

So let's conclude our discussion of female impersonation in Parsi theater. We ended the last session with our discussion of Balgandharva's performance techniques. We saw how in the case of both Sundari as well as Balgandharva they are sartorial, they address the clothes they wore, their gestures, their jewelry they all had multiple meanings that were contingent on the dramatic text and the performative realization of this dramatic text and the speaker social location and interpretive apparatus.

So we saw how for example Balgandharva's rather seductive posturing and behavior on stage including his untied hair, the act of braiding his hair, the act of removing his blouse were not necessarily read as crude but they were actually seen as signs of female modesty. They were seen as modest and charming representations of the educated young women of the day.

His songs especially were known for their emotional expressivity and they evoked certain emotions of romance and pathos of Sringara and Karuna rasa. The voice also was in some sense between a male and a female vocal register and there was this natural wonder that was evoked from Bal Gandharva's performance and that itself created a an *adbudha rasa*, kind of an emotion of wonder at the ways in which Bal Gandharva was able to pass off successfully as a woman and it's important to also consider the fact that the Bal Gandharva and Sundari were also in some sense challenging and easy understanding of the transvestite as somebody who just thinly bales or cloaks an aggressive heterosexual masculinity. The transvestite was more interpreted as a woman or as identifying emotionally with a woman even though he is still biologically a man. And so the transvestite is not seen as somebody who threatens female honor or a family but is also seen as someone who may in some sense also be a source of deception, of the scenarios where you have men dressed in women's clothing who were seen to be trying to access their lovers through cross-dressing right but here you have an attempt to pass off as a woman and not, never actually get out of character right. So these men who performed cross-dressed as women were remained women in their performances. Although there was this clear comment being made in the fact that it was the men the male actors who cross-dressed as women. They were the ones who actually ended up governing and ruling over what constituted femininity and female behavior.

So both Sundari and Bal Gandharva embodied a highly magnetic mode of female impersonation right. So Sundari also his acting method was based on the identification with feminine sensibility and the actors very clearly try to disguise their male characteristics. So for example Sundari played a number of roles which were directed to the female spectatorship in the audience and so he was in some sense for example he played the role of the tragic woman of the wronged wife of the victim and so the female impersonator was rendered, non-threatening because he was someone who evoked sympathy and tears from the audience rather than sexual excitement or titillation.

So it was possible for the female impersonator to portray a certain social ideal of femininity which went beyond social stigma and the threat of violence or disrepute. So the female impersonator was in some sense seen as someone who surpassed any woman in his representation of the beauty of womanly suffering and Kathryn Hansen in her essay on cross-dressing also points to the possibilities of homoeroticism that existed between the female, the male transvestite and the male hero or the male protagonist of the play. So you have for example instances of this kind of romance in their the famous Urdu play *Inder Sabha* that I mentioned the last session where you know one of the actors comments on how thousands of people became captivated and went mad over these beautiful beardless youths. These young men whose voices

had probably not cracked who had still not acquired beards were playing female roles and so there is always this possibility that in these plays especially when these Urdu plays were drawing from certain Urdu repertoire portion of Arabic repertoire of same-sex love and pederasty that you had instances of men in the audience falling in love with young boys who played female roles.

So there are other instances where for example the site of Bal Gandharva playing Shakuntala evoked the lusty applause of the audience. This is again a quote from Kathryn Hansen's essay. So it's important also to note that the institution of female impersonation was made the image of woman publicly available right. The respectable image of the woman was constructed and one that was used by both men and women in the audience. So there was an interesting shift in the representation and perception of these female transvestites on stage because the shift was in the fact that for once there was these external markers of femininity especially in terms of the saree style, the hairdo and jewelry. It's the male actors who played women who idealized and became marked the fashion statements for many other women who came to emulate or imitate these men right. So they actually became ideal models of femininity through their own observations of the contemporary and latest styles and fashions.

And so women were largely kept away from this process of gender formation in many senses. So women were denied employment under in the world of entertainment and there was also an intensification of misogyny because women had to be held offstage and out of the public eye right. So it was really the men in the theater system who and the public who actually served to perpetuate the long-standing control that men had female bodies and their representation.

