

The Parsi Theater as a Cultural Channel between South and Southeast Asian Cities

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Abstract

This paper is to analyze different cases from the Malay world, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar with historical methods as well as from the perspective of current musical practice. Constructions of historical awareness and some nationalist or religiously motivated thoughts may play an important role in reflecting on musical skills. This practice-based research carried out in contexts of selected urban areas of Southeast and South Asia involves long term field work experiences, archival work, and interviews with key figures. This paper should help rationalize historical developments and their meaning for current performance practices in the region. The further idealization of musical dramas on stage was and is always accompanied by individuation resulting from personal encounters, accidental shifts in arrangements, and the availability of performance knowledge. The paper suggests an open minded and fearless approach to cultural globalization.

Keywords: *Parsi Theater, Cultural Channel, Urbanization, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Entertainment Music*

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Introduction

Most of the music and dance practices which were confined to and popular among nobles and aristocrats in North India became similarly popular among the upper middle-class after the political and cultural interference of British colonial administrators during the twentieth century in North India's rapidly urbanized areas (Qureshi, 1969). Parsi theatre has been the best entertainment for North Indian people from all social classes in vogue at that time and its successful development was probably based on this permeability of class and cast structures in the anonymity of large cities. It is, therefore, not surprising that Bombay played an important role first in generating Parsi Theater and later in quickly adapting modernized communication technology for the introduction of Indian cinema. The way, how Parsi Theater was embedded into the social and cultural life of North India and how it is related to economic changes among different groups of people, is excellently described by Hansen (2001, 2002 & 2018) and Gupta (2005). Nevertheless, this paper aims at going beyond the descriptive analysis through reviewing literature and written documents. Mainly, the current echoes of Parsi Theater have to be investigated in different urbanized places such as Colombo, Yangon, Penang, Singapore, Johor, and larger Indonesian cities. A retrospective comparative study can reveal the importance of core features observed in the mobility of musical entertainment, of which Parsi Theater was an extraordinary example.

Sri Lanka

The impact of traveling Parsi troupes on the entertainment industry in urban Sri Lanka at the end of the 19th century and onwards has been investigated in a number of local research writings such as Bandara (1993), Ariyanrathna (2004[1986]), Munasingha (2000), and Wijayathunga (1966). Therefore, Sri Lanka's case can be roughly summarized as follows:

Some sources reveal that North Indian music was spread in Sri Lanka during the British rule with the coming of Parsi Theater (Bombay Theater) which largely promoted Hindustani raga-based compositions. These Parsi theatre performances were imitated by Sri Lankan experts in the field by writing scripts and songs in Sinhala language. The Sinhala version of Parsi Theater was named as "Nurti." Prior to Parsi Theater, the most popular music theater type in Sri Lanka has been Nadagam which has got a strong South Indian cultural background. The literature describes that Nadagam declined its popularity after the coming of Parsi Theater which has been nurtured with North Indian classical, semi classical, and folk music and dance practices. The dialogues were less important than the content of songs of Parsi Theater scripts written by following mainly the Ghazal poetic structure which has been widely popular in North India since the second half of nineteenth century. Eclectic features of North Indian performing arts were included in Parsi Theater performances where graceful and skillful song-actresses and actors had inspired the Sinhala people to adopt North Indian performing arts practices. Hansen refers to the young Wijayathunga (1944; by Hansen referred to as Wijetunge cited from Sarachchandra) who wrote:

"Gorgeous and scintillating costumes [sic], colorful and artistic sceneries [sic] before brilliant kerosene-oil footlights, breath-taking spectacular mechanical devices (of

marble palaces floating up into thin air and of wondrous magic treasure caves), rapid dramatic sequences grasped in spite of a foreign language. In particular, the irresistible music of the theatre operated as an agent of intracultural seduction: ... and above all, the haunting airs of the music of North India – all these fascinated and captivated the onlooker.”

Parsi theater activities took place in Sri Lanka during the British colonial times for nearly five decades. Parsi theatre had an impact not only on the use of different genres of music and speech on stage but also on the organization of urban musical life. These issues offer a wide field of future research topics.

