

# The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development (1)

SOMNATH GUPT

Translated from the Hindi, abridged, and edited by  
KATHRYN HANSEN

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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 1853, the Parsi theatre rapidly developed into a mobile, company-based entertainment that reached all corners of colonial and princely India as well as South-east Asia. It arose at approximately the same time as the modern Bengali and Marathi theatres, and like them employed local languages: Gujarati, Urdu, and Hindi. These theatres shared the use of the European-style proscenium with richly painted scenes and trick effects. Like the English stage of the period, they depended on spectacle and melodrama to create audience appeal. Simultaneously, these emerging theatres ushered in the conventions and techniques of realism, and they mark the transition from stylized open-air presentations to a new urban drama. Although displaced by the cinema in the 1930s, the Parsi theatre continues to be significant for its long-term impact on South and South-east Asian theatrical styles and on the popular cinema.

At present, the Parsi theatre is a source of fascination to theatre practitioners, scholars of art history and the cinema, and students of media and popular culture alike. At the National School of Drama, Delhi, veteran performers like the late Master Fida Husain have been tapped to reconstruct the art of the Parsi theatre for today's audiences. Cinema scholars likewise are investigating the record to discover the relationship between the theatrical legacy and the genres of popular Indian film. Others are fascinated by the songs associated with the Parsi theatre and are attempting to preserve them archivally before it is too late. Even the Parsis, once disinclined to claim what was for them a low-brow artefact, have demonstrated more than a flicker of interest in this chapter of their past accomplishments<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, the Parsi theatre is a vital link in India's cultural history, but one that has often been dismissed and misunderstood. In this context there is a great need for reliable information in English that would shed light on the history and practice of this important theatrical form. Early in the twentieth century, contemporary observers like Yusuf Ali (1917), Saksena (1924), and Yajnik (1933) provided important documentation, which is still of value. Scholarly research on the subject, however, is scant prior to the recent explorations of Hansen (1992, 1998), Kapur (1995), and Willmer (1999). All of these investigators are heavily indebted to a common source. That source is a Hindi book that appeared in 1981, Somnath Gupta's *Parsi Thiyetar*, published by Lokbharati Prakashan, Allahabad. Simply stated, Gupta's book is the best single reference for the early period of Parsi theatre history. Its coverage starts with the antecedent phase of English theatre in Bombay and extends through the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>2</sup>.

Two things make Gupta's book stand out among the lesser works on the subject. First, Gupta

<sup>1</sup> See the articles by Gopal Shastri, 'The Contribution made by the Parsis to Gujarati Theatre', and Sharatchandra Vishnu Gokhale, 'Indian Music Among the Parsis', in Nawaz B. Mody, ed., *Parsis in Western India* (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Gupta's full title is *Parsi Thiyetar: Udbhav aur Vikas* (The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development). It apparently grew out of his earlier *Hindi Natak Sahitya ka Itihas* (History of Hindi Dramatic Literature), first published in 1947. Gupta may have finished *Parsi Thiyetar* in 1969, according to the date of its foreword.

consulted a range of source materials in several Indian languages as well as in English. These are acknowledged in his footnotes and preface. Gupt's references point to a dense layer of primary evidence in old newspaper columns, in early autobiographies and memoirs, and in compendia of theatre lore published in Gujarati and Urdu. Second, Gupt's interpretive apparatus is relatively free of the bias that pervades most of the secondary sources on the Parsi theatre. Composed in one of three languages — Urdu, Gujarati, or Hindi — these writings often reveal a preference for one particular group or community over another. Urdu-language histories of the Parsi theatre laud the Urdu munshis' contributions but barely recognize the existence of Gujarati and Hindi playwrights, whereas accounts in Hindi and Gujarati denigrate the munshis as hack writers or do not even mention them<sup>3</sup>. Yet, as Gupt himself states, it was "Parsis, non-Parsis, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians who spread the art of theatre by founding theatrical companies, who built playhouses and encouraged drama, who became actors and popularized the art of acting, who composed innumerable dramas in Gujarati, Hindi, and Urdu, who composed songs and defended classical music, and who wrote descriptions of the Parsi stage and related matters"<sup>4</sup>. The Parsi theatre as a living phenomenon was quite free of communal antagonisms; it is rather literary history that is divided along linguistic, ethnic, and religious lines.

For these reasons, Gupt's *Parsi Thiyetar* is a worthy source whose English translation is long overdue. As one who has consulted the book repeatedly over a period of years, I have come to both appreciate it immensely and to recognize its limitations. These now require some mention, in that my editorial strategies are intimately connected with them. Although Gupt located many significant sources, he was unable to consult the records of the British Museum and India Office Library, where many of the old printed play-texts are housed. Gupt therefore perpetuates the assumption that Parsi theatre play-texts were not published or are unavailable, and his bibliographic details are accordingly incomplete. My attempt has been to supply the missing information wherever possible, drawing on my own research visits to the libraries in London.

It is important to recognize that Gupt depended upon several key works for major sections of his book. These include Kumudini A. Mehta's unpublished English-language dissertation on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English stage in Bombay, Patel's and Sharof's Gujarati works on the history of the Parsi theatre, and Nami's multivolume *Urdu Thetar*. Because of Gupt's rather minimal use of citations, the extent of his borrowings from previous authors is not entirely visible. As editor, I have compared these sources with Gupt's text and amplified the footnotes where necessary. I have also corrected the errors that so commonly creep in when transliterating from one Indian script to another, as well as when copying English-language passages into a Hindi publication. What has not been possible, however, is to resolve the discrepancies contained within and among these multiple sources. Numerous inconsistencies and fragmented bits of information remain in this translation. Many of these stem from the works that Gupt consulted. However, it must also be acknowledged that Gupt himself has made mistakes and allowed contradictions to stand.

Gupt's expository Hindi style is rather prolix and repetitious, although no more so than comparable Hindi literary studies. Since the value of Gupt's book lies in the information it contains rather than its prose *per se*, I have taken the liberty of tightening the syntax and removing redundancies. Another characteristic is the descriptive rather than analytical nature of the treatment. Although it supplies much valuable detail, the book carries no central argument. At times the amassing of evidence is not well-organized. The result is a certain tedium for the reader, who must sort through an excess of fact without a supporting framework.

To overcome these obstacles and make the book more accessible, I have decided to publish an

<sup>3</sup> For further details, see Kathryn Hansen, 'Parsi Theatre, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay', *Annual of Urdu Studies* 16:1 (2001), 43–63.

<sup>4</sup> Somnath Gupt, *Parsi Thiyetar: Udbhav aur Vikas*, dedication, 5.

abridged version of the translation. The following excerpt therefore presents the first three of ten chapters in compressed form. The translation will be completed in two subsequent instalments. To provide visual illustrations to Gupt's history, I have also included several photographs from my personal collection. My supplemental notes to the text are carried within square brackets in the footnotes, alongside of Gupt's original footnotes in translation, which are not bracketed.

Through the acts of translation, abridgement, and annotation, I have sought to make Gupt's *Parsi Thiyetar* a useful source of information for the general reader. This translation will not put to rest the controversies surrounding the Parsi theatre and its significance to the cultural history of South Asia. However, it will make available in English one of the most frequently consulted studies of this seminal theatre form, thus opening the door to further research.

