

Pakistani Theatre: A Unique Cultural Form of South Asia

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ABSTRACT

Theatre is one of the oldest traditions of South Asia, and Urdu theatre had become the main stream commercial theatre in the middle of 19th century, and the Parsis were the pioneers. However, in Pakistan, the field of theatre has always been struggling to establish itself as an art form. Two different types of theatre had been occurred in this part of South Asia; first, British adaptations presented in art councils; and second, comedy or juggat based popular drama of masses. Parallel form of theatre had also evolved in 1980s, which highlighted different social and political issues, and later converted into NGO based theatre. Theatre societies by the students at different institutes have also been experimenting with the medium, which may evolve a form that could be artistically appealing as well as gain popularity in the masses. However, it needs serious efforts on the part of policy makers. This paper traces journey of Pakistani theatre to analyze the strengths and limitations.

Key Words: South Asia, Mahabharat and Ramayana, Urdu theater, Cinema

Background

Theatre is categorized as dramatic arts, “an art concerned almost exclusively with live performances in which the action is precisely planned to create a coherent and significant sense of drama”.(Chaillet, Guthrie, & Davis, 2018)

The word *drama*, originated in 16th century, has its source in the Greek verb *dran*, meaning “to do,” “to act,” or “to perform”(Iwuchukwu, 2008; Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). Aristotle, in *Poetics*, characterizes dramatic poetry as “people in action”, which is not similar to speech. Plato and Aristotle, both philosophers consider drama as “mimesis”; an imitation of reality.(Storey & Allan, 2005, p. 1). Imitation begins with the dramatist's conscious selection and arrangement of events, words, and images into a dramatic pattern that makes up a meaningful course of human events. The rituals of the primitive man were in the form of dance and mime, therefore those rituals are considered as origin of theatre. Apart from imitation people used different kind of costumes, masks, makeup and music in those rituals. Secondly the instinct of expression forced man to form different kinds of expressions with gestures and movements, so these ceremonies and rituals became formalized in dramatic festivals. In the West their origin was in Greece and in the East it originated in India (Quraishi, 1989, p. 12).

Theatre in South Asia may have originated as early as the 5th to 3rd century BC and was influenced by the Hindu religion. Hindus have great literature in the form of their Sanskrit epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana and these were the major sources for early Sanskrit scriptwriters. Hindu religion had understood theatres as a part of the holy knowledge, and most of its rituals and prayer methods have originated from some basic forms of performing arts (Banham, 2000, p. 472). Main source for establishing the character of Sanskrit tradition of drama in ancient India is the *Natyasastra* (The Science of Dramaturgy), a Sanskrit handbook probably completed sometime around AD 200. It covers the basics in drama, dance, acting, costume, and makeup. Ancient tradition of theatre is linked to Bhārata¹, as chapter one explains that Indira² asked Brahma³ to create a form of entertainment that could be seen as well as heard. Thus, Brahma created the form of drama (*natya*) through meditation and recommended it as fifth *Veda*⁴, and assigned the duty of acting to Bhārata and his sons, and also taught them the intricacies of the art (Banham, 2000, p. 472; Britannica, 2018). Theatre is the most sacred art descended directly from Brahma to human beings.

Sanskrit theatre was performed to celebrate important religious occasions like coronations, birth of children or victory in a battle. The *Natyasastra* calls performances as a visual sacrifice and clearly identifies it as a sacred art. Hundreds of plays were written from the 1st century to the 10th century AD. *Shakuntala*, written in the late 4th or early 5th century AD by Kalidasa who is a court poet and dramatist, is considered to be the finest of all Sanskrit dramas, which was based on a chapter from the *Mahabharata*, it narrates a love story with insight and sympathy (Banham, 2000, p. 474; Viswanathan, 2011).

Sanskrit drama was emotion dominated which roused sentiments (*rasa*) in the audience. It worked as a model of ideal human behavior and had its own aesthetic theory. *Natyasastra* divided the human experiences into eight basic sentiments: erotic, comic, gloomy, furious, courageous, horror, hateful, and marvellous (Banham, 2000, p.476). South Asian theatre is a blend of music, dance, mime, formalized spoken language, and scenes. Here dancing and acting are part and parcel of each other; thus, the word “repertoire” is used to cover the performer’s skills, that means a whole range of dancing, singing, expressing, simulating and impersonating (Gargi, 2015). The Sanskrit plot was normally full of emotions and sensations but always ended on a happy note (victory of virtue). Even a tragedy play did not end with its tragic note, but continued a little longer to recreate hope and happiness. The contentment of the audience could be a reason behind this extension in the plots (Tāj, 1969, p. 12).

