس بزم میں اب راجہ پر کی آتی ہے  
 غل ہے غفل میں کچھ پر کی آتی ہے

شہزادان اپنے حسب حال زبانی کچھ پر کی کی  
 کافی ہوین اور راجہ سہاگام ہو میرا  
 پسند ہے برے کوئی نگلے نہیں پاتا  
 مین لاکھ کی دولا کہ کی پروا نہیں کرتے  
 کہتے ہیں جا میں جسے انسان کا گدگل  
 آفاق میں کچھ پر کی نام ہے میرا  
 اس گلشن عالم میں بچا دام ہے میرا  
 قار و کون خزانہ ابھی اعظم ہے میرا  
 وہ رخ ہے وہ گیسو بیہ نام ہے میرا

جواب  
 میرا سنگدب میں لکون کلندر  
 لاؤ تم ہر کو صدی جا کر  
 ابد کچھ کچھ پر کی کی پنج سہاگے

Fig. 7. Indar Sabha Amanat va Indar Sabha Madari Lal, published together with the German translation by Friedrich Rosen in Die Indarsabha des Amanat: Neuindisches Singspiel, Leipzig 1892.



Fig. 8. *Syair Indra Sebaha*, translated into Malay, published by Haji Muhammad Siraj, Singapore 1891. Facsimile of the original with modern text and introductory notes, edited by Khalid M. Hussain, published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur 1992. Courtesy Khalid M. Hussain.



Mohammad Burney, five dated and six undated editions of the IS are held in this body of theatre texts and ephemera collected by the late Dr A.A. Nami, author of the four-volume series *Urdu Thetar* and the *Bibliografia Urdu Drama*<sup>57</sup>. Two of the dated editions are published by popular houses in the first half of the twentieth century, two are later scholarly editions, and many of the undated editions appear to belong to the early twentieth century. The song book, a new type of publication, also makes its appearance in the first decades of the twentieth century; the collection contains three such books<sup>58</sup>.

### *Theatre as Spectacle, Text as Artefact*

It may be helpful at this point to summarize the characteristics of nineteenth-century popular consumption that can be drawn from this discussion. As a multimedia, hybrid performance work, the IS was consumed by its theatre audience on many levels. Its various languages, song genres, verse forms, and dance items were probably placed mentally by connoisseurs of these arts into micro-environments within which the compositions were judged with reference to other *ustads'* creations. This, to a large extent, is how the IS as Urdu drama has been treated by Urdu's literary critics, who judge Amanat's plot in relation to well-known masnavis, or measure his ghazals against those of Ghalib and Mir. To even these consumers, as well as to those less well-versed in its constituent artistic traditions, the IS was still something greater than the sum of its parts.

Like other nineteenth-century dramas, it presented a visual spectacle rich in the imagery of monarchy, but it surpassed its rivals. Its novelty was due to Parsi production techniques and adaptations as much as the original text itself. Fairies who appear out of nowhere at the clap of hands or shot of a pistol; flying cots that descend magically onto the stage; trap doors that make visible a scene like Gulfam's entrapment in a well; painted curtains that bring the perspective of European painting and baroque details of architecture within a Mughal arch or frame—all of these effects added to the spectacle of the Parsi theatre. As Anuradha Kapur suggests, "Stage technology functions as a modernizing element, and makes the audience feel contemporary, modern." It becomes a "means of translation: a mode of presenting old, already known narratives and deeds in new forms"<sup>59</sup>. The promise of novelty, even as imitation replaced imitation, drew audiences back. The drama's songs, too, circulating independently of the play, acquired their own life just as film songs do today and remained a consistent source of audience pleasure. At a deeper level, the central preoccupations of the drama—romance, feudal luxury, and exotic fairies and djinns—were consumed within a post-feudal sensibility that, although deemed escapist by nationalists, nonetheless possessed a kind of cultural authenticity.