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BEFORE THE PARSİ THEATRE<sup>1</sup>

Just as the present is the result of the past, so too the Parsi theatre emerged from a pre-existing form of theatre. Its antecedent was the so-called Bombay Theatre, which available evidence dates to 1776. One of the first references is in an essay by John Forbes, an employee of the East India Company who retired in 1784. "When I left Bombay, the generality of the public buildings were more useful than elegant, the government-house, custom-house, marine house, barracks, mint, treasury, theatre and prison include the chief of these structures."<sup>2</sup>

Corroborating Forbes, W. Milburn in his memoirs says, "In the centre of the town is a large open space, called the Green . . . ; around the Green are many large well-built and handsome houses, the Government House and the church . . . On the right of the church gate is the bazaar . . . where the native merchants principally reside; at its commencement stands the theatre, a neat handsome structure."<sup>3</sup>

The absence of the Bombay Theatre before 1776 is deduced from A. Parsons's *Travels in Asia and Africa*, published in 1818. This gentleman arrived in Bombay in 1775, but the Bombay Theatre does not appear in his work. The second piece of evidence is J. H. Grose's *Voyage to the East Indies*, wherein he describes the place called the Green, "a spacious area that continues from the fort thereto, and is pleasantly laid out in walks planted with trees, round which are mostly the houses of English inhabitants"<sup>4</sup>. Here too there is no mention of the Bombay Theatre.

In 1833, when it was decided to sell the Bombay Theatre, there was an investigation into its history. The then Secretary to Government, John Bax, wrote a letter to the Bombay Municipality, requesting information on "the terms on which the Bombay Theatre was originally constructed and has since been held"<sup>5</sup>. In reply the Municipality wrote, "It is stated in the Plan and Survey of the Revenue Surveyor to belong to the Hon'ble Company, and neither rent nor acknowledgment have consequently ever been received by Government"<sup>6</sup>.

William Newnham's letter to Governor Clare is also important in this connection: "I have been associated with this Theatre for more than 20 years, as a Manager. It was built, I understood, by subscription so far back as 1776, where a Tank of impure water before existed; and was rebuilt in my own time, at the expence of the Community in 1817, on its present extensive scale; and the outlay on that occasion has given it a value it did not previously possess. It may be proper here to state that at the time this great outlay was made by the Community of this Presidency, nothing was known to the Managers of that period whether the ground, (or swamp as before alluded to) was originally the property of Government, or of private individuals, or of any condition being attached to its occupancy, and that it was not till many years after, when filling the office of Chief Secretary to Government, that, on tracing the Records, I discovered, from Proceedings in 1789, that it had been originally occupied with the sanction of Governor Hornby, and its continuance then sanctioned by Governor Meadows but subject to the pleasure of Government"<sup>7</sup>.

Although Newnham's employment lasted for thirty years, he himself never appeared on the stage of the Bombay Theatre<sup>8</sup>. An efficient manager, he carefully recorded the proceedings of the committee's meetings in diaries. When necessary, he also appealed for funds by



subscription. He made arrangements for costumes for the actors and took care of their food and drink. The theatre became almost his household hobby.

The Bombay of those days was not like today's city. It was divided into three islands, each with its own importance. Spain, Portugal, France, and England all came to Bombay, but the English finally were the ones who succeeded in staying on. From the letters and documents of the Belassis family, it is apparent that English society was originally a small military settlement whose means of entertainment were limited. They played cards at home, hunted for rabbits on Malabar Hill, or rode horseback up to Thana. Some individuals must have got together and built the Bombay Theatre for their amusement.

The history of the theatre is divided into several phases. During the first phase, 1776 to 1819, there are few descriptions. Possibly the earliest notice was published in *The Bombay Courier* on 27 July 1793. An appeal for the printed book of Sheridan's *The School for Scandal* suggests that the theatre managers wanted to put on the play but lacked a copy. In 1818 the theatre was closed for repairs, reopening in 1819 with a performance of Holcroft's *The Road to Ruin*. According to *The Bombay Gazette* (6 January 1819), the audience consisted of "the whole of our society that were not prevented from attending by ill-health or very urgent business". During this second phase, the Bombay Theatre was greatly aided by Bombay's governor, Mountstuart Elphinstone. He gifted a number of comedies and farces to the theatre, came to watch the performances, and supported the theatre financially. The theatre mounted a production of *The Rivals* on the occasion of his departure.

After Elphinstone, dark clouds of neglect and inefficiency settled over the Bombay Theatre. The debt owed by the theatre kept mounting, and finally it was decided to sell off the building. In 1835, Jamshedji Jijibhai [Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy] bought it for Rs 50,000. After paying off the loans, a balance of Rs 27,379 remained, which was deposited in a government account. For ten years the theatre remained closed. Then the public urged the reopening of a theatre, and Bombay's newspapers lent their full support to the movement. Consequently, the government allocated the proceeds from the sale of the old theatre for the construction of a new one. One of Bombay's leading merchants, Jagannath Shankar Seth, donated a plot of land situated on Grant Road. The question of location was thereby resolved, and the construction of the new theatre began.

Finally, on 10 February 1846, the Grant Road Theatre was inaugurated. At first English plays were performed here, although the venue was quite distant from the Bombay Green and Fort area, and the English audience had to surmount numerous obstacles to make the journey. This was the very playhouse in which Parsis, Hindus, and Iranis also entertained the public with their plays.

The Grant Road Theatre was built after the English fashion, the interior portion being influenced by the Drury Lane Theatre. Its dress boxes extended around the auditorium and could accommodate seventy-two individuals. The capacity of the pit was sixty-five spectators, and there were 200 seats in the gallery<sup>9</sup>. The acoustics were such that everyone could readily hear the dialogues and songs occurring on stage<sup>10</sup>.

The scenery was minimal, as a large sum had been spent to construct the building and no funds were left over. Nevertheless, Mrs Deacle ordered "a great quantity of new scenery" from England<sup>11</sup>. *The British Indian Gentleman's Gazette* praised its beauty and interest, but

other newspapers voiced their displeasure. Once Prince Waldemar of Prussia was seated in the theatre with his companions. The drop scene was raised to loud applause, and a painted curtain depicting Monsieur Deschappelles's furnished room came into view. Suddenly the rope holding the curtain broke and the entire scene crashed to the ground<sup>12</sup>. The audience was outraged, and the newspapers severely criticized the event.

Costumes were similarly neglected, rarely being in accordance with the play. When Hamilton Jacob inaugurated the theatre with W. H. Wills's *The Larboard Fin, or The Cornish Wrecker*, he advertised that the play would display "entirely New Scenery, Dresses, Decorations, etc."<sup>13</sup>. However, the audience raised a ruckus about the extravagance and incongruity of the costumes. The Cornish wreckers were dressed in scarlet breeches and white petticoats trimmed with red taffeta<sup>14</sup>. The critics assailed the managers, saying that Cornish seamen wore thick broadcloth and detested petticoats. Although the criticism was harsh, attitudes were slow to change.

In the beginning the theatre was lit with oil lamps and candles, but later gas lamps were brought into use. In 1847, on the occasion of welcoming the Governor's wife, the theatre was illuminated by means of gas. Yet a full use of this invention could not be made, perhaps because the managers were not very familiar with it. In April 1854, *The Bombay Gazette* praised the lighting system, but in December of the same year *The Bombay Telegraph and Courier* called the arrangements "wretched".

When it opened, the Grant Road Theatre was leased to Mrs Deacle rent-free<sup>15</sup>. The managing committee was chaired by one Le Geyt, Revenue Judge and Senior Magistrate of Police, with Jagannath Shankar Seth and Khurshedji Jamshedji [Cursetjee Jamsetjee] as the two Indian members. After some days, Mrs Deacle and the committee had a disagreement, and for three years the theatre was rented out. However, financial problems continued, and to reduce the debt, the government was petitioned for aid, which it refused. The committee was reduced to announcing that the theatre building would be auctioned off in 1855<sup>16</sup>. Jagannath Shankar Seth purchased it, and the Grant Road Theatre became his personal property<sup>17</sup>. After he died the theatre passed to his heir, Vinayak Shankar Seth, and then to his widow, Mrs Lakshmibai Vinayak Shankar Seth. In 1885 she sold it to the Western Indian Flour Mills<sup>18</sup>.