¹It is the name of a prophet in Hindu religion and also the name of the first tribe of India.

²King of the gods in Hindu religion

³The creator-god in Hindu religion

⁴The oldest Hindu literature in oral form

Urdu Theatre

Urdu theatre, compare to Sanskrit drama, is a relatively new phenomenon, and considered to be modern Indian theatre (Jālībī, 1989; Tāj). Urdu plays had not taken any direct inspiration from Sanskrit tradition. Urdu play was taking birth and achieving its peak while the Sanskrit drama was declining and losing its popularity in masses, due to the lack of subject matters, repetition and increasing commercialism (Quraishi, 1989, p. 198). *Indrasabha* (“The Heavenly Court of Indra”), written by the poet Agha Hasan Amanat, was produced in 1855 is considered to be the first Urdu play (Gargi, 2015). *Indrasabha* was an inspiration from the theatrical techniques evolved by Wajid Ali Shah, who himself, was an expert *kathak* dancer, composer and had written about the practical aspects of performing arts (Ansari, 2014). Indeed, Urdu drama has a strange history due to the political and socio-economic conditions of India. Urdu drama was flourishing at a time when great Mughal dynasty was declining. Wajid Ali Shah was also titled as last king in India (Jones, 2018). Thus, Urdu theatre, as a form of art was badly neglected and was never able to reach its peak. Urdu drama hardly has an age of hundred years (it also includes the period of Lucknow’s *Saba*⁵), and during these hundred years drama started, flourished and ended (Quraishi, 1989, p. 199).

Urdu had become the main language of the northern side of the subcontinent, which had made it a medium of main stream commercial theatre, and the Parsis were the pioneers, and had been doing theatre from 1873 to 1935 (Gargi, 2015). Firstly, the local tradition of Rās-Līlā⁶, Raḥs⁷, Naqālī⁸, *Bhāgat Bāzi*⁹ and *Mujrā*¹⁰, along with *Dāstān Gu’ī*¹¹ had worked as inspirations for Urdu theatre (Jālībī, 1989, p. 854). Apart from these mimicry of Bhaands, puppets, Swang, and Islamic poetry had their impact on the form of Parsi Theatre (Rehmani, Urdu Drama ka Irtaqa, 2006). Secondly, visiting troupes from England, which performed mostly Shakespeare’s plays or adaptations of British dramas in colleges, had inspired Parsi theatre. Most of the Parsi scripts were an adaptations of British dramas. For example; *Sufayd Khūn* (“White Blood”), by Agha Hashr (1876–1935), was an adaptations of *King Lear*, and *Khūn-e Nāḥaq* (“The Innocent Murder”) was modelled on *Hamlet* (Rehmani, Agha Hashr kay Dramay, 1987). Moreover, the backdrops, box like sets, costumes, makeup, lighting, subject matters and even the direction of theatre (Banham, 2000). Indeed, in the shape of Urdu drama, a huge set of skills, paradigms and facets were playing their role in shaping the modern theatre.

Modern understanding and imagination about drama and its presentation was evolved, in subcontinent, with Parsi theatre in three big cities of the Sub-continent

⁵ It has been considered as first ever theatre drama in Urdu language written by Amanat.

⁶ Cosmic Dance based on the stories of Hindu god Krishna and the Gupīs.

⁷ Play based on the old epics with a blend of music and dance.

⁸ Imitation

⁹ Local form of comedy play with the blend of slapstick and improvisation.

¹⁰ Commercial Dance

¹¹ Art of storytelling

namely Kolkata, Chennai, and Mumbai (Tāj, 1969, p. 7). The existence and growth of theatre in these urban centers was due to the British presence in these cities. Later Parsi producers like Pestonji Framji and Khurshidji Balliwalla, developed a form of theatre known as Pārsi musical. After 1880, Raunaq Banārsi, Miān Zarīf, Vināyak Prasād Tālib, Ahsan Luḡknāwi, Narā'in Prasād Bītāb and Āgha Hashr wrote plays for Pārsi musicals of the Victorian Theatrical Company, the Alfred Company and the New Alfred Company (Banham, 2000, p. 748). Most of these groups were evolved and performed in Lahore and Mumbai.

Parsi theatre, no doubt, had adopted Urdu, due to the commercial reasons. The commercial aspect; to spend less and earn more, can be observed in the compromises made on the production of these plays, as most of these were staged in temporary structures, with inappropriate stage settings and played with unsuitable cast. For example; one of the dramas; "Alā Dīnkāchīrāgh"¹² by a Pārsi musical company, a temporary stage setup near Mayo Hospital, Lahore was arranged. Though the play was in Urdu language, the stage was set in European manner, stage lighting and acoustics were insufficient, and only one female was performing in the show (Tāj, 1969, p. 278). Another reason of ordinariness in theatre was the political and social unrest between the 10th and 15th centuries, particularly in northern India. Theatre no longer flourished in those areas where Islam¹³ became the state religion, as religion did not permit it, so with the advent of 10th century a relatively dark period began in the history of Indian theatre (Banham, 2000, p. 476).