So the other process that I mentioned in the last session was the fact that you also had non-Hindu women especially Anglo Indian and Jewish women who played actresses on stage and this was a process that went hand in hand with the figure of the female impersonator. So here you see Anglo Indian actresses being perceived as foreign and yet passing off as the ideal Indian woman. So she was in some sense a hybrid right. She was on one hand she had fair skin and she had the promise of so-called modern ways but at the same time she was also someone who attempted, who was made to pass off as a Hindu or an Indian woman. So she could be seen as someone who possessed an exotic Elio and this of course came through in the images of these Anglo Indian and Jewish actresses on billboards and magazines and so on. So the images also circulated and that in some sense was a source of excitement among the audience and the male and the men of the audience especially. So she was a very evident source of spectatorial pleasure.

And there were lots of tensions when Jewish actresses and Anglo Indian actresses were first introduced on stage especially from among major playwrights of the time one of course was K.N. Kabra, the eminent Gujarati playwright 1842 to 1904 who belonged, who was a prominent Parsi social reformer and so while on the one hand Kabra argued for the independence of passive event. He also discouraged their participation on stage. So he, of course, made possible for Parsi women to come to theaters preferably accompanied by their husbands and brothers. He also had crushes by outside the theatrical space for young mothers to leave their children and when he founded the Natak Uttejak Mandal he also offered offered women only performances but there was still a lot of resistance to for example the arrival of courtesan performers on stage. So he resisted the entry of courtesans in the acting profession.

So there was a very ambiguous response from Kabra to the introduction of women for as long as they performed respectable roles they were tolerated or there were perhaps encouraged but then the arrival of courtesan performers many of whom were Muslim there was a strong resistance to

their presence on stage. There was a similar resistance also expressed by the new Alfred theatrical company which again declared its opposition to women performing on stage and the new Alfred company which emerged in the late 19th century was also sponsored and patronized by nationalist leaders like Madan Mohan Malaviya and Motilal Nehru for their most – for their performances because they were seen to be one of the most orthodox and respectable Parsi troops.

And then around 1880 one of the important playwrights Adi Patel, I mentioned earlier was the manager of the Victoria Theatrical company was traveling with his troupe across the country even before railroads were available and he was – he had brought along with him several Hyderabad singers and so he used these female singers in his 1875 production of the Indra Sabha turning fairies into females and so on. Then another important playwright Baliwala brought women into the Victoria company in 1880 beginning with Miss Gohar who was followed by a host of other women Miss Malka, Miss Fatima, Miss Khatun and so on. And many of these women also assumed Hindu names to pass off as Hindu and it was still rare an exception to see a Parsi woman acting on stage.

Then you also had the most important Anglo Indian female actor Mary Fenton who in contrast to let's say the other women who acted on stages Latifah Begum. Moti Jaan, or Miss Fatima was an Anglo Indian woman and she was herself the daughter of retired Irish soldier. She was an entertainer and she did magic shows and she was known for her singing abilities, her accurate pronunciation of Urdu and her acting talent of course. And so she became a very important and famous actress because of her beauty, her fair beauty of her skin, her ability to pronounce Urdu well and to sing and so it's in her that you see an instance of racial boundaries being blood and there are many other actresses too who came from the Baghdadi Jewish community who had immigrated to India in the 19th century. Many of them again assumed Hindu names like Sulochana who was Ruby Meyers, Seeta Devi for Renee Smith, Indira Devi, Effie Hippolet, Manorama for [00:16:43] and so on.

So the Anglo Indian actress added glamour and excitement to the theater which was always anonymous with spectacle. Kathryn Hansen makes this very interesting observation where she says that it was through the exercise of the gaze that the male Indian spectator could possess the English beauty and enact a reversal of the power relations that prevailed in British dominated colonial society. These relations while grounded in economic and political control were figured as a gender domination of the West. The Anglo-Indian actress was now domesticated and subordinated to the Indian hero and the male viewers gaze.

Let me just repeat that part. Through the exercise of the gaze the male Indian spectator could possess the English beauty and enact reversal of the power relations that prevailed in British dominated colonial society. These relations were grounded in economic and political control were figured as a gender domination of the masculine west over the feminine East. Instead the feminine embodiment of the West, the Anglo-Indian, actress was now domesticated and subordinated to the Indian hero and to the male viewers gaze. The inversion became such an integral part of domestic comedies in melodramas that playwrights were required to craft the narratives accordingly.

So you see an interesting shift or reversal there where initially you had a male Indian spectator who could possess English beauty and enact reversal of power relations that prevailed in British dominated colonial society. So while you had a masculine colonial gaze and a feminized

colonized of society here you have the male Indian gaze capturing or possessing the English beauty of the actresses of the Anglo-Indian actresses on stage that would be now subordinated and domesticated.