As long as it was patronized by the governor and high-level officials, the theatre was frequented by people of good family. Because of the location on Grant Road, however, their attendance decreased. Some Christian preachers also opposed the theatre as depraved and immoral. The *Oriental Christian Spectator* was chief among those newspapers that wrote in opposition to Hindu drama. In consequence, the theatre was attended by sailors from trading ships, soldiers, and traders. A low class of public came and made the theatre foul-smelling with their smoking. The performances began to start late, and etiquette deteriorated. Drunken sailors and soldiers behaved rudely with the women. It began to be necessary to bring in the police to keep order. This audience in later times was inherited by the Parsi theatre.

In the Grant Road Theatre, the actors usually were professionals. The theatre's lessee, Mrs Deacle, was herself a professional, as was her companion Miss Clara Ellis, although they appealed to amateur actors to assist them. Whenever a foreign actor or theatrical company arrived, heading to Calcutta, Australia, or China, they stopped in Bombay for a

performance. This pattern continued for many years.

The Bombay audiences preferred melodramas and farces, as in the contemporary English theatre. Morton's *Speed the Plough* and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons*, with their mix of serious comedy and melodrama, were favourites at the Grant Road Theatre. As Mrs Deacle had said, "Old wines made mellow and improved by age, / New fruits, but late from the London stage"<sup>19</sup>. It was often impossible to perform a complete drama, be it a tragedy or a comedy. Thus portions selected from dramas — including those of Shakespeare — were performed. To link the different scenes, farces, music, and other entertaining fare were inevitably added. The audience preferred action and gesticulation to speechifying. They especially liked an abundance of songs, exciting dancing, and clowning. They wanted spectacle and demanded supernatural scenes and an element of romance even in serious plays. This was more or less the condition of the theatre in England as well.

Whenever an actor in a soliloquy made a satirical remark on a contemporary topic or poked fun at an important person or incident, the audience burst out with rounds of laughter. The element of topicality was a necessary part of theatrical representation.

The playhouse system, lack of actresses for female roles, inappropriate costuming, worn-out scenery, middle-class viewership and their taste, etc. — all were inherited by the Parsi theatre. The Parsi theatre was grounded in both the accomplishments as well as the deficiencies of the English stage in Bombay. What it did with this inheritance, and how, form the subject of this book.

#### THE ORIGINS OF THE PARSI THEATRE<sup>20</sup>

The phrase 'Parsi theatre' signifies the playhouses 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 a salaried basis for the Parsi theatrical companies. Further, those companies, owners, and actors are counted who, while not being from the Parsi community and not being residents of Bombay, added the words 'of Bombay' to their theatre companies in order to show their connections to the Parsi theatre. For example, 'The Jubilee Imperial Theatrical Company of Bombay' had its origin in the present Uttar Pradesh (former United Provinces). Its owners added 'of Bombay' to connect it to the Bombay companies, hoping to make a greater profit by using this association.

The English-style playhouse on Grant Road was variously called the Grant Road Theatre, Shankar Seth's Old Playhouse, and the Royal Theatre. At first English plays were performed in this theatre, but slowly the audience began to change. As the number of Parsis and Hindus increased, performances were required that met the taste of these new spectators. From 1853 onward, performances of plays in Marathi, Gujarati, and Hindustani took place in this theatre.

According to *The Bombay Telegraph and Courier*, 27 and 31 October 1853, one Parsi Dramatic Corps performed a play in the Grant Road Theatre in Gujarati entitled *Rustam Zabuli and Sohrab*. The plot was taken from Firdausi's *Shahnama*. Another advertisement

under the heading "Parsi Theatre" was published in *The Bombay Times*, announcing the performance of *The Birth of Shyavaksh* and a Hindustani farce, *Tikhe Khan*, on 6 May 1854<sup>21</sup>. This drama too was based on the *Shahnama*, whereas the farce satirized the life of the nawabs. According to *The Bombay Times* of 18 May 1854, *Shyavaksh, Part Two* was to be performed along with a farce, *Haji Miyan and His Servants, Fazal and Tikhe Khan*. The play received a favourable review<sup>22</sup>. *The Bombay Times* of 2 June 1854 published another advertisement for a theatrical performance. With this series of dramas in one season, the Parsi theatre was launched. The main plays were in Gujarati and the farces were written in Hindustani. All of the actors were Parsi youths. The names of the playwrights are not known, and perhaps these plays and farces were never published. All were performed in the Grant Road Theatre.

Advertisements under the headers "Parsi Dramatic Corps", "Parsi Theatrical Committee", and "Parsi Theatre" were published in the Bombay newspapers of the time. A curiosity naturally arises as to whether these names all referred to one organization or whether they belonged to separate companies. Dhanjibhai Patel makes reference to the establishment of the "Parsi Natak Mandali" in 1853<sup>23</sup>. The founder of this company was Pestanji Dhanjibhai Master, himself an actor with the company<sup>24</sup>. The other actors were Nanabhai Ranina, Dadabhai Eliot, Manchershah B. Meharhomji, Bhikhabhai K. Mus, Dr Kavasji H. Bilimoria, Dr R. H. Hathiram, and Kavasji Nasharvanji Kohidaru who later became famous as Kavasji Gurgin. All these Parsis were famous citizens of their time. Nanabhai Ranina and Kavasji Gurgin remained connected to theatrical activities for most of their lives. The rest got involved in their own occupations. The owner of the company was Framji Gustadji Dalal, who was known as Phalughus. For the oversight and proper management of the company, a committee was formed made up of Prof. Dadabhai Naoroji, Kharshedji N. Kama, Ardeshtar F. Mus, Jahangir Barjorji Vaccha, and Dr Bhau Daji Lad.

In the Parsi newspaper *Rast Gofiar* dated 25 February 1855, this notice was published:

Parsi Theatre  
For the benefit of the Patriotic Fund

The Parsi Natak Mandali wishes to inform the public that its twelfth show will take place  
on February 27th in the Grant Road Theatre  
during which the following plays will be performed:

The story of *King Faredun*  
and an amusing farce called *The Thief from Surat*

Ticket prices: Rs. 2.50, 1.50, 1.25, pit Re. 1.

In 1856 it performed *Rustam ane Ekdast*, whose plot was also taken from the *Shahnama*. The name of the playwright is not known.

In order to understand the rage for Parsi theatre, one must look at the Hindu theatre as well, because it too provided encouragement to the Parsi theatre. *The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce* in 1846 reported:

Our readers are not generally aware that an attempt which has hitherto proved eminently successful, has lately been made to revive the legitimate Hindoo Drama in Bombay. The

Theatre in Khetwaddy, where this has been attempted [,] is as yet without moveable scenes and . . . what is usually reckoned the pit serves the purpose of the stage, benches all round rise tier about tier, and are occupied rightly by hundreds of respectable, well-conducted, and most attentive natives of all classes and creeds. We need not inform the readers of Horace Wilson — to those who are not such, the information may be new — that the Hindoo Drama is of very old date . . . The plays acted at Khetwaddy Theatre have been translated from Sanskrit by a learned Brahmin, who appeared on the stage. A buffoon or chorus first comes in, somewhat after the manner of Greeks and shortly recites the leading particulars of what is about to occur. The actors next appear gorgeously and fantastically dressed and the play proceeds — the buffoon through the whole, even in the gravest scenes[,] intrudes his impudence or wit<sup>25</sup>.