Independence

Lahore, even before Independence in 1947, had been established as a cultural hub of all the performing arts and theatrical activities in the Punjab. Punjab's tradition of theatre which varied from comedy to tragedy and mimes to musical operas, and more. Folk theatre in the form of *tamāshah*, *swāng* and *nawīānkī* had been practiced in rural Punjab, whilst *Dāstān Gu'ī* (storytelling) and puppetry had also been established forms. Storytelling, usually presented as a collage of singing and instrumental music. It is an ancient art in which the storytellers spin their tales, by using different rhythms, methods of expression and quality of voice. Folk stories like *Hīr*, *Mīrza Sahībān* were fine examples of musical story telling based on traditional folk rhythms (Prvaiz, 1987).

After the independence, in 1947, not even a single Pakistani government had shown their interest in local theatre; thus theatre had to struggle for survival. One of the main reasons is rooted in the official political ideology of newly made country, which was constructed on the model of some Muslim state as opposite to the characteristics of a Hindu state (Egan, 2002; Gauhar, 2017; Jalibi, 1984;

¹² A story from the famous "Alif Lailā"

¹³ This is in the view of writer, as the Art & Architecture of Mughals is narrating the other side of the story.

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Talbot, 1998). Pakistani Muslims had to form their own distinctive identity, which should be aligned to the Pakistan's political ideology; thus, the policymakers, from the very beginning, had to reject the elements which were adopted or appreciated by Indian Governments. This has created a paradoxical situation for the arts, crafts and cultural forms in the country, as most of the cultural elements, for instance; theatre, dance, acting, and music, have been considered as part of Hindu traditions.

A division can be further observed in this part of South Asia, as two different types of theatre had appeared, after partition. First, the established tradition of western theatre had been continued at the educational institutes and the art councils and formed the dominant culture of Pakistan's theatre. Initially, it was identified with western plays and their adaptations, while in the 1960s and 1970s a few of the individuals had also crafted original scripts. Although this kind of theatre had captured the elite audience, it was not successful enough to engage middle and lower-middle classes (Bhatti 2012). Second; musicals, comedy or *juggat*¹⁴ based on folk tradition of drama. Jalibi mentions a divide between aristocracy and uneducated masses, as former were leaning towards western culture, whilst later were positioning themselves with indigenous art (Jalibi, 1984, p. 1). Indigenous theatre, popular or folk, reconfirms the class divide, as it flourished outside the art councils and survived by transforming itself into travelling theatre (Bhatti, 2012; Pamment, 2017).

Cinema, a new medium, had occupied the space of theatre. The authorities were also interested in the role big screen to set the national agendas. Colonial rulers, as well as later establishments, preferred cinema over theatre, due to the possibility of centralized control over the releasing content to maintain hegemonic dominance and to spread the ideology of the ruling elite (McMillin, 2007). Agha Nasir (2012), in an interview with the researcher, reveals that the theatre performances were converted onto celluloid and theatre houses had been altered into cinema halls. The detestation for the indigenous arts in the colonial times had its impact on the post-colonial theatre, as dignified families did not allow their females to perform in a local theatre, whilst they felt prestige by participating in the English language plays and Imperial theatre (Bhatti, 2012).

Parallel Voices

Zia's regime had further widened the divide, between the theatre of elite and the drama for the masses, as the cultural activities were under strong scrutiny. The scripts had been censored and that had paved the way for private theatre in hotels, and in provisionally altered cinema halls. The poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Josh Malihabadi, Habib Jalib and Ahmad Faraz, was banned on national platforms, and only a few venues, such as Karachi Press Club (KPC), which was called "enemy territory" by the ruler's representatives, allowed the revolutionary voices

¹⁴This kind of theatre is similar to the tradition of slapstick comedy, like *Punch and Judy*, with lots of improvisations and adlibs

(Abbas, 2012). Thus, most of the serious practitioners of institutional theatre had left the arts council to join television and other organisations for financial reasons, which had created a vacuum and damaged the field.