Along with these modes of reception and consumption, let us now turn to another aspect of this work, namely its status as an artefact. Whereas all Urdu manuscripts and early printed books bear an artful aspect based on their calligraphy, the IS's artistic

interest is greater because pictures often illustrate the text. Beginning with its early published versions, the printed page was enhanced by penned drawings representing scenes from the play. Cover drawings were standard fare for nineteenth-century popular texts, enclosed by borders on four sides featuring floral motifs. Two scenes illustrate the cover of the 1853 Kanpur edition: one of Raja Indar (named by a tag) seated on his throne, watching a *pari* dance while two *devs* provide music on Sarangi and Tabla; the other of Gulfam Shahzada and Sabz Pari (tagged) sitting on the ground with two other fairies; the Emerald Fairy offers the prince a morsel to eat from a *thali*. Subsequent editions contain a number of illustrations within the text, many of key scenes that are repeated with regularity. A detailed comparison of these drawings and their variations in style and content would be interesting as a study in its own right. It would additionally serve as a gauge of changes and continuities in consumption as the text and its performance migrated from place to place.

While the IS's illustrated editions have neither been systematically catalogued nor analysed, a fascinating find at the India Office Library clearly establishes that in at least one instance illustrated texts of popular plays were prepared not for ordinary readers but as objects of artistic value for elite consumers. This is exemplified by the discovery of a unique illuminated manuscript of the IS in Hebrew characters, dated March 1887<sup>60</sup>. Conforming to the evidence already provided of the Urdu IS published in Devanagari, Gujarati and Gurumukhi scripts, the manuscript in question is not a translation into Hebrew but a transcription of the original Urdu in Hebrew characters. It belongs to a minute body of texts available from the late nineteenth century of Indian Jewish literature in Urdu. The only other such texts are an illustrated lithograph of the IS, published in or before 1880, held privately by the Sassoon family in Jerusalem; and a version of the popular *Laila Majnu*, another Urdu play in Hebrew characters, which is in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem.

The manuscript, lavishly illustrated in colour, was acquired by the British Museum from an antiquarian book dealer in London in 1970. The work was apparently produced by a scribe for a patron within the Baghdadi Jewish community of Calcutta, one of the three historical Jewish communities settled in India. This is surmised both from its provenance and from the difficult Iraqi cursive in which the manuscript is written. Like other lithographed editions of the text, the illustrations are executed in what Hill calls a "primitive, even childlike, style, along the lines of popular Indian folk-art"<sup>61</sup>.

This manuscript, although probably an oddity within the textual history of the IS, suggests the notion of intersecting diasporas for literary production in the nineteenth century. One can speculate upon the cultural practices that brought the Hebrew IS into existence. Performed in Calcutta in 1874 by the Victoria Theatrical Company, the IS had achieved fame in the cultural marketplace of the city. It is likely that its widely reprinted text was also available, either in the form of one of the migrating copies published in

Delhi, Lucknow, or Kanpur, or in a Calcutta edition such as that of 1878 held in the IOL. The Baghdadi Jews were already familiar with the practice of writing Arabic in Hebrew characters. While living in Calcutta, they began to assimilate the lingua franca used in everyday life and commerce<sup>62</sup>. Quite possibly, the community's leaders patronized the play or sponsored performances as wealthy merchants often did in Calcutta. The Baghdadi Jewish community's exposure to Islamic civilization, carried from their Arabic homeland and reinforced by contact with Indo-Muslim culture in nineteenth-century northern India, predisposed them to receive favourably the poetic and narrative elements of the drama. Cultural, religious, and historical factors similarly inclined them toward appreciation of manuscripts and books as works of art. The conjoining of these factors prompted the creation of an artefact that is hybrid in language, concept, and design.

#### *Recordings and Films*

By way of epilogue, it will suffice to mention briefly the transmutation of the IS into the mass media of the twentieth century, namely gramophone recordings and cinema. F.W. Gaisberg, the original recording engineer of the Gramophone Company, London, came to India in 1902 seeking performing artists to provide recordings of popular songs. Two managers from the Calcutta theatre world, Amarendu Dutt of the Classic Theatre and Jamshedji Framji Madan of the Corinthian, closely collaborated with Gaisberg, as a result of which almost all of the 550 recordings made during the tour of November–December 1902 were by singers and musicians associated with these two theatres. According to Michael Kinnear, the Corinthian Theatre continued to be utilized as the main source for recordings in Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati over the next few decades<sup>63</sup>. Songs from the IS are listed on 17 recordings (seven- and ten-inch format) in Kinnear's discography. The artists include Miss Mohatal (Corinthian Theatre), Miss Acheria (Corinthian, Classic), Miss Subashi, Miss Mahtab, Miss Gafooran, Master Takul (or Tikol), Mr. Pestonji, and Sohrabji R. Dhondi, and all of the recordings were made between 1902 and 1907. In the circular pattern of consumption that characterizes the IS phenomenon, Kinnear notes: "The artists of the Alfred Natak Mandali had also been recorded by several recording companies, including the Gramophone and Typewriter, Ltd., and the success of the recording of these artists, no doubt contributed to the continuing popularity of the Alfred Natak Mandali."<sup>64</sup>