Thus the Khetwaddy (or Khetvadi) Theatre was active in 1846, and plays translated from Sanskrit were performed under the name of 'Hindu drama'. This theatre was possibly open-air, the stage being constructed after the traditional folk style and folk traditions followed for audience seating, entrance of characters, etc. It can be assumed that the plays were in Marathi because Khetvadi was a Marathi neighbourhood, as it is today, and entertainment must have been geared accordingly. It seems that the phrase 'Hindu drama' was taken from Horace Wilson who had written a book on Sanskrit drama, which he called not Sanskrit theatre but *The Theatre of the Hindoos*. Whatever the case, it is certain that before the rise of the Parsi theatre in 1853, the Hindu theatre was actively present in Bombay, and in it popular dramas were performed in the local language. This trend must surely have given impetus to the Parsis.

By 1861, a number of Parsi theatrical companies and clubs were extant in Bombay, entertaining the populace from time to time in the Grant Road Theatre. Most were amateur companies. The club at Elphinstone College only performed English plays, especially Shakespeare. However, most of the dramas were in Gujarati, with occasional performances in Hindustani as well. In 1858 the Zoroastrian Theatrical Club performed *Hindi aur Firangi Raj men Muqabla* [Contest between the Indian and Foreign Regimes], which was in Hindustani<sup>26</sup>. Around 1858 a new company called the Indian Theatrical Club was formed. They performed a drama entitled *Nana Saheb*. This was the same Nana who was considered the hero of the independence struggle of 1857. Showing their loyalty to the British government, the Parsis addressed the hero as follows:

Oh tyrant Nana, you've done a foul deed,  
Betrayed your salt and insulted our honour.  
Sinner, thief, untouchable, who brought death to the innocent,  
Your example remains, but you'll meet a bad end.<sup>27</sup>

This drama became extremely popular. Some of its songs were sung in Parsi homes.

It is unfortunate that the plays from the early period of the Parsi theatre are nowhere to be found today. It may be that they were not published. Nonetheless, from the descriptions that are found here and there, it seems that the interest of the Parsis went first of all towards the history of Iran. Taking stories from the *Shahnama*, they made the warriors and kings of Persia their heroes.

### THE BOMBAY PLAYHOUSES BUILT BY PARSIS<sup>28</sup>

The greatest difficulty faced in the early days of the Parsi theatre was the shortage of playhouses. In 1853 only two theatres seem to have existed in Bombay. One was on Grant Road and the other was the Khetvadi Theatre, perhaps an open-air theatre that featured performances in traditional folk styles. The result was that theatrical companies could not present their plays for long runs. The Grant Road Theatre was rented out each week to a given company while the other companies sat idle. In terms of business and revenue, the dearth of playhouses introduced a formidable situation. Therefore the attention of company owners went first of all to fill this lack. They took two approaches. The companies performed in Bombay as much as they could, but then they took all of their actors, scenery, and props and went on tour, establishing an itinerant theatre so as to perform their plays for as long a duration as possible. These performances took place in different parts of the country during suitable seasons of the year.

The playhouses built in Bombay during the development of the Parsi theatre were extremely important. However, when these theatres were built, and their internal and external dimensions, are mostly unknown. Today they have almost all been destroyed or converted into cinemas. Due to the lack of information about the chronology of their construction, the following information is presented in alphabetical order.

*Edward Theatre:* Probably constructed in 1850–60 and still standing on Kalba Devi Road. Like the other theatres, it has been overhauled and is now used for cinema. Gujarati dramas were performed here.

*Elphinstone Theatre:* Built around 1853 and named for Bombay's popular governor. No other details are available<sup>29</sup>.

*Empire Theatre:* Constructed in 1908 and owned by the City of Bombay Improvement Trust Limited, whose principal trustees were Mr Nathan of the E. D. Sassoon Company and A. J. Bilimoria from Tata & Sons. Its seating capacity was 1000. Dramas were still being performed here in 1930, the year in which the theatre's first talkie, *Vagabond King*, was exhibited. In 1948 Seth Kekhashru Modi had it completely rebuilt and put into operation as a cinema hall<sup>30</sup>.

*Eros Theatre:* Constructed in 1937 by Shyavaksha Khambata. This elegant theatre was erected opposite Churchgate Station, and lakhs of rupees were spent on it. It still maintains its illustrious character, being counted as one of the most famous theatres of Bombay. Today it is used as a cinema hall<sup>31</sup>.

*Esplanade Theatre:* Built by the Natak Uttejak Mandali. Located near the present-day Crawford Market, it was constructed of wood. All of the Uttejak's dramas were performed here, including Ranchhodbhai Udayram's long-running hit *Harishchandra*. Kaikhushro Kabra was intimately involved in the construction of this playhouse, just as he was with the founding and operation of the company. The company lasted about thirty-five years; thus the playhouse must have been in use for at least that long.

*Gaiety Theatre:* Its owner was Dahyabhai Dholsaji, but whether he directed a theatrical company is not known. Earlier Nazir had built a theatre of the same name on this site, and



companies that came from England would present their performances at the Gaiety. It was here that Nazir acted so successfully in *The Honeymoon*, appearing opposite the English actress Agnes Birchenough<sup>32</sup>.

*Grand Theatre*: Another theatre on Grant Road constructed by Balivala. He spent a lot of money on this project and, it is said, fell into a financial crisis as a result. Balivala was courageous, but disasters never happen singly. The theatre caught fire and burned to the ground. According to Sharof, the theatre was opened by police commissioner S. M. Edwards in 1907.

*Golpitha Playhouse*: Constructed opposite Golpitha by Pestanji Framji Belati. He formed the Persian Zoroastrian Club, for which this theatre was built. Here the famous drama *Poladband* was performed using various mechanical scenes<sup>33</sup>.

*Hindi Playhouse*: Built by Dadabhai Ratanji Thunthi. When Dadi Patel took over the Victoria, Dadabhai Thunthi founded a new company and decided to establish a new theatre. He bought a large house on Grant Road and began constructing the playhouse in its compound. The first play performed here was the Gujarati drama *Faredun* by Kaikhushro Kabra. Then *Bejan-Manijeh* and *Benazir-Badremunir* were performed in Urdu. Finally the theatre was turned over to a wealthy creditor whom Dadabhai Thunthi had been unable to repay.

*Novelty Theatre*: Built on the Maidan in front of the Boribandar Railway Station by Khurshedji Balivala, the famous actor and one-time sole proprietor of the Victoria Theatrical Company. Entrance prices for the orchestra were Re 1.00 or Rs 1.50, and for the pit only one anna. Both seat classes afforded equal pleasure to the spectators. According to *Parsi Prakash*, it was built in 1887. Today the Excelsior Theatre stands in its place.

*Ripon Theatre*: Nothing is known about it<sup>34</sup>.

*Royal Opera House*: This impressive theatre was built by Jahangirji Fardunji Karaka for seven and a half lakh rupees. Maurice Bandmann of the Bandmann Company provided advice on the construction. The building was completed in 1925, and ten years later it was converted into a cinema hall.

*Tivoli Theatre*: Constructed by Kunvarji Paghtivala opposite Victoria Terminus (formerly Boribandar Station), where the *Times of India* office is currently located. It was extant in 1886, but the date of construction is uncertain. Built for the Alfred Natak Mandali, it was a rough and ready playhouse.

*Victoria Theatre*: In 1868, when the Victoria Theatrical Company was established, the question arose as to where their plays would be performed. In 1870, when the company came into the hands of Dadi Patel, he recommended the construction of a new theatre. The Victoria Theatre was built on a plot of land right on Grant Road, ensuring that this company, the largest of its time, would have no difficulty in performing its plays.

*Wellington Theatre*: Constructed by Seth Rustamji Dorabji and inaugurated in 1925 by Bombay Governor Leslie Wilson. It too was converted into a cinema in 1930.