Naeem Tahir(2013) discloses, in an interview with the researcher, that strict censorship policy to control theatre scripts had obstructed the route of theatre and transformed it into a theatre of improvisation and adlibbing. A number of pages left empty in the script with only a name of any artist written, which mean the performer would be doing some act based on his/her own artistic ability. Thus, comedians with competence to perform one man shows and the theatre of *Juggathad* dominated the Punjabi popular theatre. For instance, Amanullah Khan, a performer, emerged as an icon of improvisational and superfluous adlib theatre. The success of Amanullah resembles to the triumph of Punjabi cinema star Sultan Rahi. Both these iconic performers have ordinary looks, which did not resemble to the traditionally acceptable standards of beauty; fair complexion, westernised looks and modern costumes. Certainly, the audience rejected the colonial legacy in the shape of these icons.

During General Zia-ul-Haq's martial law another form of theatre, identified as "parallel¹⁵ theatre movement" or "political theatre" or "street theatre", had been originated by Tehrik-e-Niswan and Ajoka in reaction to the "military-mullah-elite" interconnection in Pakistan (F. A. Khan, 2000; Mundrawala, 2009; Sengupta, 2014). Most of these theatre activists have been using theatrical means of production to highlight different social and political issues (Taylor et al., 2014). The parallel theatre in Pakistan was simultaneously emerging with the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy and the Women's Action Forum; hence, most of the performances were directly in response to the policies of the government. For instance, *Dard Kay Faasley/Distances of Pain* (1981), by Tehrik-e-Niswan, highlights the suffering of women in times of national bigotry and extremism. *Juloos/Procession* (1984), an adaptation of Indian playwright BadalSircar's *Michhil/Procession* (1972) by Ajoka, depicts state coercion against male citizens in metropolitan settings (Sengupta, 2014).

Juloos was not allowed to be performed in any of the theatrical spaces; hence, it was performed on a house lawn at Cantt, Lahore (S. Khan, 2014). Sircar formed the "third theatre", which is performed outside the proscenium stage by using minimal lighting, costumes and props, with an emphasis on physical movements rather than dialogue delivery (Mundrawala, 2009, p. 88). Thus, the technique and style helped Ajoka to perform in an informal space and also allowed a better relationship with the viewers (Khan 2014; Mundrawala 2009). "Political theatre", according to Mundrawala(2009, p.2), is a cultural practice which combines questioning, analysis and interference with a clear political agenda and demands an active audience; hence, it can contribute to the cultivation of social revolution. She relates the theatre of Tehrik-e-Niswan and Ajoka with the alternative theatre

¹⁵ Different 'parallel' theatre groups may sometimes be in conflict with each other on aesthetic values as well as on the issues of 'language, agenda, and collaboration' (Sengupta, 2014).

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in Britain (Mundrawala, 2009, p. 2). Baz Kershaw (1992) explains that this kind of theatre combines aesthetics with debate to appeal to an audience to create an opposition to the dominant cultural, social and political values. Kershaw uses Raymond Williams' description of "oppositional cultural forms", which are resistant to the conventional norms; however, in the case of the alteration in the power structures in a society, the oppositional culture can replace the dominant culture (Kershaw, 1992, p. 6).

Although Mundrawala(2009) seeks the character of alternative expression against the power of the dictator's rule in the early work of Tehrik-e-Niswan and Ajoka, she finds a shift in their later work, from volunteer and ideological, to one that has become a part of the dominant culture, because of the funding from the NGOs. She argues that NGO-based theatre and training organisations, such as the Interactive Resource Centre (IRC), which were shaped by the neoliberalisation in the 1990s, have influenced the growth of theatre groups; hence, the alternative theatre has been depoliticised and became a commodity by transforming its role from "self-directed activism to donor-driven activism" (Mundrawala, 2009, p. 1). She uses the term "repressive tolerance", that is to neutralise the political ideology and to strengthen the status quo, to work as resistant and dominant simultaneously (Mundrawala, 2009, p. 3).

The oppositional or alternative culture may have caused significant changes in the dominant culture; however, at the same time, it may have been incorporated into the dominant culture, as in a capitalist society it is almost impossible to challenge the dominant values, thus the alternative culture maybe included in the dominant form (Williams 1977). The alternative theatre of Pakistan, although having altered its route due to economic requirements, provides evidence that theatre, or any cultural form, can be continued as an oppositional force within the limited resources. The private places with organised and active audiences can be more functional within postcolonial societies; hence, with the availability of new and convergent media, similar performances can be made in the form of film, and can be distributed to a larger audience.