By 1918 J.F. Madan had turned his entrepreneurial skills towards film production and investing in cinema houses. The Madan chain of theatres and cinemas grew by the 1930s into an empire numbering more than 170, spread across India, Burma, and Ceylon. Many of the motion pictures produced by Madan Theatres, Ltd., were filmed versions of popular dramas, and they often featured the recording artists associated with the Corinthian and Alfred theatres. The first filmed version of the IS was produced at Kohinoor Studios in Bombay by Manilal Joshi, a major silent director, in 1925<sup>65</sup>. Although little is known

about this film, it is worth mentioning that silent films commonly employed trilingual subtitles and were accompanied by live music supplied by theatre artists. As popular entertainments, these shows were a direct continuation of the travelling bioscope shows that popularized scenes and songs from the Calcutta theatres in the first decade of the century; here too J.F. Madan's enterprise played a major role.

One of the first motion pictures made with sound was *Indra Sabha* (1932), directed by J.F. Madan's third son, J.J. Madan. Running to 211 minutes, this epic production boasted a total of 71 songs, many of which were already familiar from stage shows and gramophone recordings<sup>66</sup>. The cinematography was directed by T. Marconi, an Italian who had earlier worked with Madan Theatres and an Italian cast in *Savitri* (1923). Madan asked Marconi to model the choral mise-en-scene after the Italian epics, and he insured the film's popularity with the Indian audience by casting the popular singing duo, Nissar and Kajjan<sup>67</sup>. A Tamil version of the *Indrasabha* was directed by A. Narayanan and R.S. Prakash in 1936. In 1956, Nanubhai Vakil, known for his remakes of silent films based on Parsi theatre plays and considered a defining force for "B-movie production in post-WW2 period", directed a Hindi film entitled *Indrasabha*<sup>68</sup>. None of the film versions of the IS are preserved in the National Film Archive of India in Pune.

This study has traced the migration of one dramatic text through different languages, scripts, media, and geographical locations. Although the IS is in some sense an exceptional work, there are certainly other pre-modern dramas that had at least as long a life and as wide a diaspora, such as *Prahlad*, *Harishchandra*, *Laila Majnu*. If we are to distinguish 'folk' from 'popular' culture in the nineteenth century, perhaps the criteria ought to include the concepts of hybridity and portability explored herein, for these rather than association with specific technologies of diffusion would separate such cultural forms from their more localized kin. Moreover, we may want to ask whether the popular culture represented by phenomena such as the IS did not contribute in an as-yet-unrecognized sense to a genuinely national if not transnational culture. Certainly the IS, despite its seeming archaism, provides valuable clues to the shared culture of ordinary South Asians that has come down to the present day.

#### NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop on the Popular Culture of India, organized by Rachel Dwyer and Chris Pinney at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, June 1995.
2. Williams 1989:156.
3. Hansen 1993.
4. The ambivalent emotions aroused by the backward historical gaze at this period are poignantly captured in Satyajit Ray's film *Shatranj ke Khilari* (*The Chessplayers*), based on the short story by Premchand.

The passage upon which they rely is as follows: "Who is not familiar with the circumstances of Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh? The tales of that era still cause tears of blood to flow from the eyes of sensitive souls. But a detailed description of all that is beside the point of this essay. It is sufficient to say that the court at that time was the cradle of luxury and pleasure. And every innovation at Qaisar Bagh, every royal order, indeed every new scheme raised a furor of excitement. Each member of the court was absorbed in the project of devising some new form of entertainment for Rangila Piya [the king]. Gradually all their powers of invention were exhausted, and the courtiers began to fill new bottles with old wine. In this connection a French attendant introduced a model of the theatres in the West. This attracted the attention of some of the Hindustanis, and they compared the prevalent forms of theatre with Western dramas. This was the time when . . . [not only] France but Europe in general was becoming converted to opera (meaning, that drama performed entirely by means of singing and dancing). Therefore the kind of French drama that was mentioned in the presence of the King was *Opera*. Singing and dancing were already favourite items; thus it was suggested that an opera be prepared conforming to Hindustani taste. By drawing lots, Amanat's name was chosen, and he fulfilled this duty in the manner of an obligation in 1270 H." Translation mine. (Ilahi 1982:354–5).