And as I mentioned earlier there were these after lives of the Anglo-Indian actress existed through the circulation of their images on Billboards and clothes even and photographs and they were an important trace that these actresses left of their beauty and lure. And Mary Fenton of course was herself very famous because she was able to imitate the signs of respectable married women of using the saree to drape her head, the jewelry, the particular cut of the borders and so on.

Right. So that was our discussion of the male, the twin processes of female impersonation as well as the figure of the Anglo Indian and Jewish actress making their presence felt on stage as a way of performing domesticated respectable bourgeois femininity while at the same time possessing a different kind of a Western fair beauty along with a linguistic prowess and singing abilities which made them particularly attractive to the Indian male audience.

It's also important now to then look at some of the folk traditions that have contributed to modern Indian theater. Again to draw from Kathryn Hansen and Anuradha Kapoor as well as Aparna Dharwadkar's work on modern Indian theater. Here it would be interesting to look at the status of Indian folk theater in the history of modern Indian theater.

So here you see that there were many India possessed many folk traditions like Yakshagana, like Tamasha, Raslila, Nautanki, Bhavai, Jatra and Khayal which underwent a very conscious self conscious revival during the late colonial and pre – slightly pre and post independence periods.

In the folk traditions there was a lot of – there were surviving fragments of the Sanskrit dramatic tradition on the basis of common features like preliminary rituals, stylized acting and gestures, stock characters like the stage director or the Sutradhara and the clown or the Vidushaka of course abundance song and dance sequences and the annual festivals which were actually held in the capital in Delhi in some sense about also occasions to revive these traditions of folk theater and folk theater in some sense was a conjunction – a meeting of both song and dance as well as drama. So you couldn't quite separate drama from song and dance and one of, for example, one of the most important post-independence playwrights the Bengali playwright and director bothered Badal Sarkar among of course many others like Habib Tanvir emphasized return to folk drama. So this is what Badal Sarkar had to say about the necessity for turning to folk theater traditions in the field of modern Indian theater. "Theater is one of the fields where this rural urban dichotomy is manifested most. The City Theater today is not a natural development of the traditional or folk theater in the urban setting as it should have been. It is rather a new theater having its base on Western theater. Whereas the traditional village state has retained most of its indigenous characteristics."

So he says that the city theater today is not a natural development of tradition or folk theater in the urban setting as it should have been. So in the process of trying to recover pre-colonial folk traditions that have also survived through the colonial period. The very object of folk theater undergoes a transformation. So it's much as these playwrights would like to believe that they have managed to recover an authentic pre-colonial theatrical form called folk theater. There are certain inevitable transformations in the process because you are drawing on folk theater traditions through the lens of colonial modernity and that cannot be wished away. So even Habib Tanvir another important Urdu playwright says, "It is in the villages that the dramatic tradition of

India in all its pristine glory and vitality remains preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups that require real encouragement. It has not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence of folk traditions in theater that a truly Indian theater modern and universal in appeal and indigenous inform can really be evolved.”

So this emphasis on exposing the younger generations of post-independence India to Indian folk theater. So the belief was that for these playwrights was that we should return to folk traditions and draw from these traditions to make Indian theater truly modern and universal in its appeal. So the emphasis was on an indigenous form and content which would cater itself to the – cater to the needs of modern day India. And many of these debates and discussions between Habib Tanvir, Badal Sarkar, Utpal Dutt and so on took place around certain very important institutions of theater which emerged in post-independence India. Of course one was the Sangeet Natak Academy and there were many complex questions raised at their roundtable on the contemporary relevance of traditional theater in 1971 where there were questions being raised on the relationship of rural forms to modern values or the role of the urban author vizaviz an unfamiliar regional genre and the reaction of the urban audience.

So in the case of folk theater the emphasis was really on the actor while in urban theater the emphasis was on the playwright and the director and in the impulse to actually return to the desire to return to folk traditions for these playwrights was that one must then recover the communal or social spirit of theater. So it involves the masses. It is not -- it's no longer being performed on an enclosed private space like the proscenium arch and encourages the involvement of rural audiences in a natural setting in a natural open mobile setting. So that was the focus of these playwrights.

You also see the influence that certain traditional folk forms like the Tamasha had on let's say a Marathi playwright like Vijay Tendulkar or for that matter the importance of mythic myths of Antapuranas and the Yakshagana tradition of theater mobile theater on the works of Girish Karnad or Jatra on the works of the Bengali playwright Badal Sarkar.