Myanmar

Yangon in Myanmar was under British rule at the time when Parsi Theater troupes travelled throughout the world. The most popular theater genre in Myanmar has been Zat Pwe which was wide spread in the increasingly populated towns such as Yangon and Mandalay. The theater road during the British time changed its name into Zi Wa Ka Street which has been once home to the last Mughal king in Delhi, Bahadur Shah Zafar (Hansen, 2018:29). Having witnessed Zafar’s tomb and the Mosque where the Ulama provided some information on the last king, his poems, and some information of his descendants, the picture about the impact of Indian heritage coming from the Northern part of this South Asian country, was seemingly reduced on a number of features dealing with a Muslim heritage. The last king has been a big fan of poems who wrote himself many poems in Urdu Language. Even today, Qawwali troupes are occasionally invited from Pakistan and North India to perform.

The musicians in current Yangon know too little about any Parsi Theater activities which have taken place in Myanmar. Only very few exceptions were found: The nearly 80-year old player of the Hawaiian guitar U Thin could remember some performances he did with Indian musicians. He could find an associated melody which he performed on his Hawaiian guitar.

More significantly, Burmese musical instruments and related music repertoires are still highly regarded and famous among musicians and people in addition to some recently popularized foreign musical instruments and associated popular music of the industrialized age. The Burmese harp and drum circle are only two of them. Musicians play them professionally for various occasions and they are not just exhibited to tourists. Interestingly, some musicians said that they need special tunings in order to meet necessary musical intervals which are not translatable into Western tempered harmonic scales or perhaps with other types of interval systems practiced in various cultures. Ne Myo Aung said that “The melodies are usually played on drum circles and we sometimes tune them in the middle of an ongoing music piece if we feel the tuning has to be adjusted according to our tunings” (Ne Myo Aung, 2018). The Burmese harp player Aung Pyae Sone (2018) also said the same. Interestingly, the Burmese piano player played piano in quite a similar way as the Burmese xylophone (made of hardwood), especially, the many free metric ‘epic’ parts of songs. This playing technique blurs intervals through

rich embellishments and trills, which may relate to the way how a North Indian harmonium player tries to fit intervals to specific ragas that are not translatable to the fixed tuning of the instrument.

Hansen (2018:29), who did a number of excellent studies on the topic, points out that the Burmese theater known as *Zat Pwe* was much stronger in attracting the Burmese audience in urban areas. Therefore, Parsi Theater could not survive or influence largely based on aesthetic preferences of the average urban Burmese audience. Hansen assumes that Parsi Theater troupes have shared the same stages that were used by *Zat Pwe* theater practices. This can be true if *Zat Pwe* is staged and confined to a certain time period within one year, in which there were specific festivals or other events annually held but not all the time. Otherwise, there would not have been space for Parsi Theater in the local theater stage genres. However, the well-established theater halls have been the ideal place for Parsi Theater performances as Hansen writes:

“It was home to the Jubilee Hall, a well-appointed theatre that seated nearly 800 patrons, as well as hotel ballrooms, clubs, and cabarets. Theatre, opera, ballet, and circus professionals regularly stopped in Burma on their tours out of Europe, Australia, and the United States. This terrain was also frequented by artists from India, notably the Parsi theatre companies that called around the Indian Ocean” (Hansen, 2018:7).

Baliwala (1852-1913) and his theater company known as Victoria Company travelled to the court of King Thibaw in Mandalay for theater performances where he could make some profits (Ruppin, 2016: 74). By the second half of the nineteenth century, there has been a much larger Indian influx who could lead to watching a theatre performance in Mandalay and Yangon. Thus, Baliwala continued staging theater in 1881, 1883, 1884, and 1885 making probably different tours to Mandalay. People like Baliwala may have had a strong role as models for following mobile performers, touring habits, and organizational talents to be developed in the context of an increasing demand in urban centres of Southeast Asia. Yet his model also provided arguments against the illusion of unlimited success beyond the borders of urban tolerance and dependence on social conditions.