Youth Theatre

Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop¹⁶, launched in 1970s to promote the local performing arts at the global platforms, had initiated a series of International and youth festivals, in 1992, covering almost every aspect of the creative industry, such as puppets, theatre, performing arts and film (culture 360.org, 2010; Taylor et al., 2014). These festivals have provided the opportunity to the drama societies to perform in front of varied audiences and have also offered exposure to the craft and technicalities of theatre along with the art of national and international practitioners, which had not been accessible in most of the public sector

¹⁶The Rafi-Peer Theatre Workshop, a non-profit organization formed in 1974, is actively promoting Pakistani arts and culture in Pakistan as well as abroad.

universities and colleges, at that time. In these festivals, a generalised censor policy has been applied, which did not ruin the basic content and message.

These festivals have become the constant feature of the cultural activities in the country, which also have worked as a platform for the alternative expression of youth. For instance, the National College of Arts (NCA) has presented entertaining and thought-provoking performances. The University of Engineering and Technology (UET), Lahore, has performed the dramatised versions of some of the prominent international novels and short stories. The Government College University (GCU) (2014) has concentrated on staging original scripts. Natak, the performing arts group of the University of the Punjab, have experimented with short films, television productions and theatre; however, the group only continued with the theatre, because it was possible to carry on with minimum resources (Bhatti 2012). Performers from these campus theatre groups have helped the growth of professional, amateur and social activist production companies (Taylor et al., 2014).

The researcher has been associated with Natak, since 1994. Most of its productions are based on social issues with a focus on the underlying layers of a problem. These presentations normally missed the gloss of elite theatre, due to the seriousness of the subjects, limited resources and the middle-class background of the participants. The idea is to use the medium to highlight the core issues of the society, in a light comedy style, to educate the middle-class youth and leave them with a question to answer by themselves. *Aisa Kaisa ChalayGa/ It will not Work* (2006-07), a theatre play by Natak, is based on the issue of child labour. The narrative suggests a solution is in education; however, the financial condition of their families does not allow them to leave their jobs to attend any school. Although, the system does not offer any solution to this problem, a dedicated teacher wants to educate these kids on his own. Thus, he settles a time with these kids, so that their study can remain unnoticed by their elders. Neither the society, nor the system favour this practice. Besides, Malangi, one of the grownup kids, performed by Majid Rana, also suspects the intentions of the teacher. The play presents different aspects of the problem; however, the climax suggests no solution within the existing system. The play's *denouement* brings hope, as the elders resolve the issue by allowing their kids to study in their spare time.

It was strange that, Natak, as a continuous movement to raise questions and to evoke enlightenment, had faced political pressures, in late 1990s and early 2000s, from both; left and right wing pressure groups. Indeed, local theatre, based on Urdu or Punjabi language to enlighten masses with middle class ideology, has never been on the priority list of the left-wing followers of the colonial legacy. On the other hand, theatre as a medium, with a tinge of critical realism, has certainly not been suited to the right-wing pressure groups. Bhatti (2012, p.101) has also included this observation in his research work on theatre of Lahore. Later, the ideology of left or right has been merged, and it's more or less changed into power politics, and theatre is a space which can provide a space to all kind of ideologies

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and notions to display themselves, and offer a chance to its audience to choose the best suited philosophies.

Pakistani establishment has realized the importance of media to launch and propagate the national policies; thus a media boom can be observed after the Media Liberation Act 2002 (Bilal, 1990). The expansion of television industry has raised the need for trained professionals, so the need for the formal study of performing arts was realised for the first time. Some diploma courses were started at the Alhambra Lahore Arts council, and National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA) in Karachi was founded in 2005. NAPA has been training limited number of youngsters in field of theatre and music (NAPA, 2018). However, it is suggested in the *Cultural and Creative Industries Report* that awareness about the importance of theatre and performing arts should be realized at the level of higher education, so that the degree programs can be launched (Taylor et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Theatre and Performing arts have never enjoyed a respectable status or authority within the cultural and religious value system in Pakistani society. Indeed, it had scene restrictions throughout its history in Pakistan. However, theatre has become more relevant with the growth of media after the Act of 2002. Indeed, Theatre can work as an incubator to raise new talent for the modern media, film and television Practitioners of film, radio, and television, had been benefited from their exposure of theatre. Fundamental elements of direction; blocking, place of action, and *mise-en-scene* to engage audience, along with the basic of acting; dialogue delivery, voice control and poise in movement can only be learnt at theatre. However, its place is quite uncertain within the cultural and religious value system, as it is disapproved by a few of the specific sects. Authorities seem to be least bothered about promoting or preserving this art form. Indeed, a very few institutions and individuals understand the importance of theatre. Thus, it can only be safeguarded and promoted by some diehard passionate persons. A new generation of theatre practitioners with conscious efforts can preserve and promote this art form; however, it could achieve the level of an ultimate form of aesthetic expression, only if its importance is realised by the authorities and television networks.

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