So, for example you see Girish Karnad's play Hayavadana which was written originally in Kannada in the early 1970s which is based on the tale of the transposed heads from the Kathasaritsagara and the play itself Hayavadana was a symbolic drama that drew a lot from several conventions of Yakshagana suggest the half curtain which is carried on stage to introduce new characters and the Bhagavata or the narrator who introduced the story and comments on the action throughout the play and for example B. V. Karanth another important Kannada playwright and director. The B. V. Karanth's Hindi version of the same play again used masks for the main characters and a folk style of costuming and music and songs based on folk tunes and there were other editions of Hayavadana which did away with the folk element.

So you have a very varied response by post-independence playwrights and directors on what to do with folk traditions. How can one actually use them utilize them to provide to offer and create a truly modern form of Indian theater. Then you also had Badal Sarkar's movement towards what you call the third theater which could be conceived as a theater of rural and urban synthesis. So this is what Kathryn Hansen says. So for Badal Sarkar one had to do away with the proscenium arch to emphasize the physical movement of the actors over words and to rely upon the simplest techniques of lighting, costuming, and staging. So there was an attempt to try and do away with colonial, the accouterments of colonial theater and to actually revive a more folk form of theater acting which would do with minimal lighting and costumes and involve the masses, the

audiences in the play and it would be a very social and commedial form of activity and so the attempt was to try and have a mode of presentation which did not rely on any of the conventions of rural theater but was still aimed at establishing within an urban context. The same sense of communal involvement and ritualistic action often found in folk theater.

So you see you can understand modern Indian theater as a hybrid form, a form which true from certain folk traditions but also catering to a largely urban audience and did not entirely do away with Western conventions of dividing the play for example into scenes and acts or the proscenium arch which enabled a private intimate viewing of theater as a spectacle, the commercialization of theater, and of course the institutionalization of theater in terms of the printing and circulation and dissemination of play scripts screenplays.

Hindi and Urdu theater for instance drew a lot from either religious theatrical traditions performative traditions like the Ramlila or the Raslila or secular traditions like the Nautanki or Swang.

So the main source of folk influence in Hindi drama has been the Nautanki together with the so called Parsi theater of the 19th and early 20th century along with the Gujarati Bhavai and the Rajasthan Khayal. Again Nautanki and Kathryn Hansen has done extensive work on the Nautanki as a musical theatrical form which used sophisticated poetic meters with heavy emphasis on rhyme and rhythm and they also had drums on the side accompanying the performance and many of these stories had to do with chivalry romance and adventure. They were also dance sequences by nach girls in which were ubiquitous in these Nautanki performance and there was also something to be said about the fact that these plays lacked subtlety. There was a very clear opposition being built between the good and the bad character.

So another important urban playing presented by the National School of Drama in 1976 was Laila Majnu which again drew a lot from the Nautanki style of acting and performance and you had many other place of course also Mudrarakshasa play Ala Afsar, Gogol's Inspector General which was then adapted and translated into Indian languages into Hindi and many of these plays for example the Inspector General was written in traditional Nautanki meters like the [00:33:21] so on and so forth.

Another example of course is also Lakshminarayan Lal's play Ek Satya Harishchandra which was first directed by M.K. Raina at the National School of Drama in 1975. the Harishchandra story had been popular in folk theater and in Parsi theater of course as well as urban [00:33:44] theatre and so on and in film as well and the play in some sense embeds the story of Harishchandra within a play. It was a play within a play or a nautanki within a play. And the play itself is a commentary on the relationships between the discriminations of the lower caste people by Harijans and it uses the Nautanki form within the play to satirize caste discrimination.

So the characters of the play watch a nautanki. and it's the process of watching the nautanki that they enter into the dramatic roles. They experience it and they realize the mistakes they have been making in perpetuating cast injustice.

So the nautanki within the play has a moral and ethical function of revealing the injustice of caste to the characters in the frame play. Habib Tanvir's Urdu play Agra Bazaar was also highly impacted by folk forms. It was first written and performed in 1954 and it was revived in the 1970s in Habib Tanvir's Naya Theater which was established in Delhi and became a success with

many of his other folk inspired works which included Charandas Chor, Indra Sabha, Prithvi Raj Singh, Prithvi Pal Singh, Gaon Ke Naon Sasural and so on and so forth.

So it's important to note that these playwrights Habib Tanvir and Badal Sakar did were influenced by folk forms and folk poetry and it was – it played a very significant role in the configuration of what is now known as the early phase of Indian modern theater.