MAJOR PARSİ PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE PARSİ THEATRE<sup>35</sup>

Without a doubt, the main playwrights of the Parsi theatre in its earliest phase were themselves Parsis, and they wrote in Gujarati. The first play was performed in 1853, but its author is not known, nor is a copy of the play available. Another play, *Karan Ghelo*, is mentioned in this period as being performed by Kunvarji Nazir. Karan was Gujarat's last Hindu emperor, and the play contained certain scenes and rituals that required the expertise of Hindus to advise the Parsi actors on their proper performance. Nazir's effort was successful, but nothing is known about the play's author. Perhaps none of these early plays was even printed. They might have existed as handwritten copies that were destroyed in the course of time. The same situation prevails with the farces and their authors, which were performed along with the first dramas. Although these farces were mainly in Hindustani, their authors were Parsi.

The following material represents the limited amount of information available on the Parsi playwrights of nineteenth-century Bombay.

1. *Ranina, Nanabhai Rustamji (1832–1900)*

One of the best-known writers of Parsi society, he penned everything from children's books to a trilingual dictionary. As a member of countless *sabhas* and societies, he was also very active in social uplift. He ran his own press and was a newspaper editor for a number of years.

Ranina translated one act each of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Othello* into Gujarati for the Shakespeare Natak Mandali; the two plays were published in 1860 by Ashkara Press<sup>36</sup>. The third play Ranina wrote was a translation of *Romeo and Juliet*, published in 1876 by the Fort Printing Press. The translator's name was printed as "Delta".

Ranina's other plays were: (1) *Karni Tevi Par Utarni* [As You Sow, So Shall You Reap], (2) *Kala Mendha* [Black Sheep], (3) *Homlo Hau* [Cheating Play Never Thrives]<sup>37</sup>, (4) *Nazan Shirin*, (5) *Vehmayli Zar* [Suspicious Gaze], (6) *Sati Savitri*. *Karni Tevi Par Utarni* and *Nazan Shirin* illustrate that Nanabhai was accomplished at writing comedy and satire. *Nazan Shirin* is a comedy that takes up the problem of child marriage. A mother and father are worried about finding a suitable bridegroom. The boy's family takes a loan and tries to impress the girl's parents with their wealth, but in the end the ruse is revealed. *Sati Savitri* is based on the famous legend, and the playwright provides interesting facts about how and why it was written in his foreword.

2. *Khori, Edalji Jamshedji (1847–1917)*<sup>38</sup>

Edalji Khori passed his matriculation in 1865. However, it seems that reading and writing were in his genes. His Gujarati non-fiction works include *France ane Germany Bachche ni Ladai* [The Franco-German War] (1871), *Asia ane Turkey Bachche ni Ladai* [The Asia-Turkey War] (1878), and *Animal Lore* (1880).

Khori's dramas were written in Gujarati, and many were later translated by Aram into Hindustani. The rights for Khori's plays were held by a number of different drama companies. Possibly his first drama was *The Lady of Lyons* (1868), based on the eponymous English play by Bulwer-Lytton that was such a hit with the Bombay public. It was written for and performed

by the Gentlemen Amateurs' Company, headed by Framroz Gustadji Dalal (Phalughus).

His second play was *Rustam ane Sohrab* in five acts, based on Firdausi's *Shahnama*. The author sold the play to the Victoria Company for three hundred rupees, and it was published by them at the Ashkara Press in 1870. Dadi Patel had Aram translate this play into Hindustani and directed it, himself playing the part of Rustam.

*Hazamvad ane Thagnavaz* was his third play (1871). It is said that this play was not a success. Next came *Khudabakhsh*, written for the Zoroastrian Theatrical Company and published in 1871. The plot is rather bizarre. A youth named Nadir Shah hears accounts of Pari Banu, the daughter of a wealthy Damascus family, and falls in love with her. He attempts to obtain her and expresses his desire to his friend Zafaruddin. Hearing the full story, Zafaruddin also falls in love with Pari Banu. As a result, the two friends become enemies. They set out on a long journey to find their beloved. On the way, a band of robbers attacks them. Although deprived of their luggage and assistants, both continue on their mission unaided. One of the robbers, Khudabakhsh, finds out that Pari Banu's parents cannot recognize Nadir Shah by sight. He disguises himself as Nadir Shah and arrives in Damascus. By deception and trickery, he is successful in wedding Pari Banu.

Khori's fifth play was *Sunani Mulni Khurshed* [Khurshed for the Price of Gold], also published in 1871. Translated into Hindustani by Behramji Fardunji Marzban, it is considered by Urdu scholars as the first play in the Urdu language. It was performed by the Victoria Company under Dadi Patel's direction. The famous Parsi actor Balivala played the role of the heroine Khurshed, and his father Mancherji Balivala played Khurshed's father. The drama was extremely popular. The amusing thing about it was that the father lays a trap so that his 'daughter', played by his actual son, Khurshed Balivala, is sold off and forced into married life.

*Nurjahan*, the sixth play, was translated into Hindustani by Aram. It was performed by the Elphinstone Theatrical Company and published in 1872. In those days both the Elphinstone and Victoria were owned by Nazir and Dadi Patel in a joint partnership, and thus the top actors of both the companies were involved in the performance of this play. Sir Salar Jang, the prime minister of Hyderabad, was invited to see *Nurjahan*. He was so very pleased by the performance that he invited Patel and his troupe to visit Hyderabad.

Khori's *Jalam Jor* was written for the Zoroastrian Natak Mandali and was originally in Gujarati. Afterwards, Aram translated it into Urdu. It was published in 1876. Altogether Khori wrote about eighteen plays, of which nine were translated into Urdu by Aram.

### 3. Kabraji, Kaikhushro Navroji (1842–1904)

A major contributor to dramatic literature and the development of the stage, Kaikhushro Kabraji was an extraordinary individual. He was not only the proprietor and editor of the leading Parsi newspaper, *Rast Goftar*, but also a playwright of high calibre.

Kabraji alone should be credited with establishing the Victoria Theatrical Company. He wrote his first play, *Bejan ane Manijeh*, in Gujarati for this very troupe in 1869, based on a story from Firdausi's *Shahnama*. It is said that in performance it was not as successful as had been anticipated.

In 1870 he composed *Jamshed*, again for the Victoria. Although based on the *Shahnama*,

it departs from the original significantly. In his preface to the play, Kabraji clarifies:

Still there is some difference between these two stories. If the story of Bejan was full of *shringar ras*, then Jamshed's story is full of *karuna ras*. In the first was amusement and in the second advice; in the first primarily story and in the second more of history; and due to this, although the famous Goldsmith thinks that the task of writing plays is very easy for the writer familiar with theatre, nevertheless to transform the story of Jamshed into an interesting or amusing play is even more laborious than to transform the story of Bejan. Incidents and situations suitable for a play can be found quite easily in the story of Bejan, . . . but Jamshed's story is . . . history without the interesting incidents suitable for a story. If the matter of Jamshed's entrapment in the noose of love had not been placed in the background, then Jamshed's story would be considered the driest in the memorable *Shahnama*.

King Jamshed's mind was swollen with his own power. Due to arrogance he made a claim of divinity, on account of which there was rebellion in his kingdom. After being defeated and crushed, he died in a state of penury. In just these words can Firdausi's colourful story be entirely summarized. However fine a description Firdausi has eloquently given of Jamshed's magnificence and great deeds, still this account is of little use in arranging the structure of a play, because in a play explanations are more necessary than incidents. Which events happened in Jamshed's glorious reign so that the mind of this emperor, appointed by the exalted God, became swollen like this? As he became puffed up with arrogance, what happened to cause the population to rebel and finally deprive him of his kingdom? All these matters this 'Homer of the East' has left to the imagination of his readers. Their absence can be excused in a book like the King of Poets' *Shahnama*, but in a play one cannot avoid bringing these events before the spectators.