6. Sharar's pieces were later collected in *Guzashta Lakhnau*, published in 1927. See also Qureshi 1987:58.
7. Sharar 1976:85.
8. Rizvi 1957:42.
9. Rizvi 1957:44.
10. Oman 1908:190–91. Although the citation is from the 1908 version entitled *Cults, Customs and Superstitions of India*, rather than the original, published as *Indian Life, Religious and Social*, a playbill dated 1881 and other details of performance practice mentioned by Oman suggest that the theatre section of the book reflects the climate prior to 1889.
11. Ilahi 1982:359, Saksena 1940:351.
12. Yusuf Ali 1917:91.
13. Raheja 1994:67–70.
14. Schimmel 1975:199.
15. Husain 1990:22–23.
16. According to Frances Pritchett, "the association of *dastan* narration with opium is mentioned in so many contemporary accounts that it should not be overlooked. If both *dastan-go* and audience were slightly under the influence of opium, they might well enjoy the long catalogs and other stylized descriptive devices, which slowed down the narrative so that it could expand into the realms of personal fantasy." Pritchett 1991:17.
17. As Shanta Gokhale has suggested in the context of Bombay and the nineteenth-century Marathi stage, what distinguished the emerging urban theatre from the traditional plays staged for the lower classes was the desire to be seen by others. "Theatre-going to this class was a badge of class, a ritual for which you dressed and behaved in certain ways." (Gokhale 1995:197)
18. Kapur 1995:407.
19. Rizvi 1957:119–20.
20. Saksena 1940:353.
21. Somnath Gupta disagrees with Nami regarding the date of the founding of the Alfred company. He says the company was started only in 1871. (Gupta 1981:129)

22. Their performance of *Jahan Bakhsh Gul Rukhsar* earned them particular fame on account of its technical innovations and new acting style. Nami 1975:44–49.
23. Masihuzzaman, cited in Ibrahim Yusuf 1980:57.
24. My spelling of Parsi and other Indian names is based on transliteration of Hindi and Urdu source materials, and thus may be at variance with the anglicized spellings employed by the individuals themselves or featured in the English-language press.
25. Dalvi, cited in Ibrahim Yusuf 1980:57.
26. Gupta 1981:135.
27. Gupta 1981:105–110.
28. Gupta 1981:111–112.
29. Gupta 1981:114, 176.
30. Maharaja Ram Singh of Jaipur was a great aficionado of drama. He had a playhouse constructed at the present site of the Ram Prakash Cinema. Dadabhai Thunthi and several Parsi lads were retained to instruct Jaipur's professional musicians (including courtesans) in dramatic arts. In Patiala, the maharaja built an auditorium in 1891, for the use of the Parsi theatre companies.
31. Gupta 1981:117–18.
32. Gupta 1981:144.
33. Gupta 1981:140.
34. Gupta 1981:120, Saksena 1940:354.
35. Ibrahim Yusuf 1980:310–12.
36. Gora Singh, a former resident of Queens, New York, remembered seeing the IS performed in Guyana in his youth. Peter Manuel acquired this information in the course of his field work on Indo-Caribbean musical traditions and kindly relayed it to me (e-mail communication of July 6, 1995). (Gora Singh died in 1997.)
37. I am indebted to Mary Des Chene for drawing this passage to my attention and translating it from Nepali.
38. Sama 1972:153.
39. Das 1991: 237.
40. Hussain 1992: xxii. A draft translation of the Bahasa introduction to the Malay version of the IS was prepared with the kind help of Ninie Syarikin of the Voice of America in Washington, DC.
41. Local companies (loosely called Parsi theatre, although not necessarily containing Parsis) were formed in a number of cities: the Albert Natak Company in Madras, the Nizami Company and Mahbub Shahi Natak Company in Hyderabad, the Ripon Indian Club in Peshawar, the Oriental Opera and Dramatic Company in Lahore, the Victoria Theatrical Company in Amritsar (Gupta 1981:239–243). For Parsi theatre in Dacca and east Bengal, see Ahmad 1990 (25–35) and Rehmani 1968 (209–219).
42. Gupta 1981: 229.
43. Yusuf Ali 1917: 91.
44. Rosen 1892: 8.
45. Anand 1978: 51.
46. Tivari 1959:115–20.
47. Although it remains to be proven by examination of the texts, my assumption is that the Devanagari,