The Malay World (Malaysia, Singapore & Indonesia)

Parsi Theater became popular in the Malay world, comprising the territory of current Malaysia (Amin, 1979; Jähnichen, 2009/2010), Singapore, Java, and parts of Sumatra, during the last third of the nineteenth century thus creating many imitative theater genres such as ‘*Bangsawan*’ in the Malay Peninsula and *Komedie Stamboel* (*komedie stambul*; Ruppin, 2016:xiii) in Java. Many long-established cultural forms of India must have been introduced to the people in the Malay world (Matusky, 1985) through Parsi Theater from which hybrid cultural activities emerged. Parsi Theater favored Hindustani music forms such as *Thumri*, *Ghazal*, *Dadara*, and folk songs in the performances, probably due to their association with Muslim cultural features. The literature provides some evidences for the adaptation of Hindustani *Ghazal* (Haji Musa bin Yusof, 1953) in the Malay world through Parsi theatre activities. There are a number of previous studies on the

impact of Parsi Theater, namely Ghulam Sarwar's theater research papers and later Tan Sooi Beng's writings about the Malayan Bangsawan. Bangsawan can be identified as one of the successors of Parsi Theater provided that it was tremendously popularized compared to other theater genres in the Malay world deriving from Parsi Theater. As the Malay version of Parsi Theater, Bangsawan was known as Tiruan Wayang Parsi in its first days.

In certain areas of Southeast Asia, Parsi Theater was also known as Komedi Parsi, as the term Komedi stands as a generic Malay term for entertainment (Cohen, 2001: 319; Cohen, 2002). The stories performed in Parsi Theater were familiar to the people in the Malay world given the vernacular translations of these stories from Urdu works were already available in the Malay world before the Parsi Theater arrived (van Kerckhoff, 1888:302-3; Cohen, 2001:319-20; Amin, 1979).

Many following studies took up some ideas from these writings, yet without any profound addition to what is found in older literature. A living source of information is Rahman B. Living in Kuala Lumpur and collecting different artefacts from his time within Bangsawan travelling troupes. Rahman B. (ARCPA2064, 2012) reveals what he heard from early dramatists of Bangsawan that:

“Parsi Theatre is an Indian theatre that came to perform in Pulau Pinang. But a lot of people liked it because at that time there was no other entertainment. No culture, so no entertainment. So, all people, Indians, Chinese, Malays, even rich people all came to watch. There was a time that the performance (performers) has no female, all males. But during the performance, there were females, because the male performers dressed like females.”

Audiovisual Exploration

There exist a number of recordings on 78rpm records comprising scenes from early Bangsawan and Komedi Stamboel as practiced before the introduction of cinema and following modern media.

One example are the recordings of Miss Riboet. The wide spread model of Bollywood productions and the Bollywoodizing of Bangsawan in all its dimensions shows an enormous demand for entertainment that resulted from ongoing urban living patterns and an increasing industrialization of agriculture and manufacturing goods. The freed time had to be filled with meaning of theater which was a big part prior to the arrival of cinemas and television cultures. The example of Parsi Theater shows that far before these sources could play a role, regional and global entertainment exchange was not only possible, but necessary in order to create an urban understanding of staged entertainment. In Yangon, the Ulama of the Bahadur Shah Zafar Mosque in Yangon was reciting a Ghazal poem that is put up on the wall due to the reason that this small exhibition connected to the grave of the last King from Lucknow, to which many people undertake a pilgrimage, is part of the city's cultural heritage and tourism infrastructure to be shown to strangers.