That is why in this play all the events pertaining to Jamshed's reign have had to be invented. Whatever sorrowful finale Firdausi described for Jamshed's kingship, even more sorrowful reasons have had to be inserted in this play from the imagination. What is the meaning of Jamshed's losing his kingdom through arrogance, and how did it happen? Great care has been taken to show these things in this play, and I now explain my plan in brief. First, due to the prosperity derived from the king's grandeur and control, his authority and pomp, he considered himself the greatest, on account of which he became proud and arrogant. His arrogance slowly increased, and the flame of his pride was fanned by the breeze of flattery. The Padshah, trapped by flattery, made the claim of divinity, which several innocents with a true heart accepted. Certain cheats with their own interests in their hearts gradually fed the Padshah's arrogance, and I have attempted to show how it steadily increased.

In this manner, herein the king has been placed among ignorant and self-interested people, whereas far-sighted and wise people have been shown as disheartened at his misfortune. And importantly, the efforts of his wise advisors and councillors to break his arrogance have been depicted . . . Finally his arrogance takes the form of tyranny, he attempts to enforce his claim of divinity, and confident of his learning and power, he distances himself from the wise courtiers who are like his hands and feet because of their opposing advice. In the time of need without advice and help, he finds himself in an incurable and helpless condition. His arrogance slowly becomes insufficient, and finally the time for repentance comes, but then it is too late. Losing his kingdom, he is in the condition of a wandering beggar: this example of a natural result is shown in this play.<sup>39</sup>



*Elphinstone Circles. Bombay*



Elphinstone Circle, formerly known as the Bombay Green, site of the old Bombay Theatre (1776).  
*Printed postcard, courtesy Phillips Antiques.*



**Bombay**  
Empire Theatre



The Empire Theatre, constructed 1908.  
*Printed postcard, courtesy Phillips Antiques.*





The old Gaiety Theatre, now Capitol Cinema near Victoria Terminus.  
*Photograph: Kathryn Hansen.*





The Novelty Theatre, constructed in 1887 opposite the Victoria Terminus.  
*Printed postcard, courtesy Phillips Antiques.*





The old Ripon Theatre, now Alfred Cinema on Grant Road.  
*Photograph: Kathryn Hansen.*





The Victoria Theatre, one of the oldest theatres in the Grant Road entertainment district.  
*Source: C. J. Sisson, Shakespeare in India (1926)*





Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, merchant, philanthropist, and theatre patron.  
*Source: H.D. Darukhanawala, Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil (1939)*





Kaikhushro Navroji Kabraji, social reformer, journalist, and playwright.  
*Source: Vidyavati L. Namra, Hindi Rangmanch aur Pandit Narayanprasad  
Betab (1972). Courtesy Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, Varanasi.*



If the evidence for a play's excellence be its success on the stage and popularity with the audience, then *Jamshed* must be counted among the top class of dramas.

After *Jamshed*, Kabra wrote *Faredun*, also based on the *Shahnama*. Like *Jamshed*, this too is a historical drama, but it treats a dynastic period somewhat later than *Jamshed*'s. Kabra presents his self-justification in the preface to *Faredun*:

Among all kinds of plays, those pertaining to history are the most difficult to write. There is a kind of enmity between the peculiarities and topsy-turvy incidents needed for success in the composition of the play and the truth required in history. Just as a poet is unsuccessful in giving a true history — that we have seen with the great poet Firdausi — similarly, if a playwright seeks to stick to true history, then he is forgoing his duty to theatre. If history is shown on the stage just as it is, it will be unsuccessful as theatre. The playwright must use a little imagination, but then in true matters he may not use his imagination . . . Luckily like *Jamshed*, the history of *Faredun* is also small and simple, without many incidents. The whole history of *Jamshed* is that he became a majestic king, ranking with the prophets, but when he made a claim of divinity his vainglory broke him, trampled him underfoot, and caused him to be murdered at the hands of Zohak.<sup>40</sup>

According to Kabraji, Firdausi did not need to explain how everything happened with *Jamshed*. But the playwright, in order to do justice to his hero, must use his imagination or else the character will be incomplete. The author divides *Faredun* into two parts, the first part being largely invented and the second more historically based.

In *Faredun* Kabraji wanted to remind the Parsis of their past and fill them with a new enthusiasm, and undoubtedly he was successful in this.

My main objective is only now, when Parsis have begun to forget their land, their power, their glory, and their feelings towards their people, to freshen the memory of previous glory by presenting before them a picture of that previous rule mingled with amusement and knowledge. And if my feeble efforts are of any help in increasing an enthusiasm for these matters among Parsis, I will consider myself amply repaid.<sup>41</sup>

Kaikhushro Kabraji was a reformer who led the movement for the betterment of Parsi society. He wrote essays, wrote plays, and even promoted music education by forming the Gayan Uttejak Mandali. For the social advancement of Parsi women, he brought out the magazine *Stribodh*.

Kaikhushro not only propagated Parsi history and culture, he wrote plays like *Harishchandra*, *Sitaharan*, *Lavkush* and *Nandbatrisi* and thereby encouraged reformist Hinduism. Although *Harishchandra* and *Sitaharan* were originally plays by Ranchhodhbhai Udayram and Narmada Shankar respectively, Kaikhushro helped to endow them with performability and became known as their author. *Nandbatrisi* was his original composition.

The plot of *Ninda Khanun* [Scandal House] was taken from the English poet and dramatist Sheridan's famous play *The School for Scandal*, but the author adapted it to fit contemporary Parsi society. *Bholi Jan*'s plot was based on *The Colleen Bawn*<sup>42</sup>, but it was a highly instructional play. In it, the famous actress Mary Fenton played the part of the heroine Gul very effectively. The piece *Sudi Vache Sopari* [Betelnut between the Scissorblades] was

said to be based on *Wives as They Were and Maids as They Are*<sup>43</sup> and was published in 1884. However, in his foreword the playwright claims that it was based on *The Wonder* by Mrs Centlivre. It too depicts the condition of Parsi society.

*Parsi Vaccho—Kaka Pahlan* is another of Kabraji's plays, also known as *Sheheriyani Safai*, *Virudh Gamadiyan Sadai* [The Cleanliness of the Citydwellers vs. The Simplicity of the Villagers]. The scenes take place in Malesar and Navsari. *The Hut of the Red Mountain*<sup>44</sup> formed the basis for *Vinash Kale Viprit Buddhi* [Reverse Logic for Perilous Times].

Without a doubt, Kaikhushro Kabraji was a successful dramatist and actor. Each character emerges fully developed in his writing. King and pauper, hero and coward, sinner and ascetic, high and low, lover and beloved are all drawn in their own way. Jamshed's call, Arjasp's intelligence, Jamasp's heroism, Sapanjan dissolving in love, Arnavez burning to ashes, crazy Shehrnavaz, Manijeh ensnared in love's net, Sita in separation from Rama, Tara lamenting for her husband and son, Harishchandra ready to give up his life for truth: all in their own places represent human virtues and characteristics.

All told, Kaikhushro Kabraji's contribution to the Parsi theatre was unique. He deserves credit for giving stability to dramatic literature and performance, and thus it is entirely appropriate that he is known as 'Father of the Native stage'.

#### 4. *Apakhtyar, Nasharvanji Dorabji (1835–1878)*

Apakhtyar was a Parsi scholar and family man. He was very interested in music, being a singer as well as a dramatist, writer, and journalist. At first he was known as Kikadavar, but in 1854, when he started the paper *Apakhtyar*, this name became attached to him. Apakhtyar and Kaikhushro Kabraji were sworn enemies. On one side the Victoria was performing Kabraji's *Bejan ane Manijeh* and Khorī's *Rustam ane Sohrab*, while on the other Apakhtyar determined to mount a musical production of *Sohrab Rustam*. Luckily, he got Manakji Barbhaya who had a sweet and attractive voice to play the role of Sohrab. Apakhtyar performed the role of Rustam himself. *Sohrab Rustam* was the first opera in Gujarati and was very popular with the spectators.