- Gujarati, and Gurumukhi editions all are transcriptions of the original hybrid Urdu, not translations into 'purified' forms of Hindi, Gujarati, and Punjabi.
48. A consideration of the large number of imitations of the IS is beyond the scope of this paper. These dramas are designated as *sabhai natak* in Urdu literary histories and have received ample treatment by Gupta (1981:227–36), Husain (1990:71–79), Rizvi (1957:121–132), and Ibrahim Yusuf (1980:52–71, 307–9). Most of the imitations appear to fall into one of three categories: (1) Stage adaptations in which new material is added and/or rearrangements are made. Among these *tarmim-shuda* ('improved') versions are the ISs of Madari Lal, Hafiz Abdullah, and Lala Kedarnath 'Surat'. (2) Freer variations on the general theme of fairy-mortal romance, using a different cast of characters but many of the same plot elements, e.g. *Pariyon ki Havai Majlis*, *Farrukh Sabha*, *Khurshed Sabha*. Several scholars mistakenly include in this category dramas based on other masnavis like *Benazir Badre Munir* and *Gul Bakavali*. (3) Parodies, such as Bharatendu Harishchandra's *Bandar Sabha* and Habab Inayat Ali Beg's *Nechur* [Nature] *Sabha*, a spoof on Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan's Aligarh movement.
  49. The full citation is *Indra Sabha Amanat*, ed. Nevand Mal. 48 pp. lith. Sukkur, Lahore, 1902. S.XII. Hindi 10610/2. Christopher Shackle generously shared this reference with me.
  50. Stuart Blackburn's help in locating references to Tamil versions is gratefully acknowledged.
  51. Perumal 1981:182–254.
  52. Das 1991: 668.
  53. Kesavan 2/1962:333.
  54. Kesavan 4/1962: 304. Kesavan lists *Nelavanka*, *Indracapamu*. Venkatarangaravu, Avantsu (1904– ). Vijayanagaram:Sahiti samiti, 1949. 51 p. 21 cm. The Library of Congress contains a work *Indracapam*, by Rudrasri. (1970) ix, 20 p. 23 cm. PL4780.9.R.77.15 (Orien Tel) As this work has not been examined, it is not known whether it is a translation of Amanat's IS.
  55. My thanks to Ariya Diwullewe for providing an on-the-spot translation at the IOL, in August 1994.
  56. Schimmel 1975: 214.
  57. I am grateful to Mr Burney, Urdu Bibliographer, and Lygia Ballantyne, Field Director of the Library of Congress in New Delhi, for special access to the Nami collection prior to its being catalogued and preserved on microfilm. To Allen Thrasher goes the credit for alerting me to the treasures of the Nami Collection.
  58. The song books in the Nami Collection are as follows: *Indar Sabha ke Gane* (Lahore: Istim Pres, 1905); *Indar Sabha Natak ke Gane* (Bombay: Matba'-i Murtazvi, 1917), 16 p.; *Indar Sabha Natak ke Gane* (Bombay: Matba'-i Gulzar Ahmadi, 1918), 16 p.
  59. Kapur 1995: 418.
  60. for most of the details that follow, I am indebted to Brad Sabin Hill, Head of the Hebrew Section at the British Library, who shared his research and gave me the opportunity to examine the manuscript.
  61. Hill n.d.: 5. As context for the work, Hill emphasizes the wider renaissance towards the end of the nineteenth century of literature in Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish from presses in India, the Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans, and even Europe, and a longer tradition of writing—and later printing—of Jewish and non-Jewish languages in Hebrew script.
  62. According to Hill, the Baghdadis' spoken vernacular became influenced by Hindustani in this period, and the matriarch of the Sassoon family, Lady Flora (born in 1859), was fluent in Hindustani. (Hill n.d.:3–4).
  63. Kinnear 1994:18–19.
  64. Kinnear 1994:19–20.