THEATER COMPANY	TITLE OF THEATER	PLACE OF PERFORMANCE	DATE	DESCRIPTION	REFERENCE
THE PARSİ ELPHINSTONE DRAMATIC SOCIETY	No repertoire mentioned	Singapore	1862		(Kulke, 1974: 107)
THE TROUPE ROMBONGAN WAYANG PARSİ (=LITERARY TRANSLATION OF THE PARSİ NATAK MANDALI)	No repertoire mentioned	Penang	1870s	Came to the island and allegedly remained there. After the troupe broke up, its stage equipment was sold to a rich Indo-Malay, Muhammad Pushi, in the early 1880s	(Bujang, 1975: 18–19)
THE PARSİ NATAK MANDALI	Indar Sabha, Gulru-o Zareena, Jahangir-shah-o Gouhar, Laili Majnun, Gul-e Bakawali	Singapore	1870–80s		(Nur Ilahi & Muhammad 'Umar, 1982: 356–378)
THE ELPHINSTONE NATAK MANDALI	Indar Sabha, Bazm-e Sulaiman, Nairang-e 'Ishq, Gul-o Sanaubar	Singapore	1870–80s		(Nur Ilahi & Muhammad 'Umar, 1982: 356–378)
THE VICTORIA NATAK MANDALI	Indar Sabha, Jashn-e Paristan, Anjam-e Sitam, Fitna-o Ghanim	Singapore	1870–80s		(Nur Ilahi & Muhammad 'Umar, 1982: 356–378)
THE PARSİ NATAK MANDALI	No repertoire mentioned	Singapore	1879		(Camoens, 1982: 10)
THE 'FARSİAN DAR MATECK' = THE PARSİ DRAMATIC [CLUB].	Indar Sabha, Gulzar-e Neki	Penang	1884		(Kadir, 1988: 36)
THE EMPERAL [SIC] THEATER OF DECCAN, HYDERABAD COMPANY (= THE IMPERIAL THEATRICAL COMPANY OF DECCAN)	A wide repertoire of plays (unspecified)	Singapore (later on Batavia)	1888		(Camoens, 1982: 8)
THE PARSİ THEATRICAL COMPANY	Only Ali Baba is mentioned	Singapore	1892	Returned after 13 years, which means that it had visited Singapore earlier in 1879 (see above).	(Camoens, 1982: 10)
AN UNNAMED PARSİ TROUPE (MOST PROBABLY THE JUBILEE THEATRICAL COMPANY)	Gulzar-e Neki, Ali Baba, Cameral (sic) Zaman (Kamar al-Zaman), the Farsani Ajaib or Janealum dan Anjo Manara (sic; Fasana-e Ajaib, urf Janalam-o Anjuman Ara)	Singapore, Penang	1894		(Camoens, 1982: 11–12)
THE NEW ELPHINSTONE THEATRICAL COMPANY	No plays mentioned	Singapore	1895		(Camoens, 1982: 16)
THE NEW ALFRED THEATRICAL COMPANY	Plays by Agha Hashr Kashmiri (unspecified)	Singapore	1910		(Nur Ilahi & Muhammad 'Umar, 1982: 374)

Figure 1. Table of visits undertaken by Indian theater companies performing Parsi theater in Penang and Singapore during the period between 1862 and 1910 (Information extracted from Braginsky and Suvorova (2008:145-6) and listed in this table by the author with added sources. This list may serve later summaries and a basic overview of missing data that should be investigated in future studies.



Figure 2. Record label of Miss Riboet's Lagu Java [Lagoe Djawa] of a Stamboel performance context. The Beka company subcontracted her for a production of the Maleisch Operette Gezelschap Orion (No. 15099-II). Photo by courtesy of Gisa Jähnichen.

The Lagu Java on this record spread widely among urban audiences and served mainly as a reference to live performances that were attended. Insofar, the function of the recording industry in that parts of the world started with merchandising of musical live entertainment far before recordings became independent items of cultural exchange.

Conclusion

The Idealization of an early urban theater entertainment through travelling Parsi troupes and the following individuation in various places of Southeast and South Asia is fascinating and points towards future developments. The Parsi Theater appeared in all the described contexts as a cultural channel between South and Southeast Asia. At the same time, this cultural channel was indicating a differentiation in urban music practices that took place along important trade routes and in the centres of modern power. Possibly, the speed of urbanization caused different approaches to urbanized entertainment practices as the example of Myanmar indicates. Another interesting observation is the fragmentation taken from immigrating theater performances such as the example of Malay Ghazal or the application of an eclectic way in composing stage plays. These facts underline the early beginnings of globally expanding performance practices that were only later reinforced through mass media.

What can be said at this point is that the beginning of mass media developments might not have been the initiating cultural change but this change has been accompanied by a process of musical urbanization that included the early use of mass media. Although the missing information about many small and individual movements within this cultural scene cannot allow for generalizations, it seems to

be appropriate to rethink a number of assumptions that connect cultural urbanization with mass media expansion in a straight way. Obviously, as the role of the Parsi theater in all its incompleteness shows, traveling troupes and an increasing demand for ethnically de-rooted distraction from an exhausting cultural context in urban centres of South and Southeast Asia were a necessity and a motor of urban cultural developments.

Taking this observation as an example, it is suggested to shift the focus from reporting on mass media induced industrialization to a cultural globalization growing into an omni-consuming sociality that creates cultural needs on its own. Intense future studies may lead to a clearer picture.

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