Apakhtyar produced a number of 'sketches' that included music. The most popular was *Kajora ne Sketch* [The Unfit Match], in which a twelve-year-old girl is married to an old man. Apakhtyar's Parsi Stage Players performed these sketches. The impact of Apakhtyar's music was such that Kaikhushro Kabraji began to include songs in his prose dramas, and Edalji Khorī had Ranchhodbhai Udayram compose songs for his dramas. In this sense, the contribution of Apakhtyar to Parsi drama is quite important.

#### 5. *Aram, Nasarvanji Mehrvanji Khansahab*

Several dramas of Aram's are famous, but not all were originally written by him. Most were translations into Urdu of Khorī's Gujarati plays, e.g., *Sone ke Mol ki Khurshed* (1871), *Nurjahan* (1872), *Jahangir* (1872), *Mazhab-e Ishq, urf Bakavali Tajulmaluk* (1872), *Hatim* (1872), *Qamaruzzaman* (1874), *Jalam Jor* (1876). Aram also wrote original dramas, such as *Jahangir Shah Gauhar* (1874), *Benazir Badremunir*, *Gulvasanovar Cha Kurd*, *Chhail Batau Mohana Rani*, *Padmavat*, *Shakuntala*, *Lal-o Gauhar*, *Farrukh Sabha*, *Chandravali*.

Aram stands in the front line of Parsi writers in Urdu, both from the standpoint of quantity

and literary quality. His language however was very difficult. This was because, in his words, "My native language is neither Urdu nor Braj."<sup>45</sup> *Benazir Badremunir* was Aram's first musical play. The second musical was *Jahangir Shah Gauhar*. Its language was relatively simple, being a good example of contemporary Hindustani. Some people consider *Sone ke Mol ki Khurshed* to be the first Urdu drama.

#### 6. Kabra, Bamanji Navroji (1860–1925)<sup>46</sup>

A famous Gujarati writer, his plays number over one dozen, including *Jebanejar ane Shirin* (based on Shakespeare's *Othello*), *Sipah Bachani Sajni*, *Jebanejar*, *Bholi Gul*, *Gamreni Gori*, *Kaljug*, *Dorangi Duniya*, *Bagh-e Bahest*, *Bapna Shrap*, *Faramarz* (based on *Hamlet*), *Vafa par Jafa*, *Diljang Diler*, *Khushro ane Parichehar*, *Bahera Bahela Kaka*, *Jugar*, *Bhulo Padelo Bhimbhai*, *Nur-e Neki*, etc. Manners and morals were the main themes of his dramatic works.

*Gamreni Gori* [The Village Belle] was written for the Alfred Company of Kavasji Khatau. Later it was performed hundreds of times by Balivala's Victoria Company. The actresses Mary Fenton and Munni Bai played the leading role. The play's subject is a comparison between the pure life of the village and the arrogant lifestyle of the city. *Bholi Gul* [Innocent Flower] was based on Mrs Henry Wood's novel *East Lynne*. Bamanji Kabra was the brother of the famous Parsi writer and reformer, Kaikhushro Navroji Kabraji.

### MINOR PARSİ PLAYWRIGHTS

#### 7. Balivala, Khurshedji (1852–1913)<sup>47</sup>

He was mainly an actor, director, and company owner, but he was also proficient in writing comedies. His Gujarati comedies include *Matlab Beharo*, *Khudabakhsh*, *Gustad Dhamar*, and *Kavani Kachumbar*.

#### 8. 'Bande Khuda', Dadabhai Edalji Ponchkhanevala

This Parsi writer is famous for his three plays: *Yazad-e Zard*, *Barjor ane Mehersimin Ozar*, and *Khushru Shirin*. The second of these, published in 1871, was a four-act play written for the Persian Zoroastrian Theatrical Company. There are a large number of characters, including Iranis, Turanis, Zabulis, negroes and giants. The playwright tries to show that true love illuminates the darkness of men's souls, and whoever is immersed in love always enjoys blessings and good fortune. The play is in both prose and poetry.

#### 9. Batlivala, Firoz

Only two of his plays are famous. *Nekbakht Tahmina* was a three-act play written for Balivala's Victoria Natak Mandali. In it the author sheds light on Irani history and customs, and also clarifies the difference between Irani and Turani culture. The drama is named after the heroine, and it is written in verse. His other play was *Kharid Lo Khavind* [Buy A Husband]. It was performed by the Parsi Natak Mandali. Batlivala also published two works entitled *Sarod-e Avasta* and *Firozi Gayan*.

10. *Bharucha, Framji Sorabji*

He wrote *Aladin ane Jaduai Fanes* [Aladdin and the Magic Lamp], which was performed by the Elphinstone Natak Mandali.

11. *Bhedvar, Shahpur N.*

He is known to have written only one drama, entitled *Haq Insaf*. In regard to the performance of this drama, Dhanjibhai Patel says that various girls acted in it. Each one wore a sari of a different colour. The owner of the company was not interested in buying so many saris, but the playwright was also the director, and he insisted that the company owners bite the bullet and lay out the money<sup>48</sup>.

12. *Dhabhar, Dorabji Rustamji, aka Dolu*

Around 1875 Dhabhar, a singer of Turra and Khyal, mixed some of his songs and others into existing Urdu plays and began to perform them. A new company, the Shah Alam Natak Mandali, was established, and it performed *Jan-e Alam aur Anjuman Ara*. Dhabhar wrote a play and gave it a strange, long name: *Jabuli Selam ane Aflatun Jin; Gullala Pari ne Pakdaman Shirin*. The names of several dramas are included in this name, from which one concludes that Dhabhar wanted to bring the excellent qualities of several plays into one. His play was only performed thrice, and then it settled into deep sleep.

13. *Dhondi, Edalji Framji*

He wrote *Sitam-e Hasrat*.

14. *Edu Kalejar (Edalji Dadabhai Mistri)*

On the basis of one of Kaikhushro Kabraji's novels he wrote *Dukhiyari Bachu* [The Unfortunate Child], and on another, *Paisa Paisa* [Money, Money]. He also wrote a musical play, *Gul-o Bulbul* [The Rose and the Nightingale]. His dramatization of Kabraji's *Dukhiyari Bachu* for Dinshah Apu of the Parsi Natak Mandali was the first attempt at performing a social drama on the Parsi stage.

15. *Framroz, Khurshedji Bahmanji (1847–1920)*<sup>49</sup>

He wrote *Pakdaman Gulnar* for the old Elphinstone Company. At first it was thought that this drama's creator was Nanabhai Ranina, but Ranina's son said that the actual author was Framroz himself. Ranina only made a few improvements in the play<sup>50</sup>. Two other plays by Framroz were also successful on the Gujarati stage, *Jahanbakhsh Gulrukhsar* and *Shahzada Shyavakhsh*.

16. *Khambata, Hirji*

*Ab-i Iblis* was his most famous play. Generally speaking, Hirji was a successful actor and director. After the performance of this play, he left the Parsi theatre and spent the rest of his life in a government job.

17. *Khambata, Jahangir (1856–1916)*<sup>51</sup>

The nephew of Hirji Khambata, he had a great interest in the art of drama. He wrote an Urdu drama called *Khudadad*. His other plays were written in Gujarati. Famous among his works are *Juddin Jhaghdo*, *Kohiyar Confusion*, *Mad House*, *Makobhil*, and *Dharti Kamp*<sup>52</sup>. Jahangir was most interested in writing social dramas based on Parsi mores. Because he himself was a good actor and a company owner, his plays were very successful.