65. Rajadhyaksha 1994: 108.
66. Rangoonwalla 1970: 40.
67. Rajadhyaksha 1924: 237–8.
68. Rajadhyaksha 1994: 211–212.

## APPENDIX

### Printing History of *Indar Sabha* Editions in the British Library

From J.F. Blumhardt, *Catalogue of Hindustani Printed Books in the Library of the British Museum* (London: 1889) and J.F. Blumhardt, *Catalogue of the Library of the India Office*, Vol. II, Part II: Hindustani Books (London: 1900).

*Indar Sabha* by Amanat Ali (aka Agha Hasan)

Urdu editions:

Kanpur, 1853. 27 pp.  
Kanpur, 1863. 28 pp.  
Gorakhpur, 1865. 30 pp.  
Delhi, 1869. 27 pp.  
Cawnpore, 1870. 23 pp.  
Delhi, 1870. 28 pp.  
Lucknow, 1871. 23 pp.  
Patna, 1871. 28 pp.  
Delhi, 1872. 36 pp.  
Lucknow, 1873. 24 pp.  
Lucknow, 1874. 24 pp.  
Lucknow, 1875. 24 pp.  
Delhi, 1876. 28 pp.  
Delhi, 1876. 28 pp.  
Lucknow, 1876. 16 pp.  
Madras, 1876. 28 pp.  
Amritsar, 1877. 36 pp.  
Delhi, 1877. 20 pp.  
Madras, 1877. 32 pp.  
Kanpur, 1877. 48 pp.  
Calcutta, 1878. 48 pp.  
Delhi, 1878. 28 pp.  
Lahore, 1878. 28 pp.  
Lahore, 1879. 39 pp.  
Kanpur, 1882. 48 pp.

Lucknow, 1890. 24 pp.  
Lucknow, 1890. 32 pp.

Devanagari:

Agra, 1870. 40 pp.  
Agra, 1871. 40 pp.  
Lucknow, 1874. 40 pp.  
Meerut, 1874. 40 pp.  
Lucknow, 1875. 40 pp.  
Delhi, 1876. 40 pp.  
Bombay, 1876. 56 pp.  
Bombay, 1876. 96 pp.  
Delhi, 1877. 40 pp.  
Delhi, 1879. 40 pp.  
Lahore, 1889. 39 pp.

Gujarati:

Bombay, 1867. 96 pp.  
Bombay, 1874. 86 pp.  
Bombay, 1874. 96 pp.  
Bombay, 1876. 101 pp.  
Bombay, 1880. 40 pp.  
Bombay, 1896. 26 pp.

Gurumukhi:

Lahore, 1878. 40 pp.

*Imitations*

*Indrasabha*. By Madari Lal.

Agra, 1860? 31 pp.  
Lucknow, 1869. 48 pp. Includes Amanat's *Indrasabha*.  
Bombay, 1870. 64 pp. Includes Amanat's *Indrasabha*.

- Lucknow, 1870. 48 pp. Includes Amanat's Indrasabha.  
 Delhi, 1873. 32 pp.  
 Lucknow, 1874. 48 pp. Includes Amanat's Indrasabha.  
 Devanagari: Lucknow, 1876. 80 pp. Includes Amanat's Indrasabha.  
 Lucknow, 1876. 32 pp.  
 Kanpur, 1877. 48 pp. Includes Amanat's Indrasabha.  
 Lucknow, 1877. 48 pp. Includes Amanat's Indrasabha.  
 Kanpur, 1882. 48 pp. Includes Amanat's Indrasabha.  
 Kanpur, 1888. 48 pp. Includes Amanat's Indrasabha.  
 Kanpur, 1889. 48 pp. Includes Amanat's Indrasabha.  
 Lahore, 1889. 48 pp. Includes Amanat's Indrasabha.
- Bandar-sabha*. (Gujarati) In imitation of the Indra-sabha of Amanat Ali.  
 Bombay, 1877. 24 pp.
- Tuhfah i dilkusha*. (Gujarati) A drama in two acts founded on Amanat Ali's Indra-sabha, or Court of Indra and the fairies. By Saiyid Muhammad, called Harif.  
 Bombay, 1885. 57 pp.
- Jalsah i paristan*, also called Bazm i Sulaiman. By Muhammad abd al-Wahid (Qais).  
 Fathpur, 1892. 46 pp.
- Mohana-sabha*. By Shaikh Khuda Bakhsh.  
 Lucknow, 1877. 36 pp.
- Pariyon ki hawa'i majlis*. By Daulat Ram and Lalchand.  
 Lahore, 1878. 16 pp.

### Bibliography

- Ahmad, M. (1990) *Bangal men Urdu Drama*. Calcutta: Maghribi Bangal Urdu Akademi.
- Anand, M. (1978) 'Bharatenduyugin rangmanch'. In N.C. Jain (ed.), *Adhunik Hindi Natak aur Rangmanch*. Delhi: Macmillan, 51–64.
- Das, S.K. (1991) *A History of Indian Literature, 1800–1910*. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Gokhale, S. (1995) 'Rich Theatre, Poor Theatre'. In S. Patel and A. Thorner (eds.), *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture*. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 194–209.
- Gupta, S. (1981) *Parsi Thiyetar: Udbhav aur Vikas*. Allahabad: Lokbharati Prakashan.
- Hansen, K. (1993) *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India*. Delhi: Manohar Publications.
- Hill, B.S. (n.d.) 'Indra Sabha: An Urdu Fairy Tale in Hebrew-character Transcription', unpublished paper.
- Husain, M.S. (1990) *Indar-Sabha ki Parampara*. Delhi: Simant Prakashan.
- Hussain, K.M. (ed.) (1992) *Syair Indra Sebaha*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Ibrahim Yusuf (1980) *Indar Sabha aur Indar Sabha'en*. Lucknow: Nasim Book Depot.
- Ilahi, N. and Umar, M. (1982, orig. 1924) *Natak Sagar*. Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Akademi.

- Kapur, A. (1995) 'The Representation of Gods and Heroes in the Parsi Mythological Drama of the Early Twentieth Century'. In V. Dalmia and H. von Stietencron (eds.), *Representing Hinduism: the Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*. Delhi: Sage Publications, 401–419.
- Kesavan, B.S. (ed.) (1962–90) *The National Bibliography of Indian Literature, 1901–1953*. 5 vols. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Kinnear, M.S. (1994) *The Gramophone Company's First Indian Recordings, 1899–1908*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Nami, A.A. (1975) *Urdu Thetar*. Vol. 4. Karachi: Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu Pakistan.
- Oman, J.C. (1908) *Cults, Customs and Superstitions of India*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Perumal, A. N. (1981) *Tamil Drama, Origin and Development*. Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies.
- Pradhan, P.M. (1980) *Balakrishna Sama*. Kalimpong: Bhagyalaxmi Prakashan.
- Pritchett, F.W. (trans., ed.) (1991) *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures From the Dastan of Amir Hamzah*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Qureshi, M.A. (1987) *Wajid Ali Shah's Theatrical Genius*. Lahore: Vanguard Books.
- Raheja, G.G. (1994) 'Women's Speech Genres, Kinship and Contradiction'. In N. Kumar (ed.), *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 49–80.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. and Willemen, P. (1994) *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rangoonwalla, F. (1979) *A Pictorial History of Indian Cinema*. London: Hamlyn.
- Rehmani, I. (1968) *Urdu Drama ka Irtiqā*. Lahore: Shaikh Ghulam Ali and Sons Publishers.
- Rizvi, M.H. (1957) *Urdu Drama aur Istej*, Pt 2: Lakhnau ka Avami Istej: Amanat aur Indarsabha. Lucknow: Kitab Ghar.
- Rosen, F. (1892) *Die Indarsabha des Amanat*. Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus.
- Sadiq, M. (1984) *A History of Urdu Literature*, 2d ed. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Saksena, R.B. (1940) *A History of Urdu Literature*, 2d ed. Allahabad: Ram Narain Lal.
- Sama, B. (1972) *Mero Kavita ko Aradhan*, Vol. 2. Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan.
- Schimmel, A. (1975) *Classical Urdu Literature from the Beginning to Iqbal*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Sharar, A.H. (1976) *Lucknow: the Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*. [Guzashta Lakhnau] E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (trans. and ed.) Boulder: Westview Press.
- Tivari, G. (1959) *Bharatenduyugin Natak Sahitya*. Jalandhar: Hindi Bhavan.
- Williams, R. (1989) *Culture*. Glasgow: Fontana Press.
- Yajnik, Y.K. (1933) *The Indian Theatre*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Yusuf Ali, A. (1917) 'The Modern Hindustani Drama', *Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature*, 2d s. 35 (1917), 79–99.