18. *Nazir, Kunvarji Sorabji*

*Kadak Kanyane Khisela Paranya* was the only play he wrote, although he wrote a great deal in English.

19. *Parakh, Dr Nasarvanji Navroji*

He was an actor as well as a playwright. *Sulemani Shamshir* was published in 1873<sup>53</sup>. Kunvarji Nazir helped to inspire it. After *Indar Sabha* had achieved such success, Kunvarji Nazir had Dr Parakh rewrite it. It was a big hit, starring the author and Jamshedji Framji Madan. Parakh's second play was *Phalkasur Salim*, which was published one year after the first one.

20. *Patel, Ardeshar Behramji*

He primarily wrote farces. First, he wrote *Nanivai Viruddh Junivai* for the Alfred Company, but it was not successful. Then he wrote *Taqdirni Taksir*. It too met with little success. *Aslaji* suddenly brought him into the front ranks. After that his comedies brought him considerable fame.

21. *Patel, Dhanjibhai Navroji (1857–1937)*<sup>54</sup>

Six plays are attributed to him: *Khaslat-e Shaitan*, *Feraun*, *Tufan*, *Laila*, *Rustam Sohrab* (a musical), and *Habil* (based on Milton's *Paradise Lost*).

22. *Sanjana, Sheth Pestanji Kavasji*

He wrote *Barjo ane Meharsimin* for the Baronet Club. His second play was *Shahzada Erach*. The plot is based on ancient Parsi history. Sanjana was the director of the Baronet Club. *Shahzada Erach* was written for the Bombay Amateurs<sup>55</sup>.

23. *Tarapurvala, Darasha Sorabji*

For the Victoria Theatrical Company, he wrote *Kaikaus ane Safed Dev*. The playwright himself played the white devil, and the play was a success. After a time, Darasha Tarapurvala quit the Victoria and formed his own company, the Khoja Dramatic Club. For them he wrote the play *Kaikaus ane Saudaba*. The third play he wrote was *Dukhiyari Bhul* [A Poor Girl's Error], in which Tarapurvala himself played a part. Then he left the world of drama.

24. *Wadia, Mervanji Nasarvanji*

He was a creator of social and moralizing dramas. His play *Satano Nigahvan Khuda* was very popular<sup>56</sup>. His second play was *Honeymoon*.

## NOTES

1. [Gupt's Chapter 1. Gupt drew most of this chapter's contents and citations from Kumudini A. Mehta's unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 'English Drama on the Bombay Stage in the Late Eighteenth Century and in the Nineteenth Century' (University of Bombay, 1960). Gupt's misspellings and errors of citation have been corrected and English names spelled as in Mehta's text. Passages from English documents have been compared against their originals in Mehta and rendered as given there. Anglicized spellings of Parsi names have been added in square brackets following their Hindi transliterations as found in Gupt.]
2. John Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*, 4 vols., London, 1813; Vol. 1, 152.
3. W. Milburn, *Oriental Commerce*, 2 vols., London, 1813; Vol. 1, 170.
4. J. H. Grose, *Voyage to the East Indies*, 2 vols., 2nd edition, London 1761. Vol. 1, 52.
5. General Department, vol. 38-A/370A for 1836, 13-14.
6. *Ibid.*, 15.
7. *Ibid.*, 16-18.
8. [William Newnham served the government for thirty years, first as Secretary to the Governor's Council and later as Chief Secretary. He was associated with the Bombay Theatre for more than twenty years. Mehta, 49.]
9. *The Bombay Courier*, 10 May 1842, and *Bombay Courier*, 8 May 1845.
10. [V. M. Pitale, *Shrimanta Namdar Jugonnath Sunkersett Urfa Nana Sunkersett Hyanche Charitra* (Bombay, 1916), 316. Mehta, 11, 145.]
11. *The British Indian Gentleman's Gazette*, 30 May 1846.
12. *The British Indian Gentleman's Gazette*, 1 May 1846.
13. *The Bombay Telegraph and Courier*, 17 July 1851.
14. *The Bombay Times*, 30 July 1851.
15. [Mrs. Deacle was a professional actress who had originally been brought from England to the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta by J. H. Stocqueler. Stocqueler was a member of the Committee of Management of the old Bombay Theatre. Mehta, 132.]
16. *The Bombay Times and Courier*, 28 August 1855.
17. *Foras Salt Batty*, vol. 8, for 1858-68; vol. 12 for 1868-78. *Foras Salt Batty*, vol. 7 for 1878-85.
18. *Foras Transfer File*, Register No. 103.
19. *The British Indian Gentleman's Gazette*, 12 Feb. 1846.
20. [Gupt's Chapter 2, titled 'Parsi Theatre'. My chapter title corresponds to the chapter's only sub-heading.]
21. *The Bombay Times*, 2 May 1854.
22. *The Bombay Times*, 23 May 1854.
23. Dhanjibhai N. Patel, *Parsi Natak Takhtani Tavarikh* (Bombay: Kaisar-i Hind Press, 1931), 2.
24. Patel, 393.
25. *The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce*, February 1846, 316, columns 3 and 4.
26. Patel, 191.
27. *Ibid.*
28. [The first section of Gupt's Chapter 3, 'The Development of the Parsi Theatre'.]
29. Shyavaksha Darashah Sharof, *Purano Parsi Natak Takhto* (Bombay: Kaisar-i Hind Press, 1950), 22.



30. Sharof, 22–23.
31. Sharof, 23.
32. Sharof, 23.
33. *Kaisar-i Hind*, 2 December 1928.
34. [The former Ripon Theatre is now the Alfred Talkies on Grant Road.]
35. [The second section of Gupt's Chapter 3. The playwrights have been divided by me into major and minor. The major playwrights have been listed in approximate chronological order, according to both date of birth, when known, and date of publications. The minor playwrights have been listed in alphabetical order.]
36. *Parsi Prakash*, vol. 2, 172.
37. [These three English subtitles are from J. F. Blumhardt, *Catalogue of Marathi & Gujarati Printed Books in the Library of the British Museum* (London: 1892).]
38. [Dates supplied from Pila Bhikaji Makati, *Parsi Sahitya no Itihas* (Navsari: 1949), 436.]
39. [Preface, *Jamshed* (Mumbai: Ashkara Press, 1870). Translated by Samira Sheikh and Kathryn Hansen.]
40. [Preface, *Faredun* (Mumbai: Ashkara Press, 1874). Translated by Samira Sheikh and Kathryn Hansen.]
41. [*Ibid.*]
42. [By Dion Boucicault.]
43. [By Elizabeth Inchbald.]
44. [By Henry M. Milner. Gupt erroneously identifies the play as *Hunt of the Red Hill Mountain*.]
45. Aram, Preface to *Jahangir Shah Gauhar* (1874).
46. [Dates from Makati, *op.cit.*, 499.]
47. [Dates from Makati, 416.]
48. *Kaisar-i Hind*, 7 April 1929.
49. [Dates from Makati, 462.]
50. Patel, 14.
51. [Dates from Makati, 432.]
52. *Kaisar-i Hind*, 21 April 1929, and Patel, 370. [Titles corrected against Gopal Shastri, *Parsi Rangbhumi* (Vadodara: 1995), Appendix 2.]
53. *Parsi Prakash*, vol. 2, 459.
54. [Dates from Makati, 624. Dhanjibhai Patel is also the author of *Parsi Natak Takhtani Tavarikh*, a history of the Parsi stage.]
55. *Kaisar-i Hind*, 28 April 1929.
56. Patel, 368.

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