

The Oxford Anthology of the Modern Indian City

Making and Unmaking the City
Politics, Culture, and Life Forms

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VINAY LAL

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Magi minsheykey chit korey pheley diye
 Bukey diyechhey pa.
 Ar chokhta julurjulur, mukhey neiko ra.²²

'The hussy has thrown the bloke flat on his back. With her foot on his chest, wordless she stands glaring in anger.'

Looking back at nineteenth century Calcutta, one finds an element of compulsion behind the humorous compositions of the city's poor people. Humour operated at two levels. At one level, there was their urge to escape from an increasingly depressing situation of squalor of slum life, the unhealthy environment and poverty. At another level, there was the need to protest against what they perceived as a total collapse of their own value system, as well as against the social humiliation of inequality which they faced in daily living. Their songs and rhymes, their dances and pantomimes concealed a certain malice. Yet, these forms of creativity allowed expression of aggression—without becoming a direct threat to the establishment. The lampooning of the foppish babus in the street songs, the caricatures of the rich gentry in the *sawngs*, the demystification of the deities and romantic heroes and heroines, afforded them a temporary feeling of superiority. It was the in-group's sense of having the last laugh at the expense of the outer group.

In the process, they created as it were a second world: a second life outside the official world of the respectable, educated classes. It was an irreverent and iconoclastic world in opposition to the *bhadralok* world of strict rituals and stiff restraints. Basically, there was a sense of anguish and distress at the social behaviour of the rich and the powerful, a sense of being let down by those to whom they had always looked up for social norms and guidance. There was also the feeling of defeat and frustration in their inability to cope with the disorderliness of city life, a failure to switch over from one matrix to another. Deep down perhaps they were a sad people, and chose the line of least resistance—laughter. As Abraham Lincoln once said: 'I laugh because I must not cry.'

—slightly abridged from the version published in *India International Centre Quarterly*, 17, nos 3–4 (Winter 1990–91), pp. 187–208.

²² Mahendranath Dutta, *Kolikatar Puratan Kabini O Pratha*, Calcutta, 1983, pp. 29–30.

A Place of Public Amusement: Locations, Spectators, and Patrons of the Parsi Theatre in 19th-Century Bombay

In 1840, 455 of Bombay's leading citizens submitted a petition to the Governor, Sir James Carnac, requesting the construction of a new theatre.

The Humble Memorial of the undersigned Inhabitants of Bombay and others—Sheweth—

That your Memorialists are of opinion that the General public feeling in Bombay is Favourable to the erection of a Theatre for the purpose of Dramatic entertainment. There being no place of public amusement in the Island and that such a measure would promote good humour and tend to induce a desirable tone of feeling in Society at large, Your Memorialists regret deeply that the former Bombay Theatre which was identified with so many pleasant recollections should have been destroyed, and fallen a sacrifice to debt and want of efficient patronage.¹

The names of Jagannath Shankarseth and Framji Cowasji, prominent merchant princes, headed the list of backers for the project. After a campaign carried out in the pages of *The Bombay Gazette* and in meetings in the Town Hall, the government agreed to underwrite the project. But the new theatre remained an unrealized dream until Shankarseth donated a building site on Grant Road. Along with a generous contribution by Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy, the shortfall was met and in 1846 the Grant Road Theatre opened, the fruition of these collective energies.

Thus began a new epoch in the urban life of Bombay and its public culture. Initially it was Bombay's merchants who pressed for theatre as an enhancement of civil society, a source of 'good humour' and 'desirable tone of feeling.' Enlarging upon their commercial interests, they sought

¹ Kumudini Arvind Mehta, *English Drama on the Bombay Stage in the Late Eighteenth Century and in the Nineteenth Century* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Bombay, 1960).

a physical site for cultural transactions, a 'place of public amusement,' as befitting the rising profile of the city and their own place within it. Yet once the theatre was built, performers, audiences, and patrons from diverse groups sought to establish their claims to it as a public good. The playhouse opened under English management, and the first plays performed there were in English. Before long however, the Grant Road Theatre was recognized as an ideal locus for Indian theatrical performances. Beginning in 1853, a group of professional players from Sangli, Maharashtra, staged dramas in the new theatre based on the Hindu epics. Parsi dramatic clubs similarly chose this site for their fledgling efforts, and for the next three decades, Grant Road and its theatres were synonymous with the Parsi theatre.

Here were offered unusual possibilities for theatrical production and reception. A proscenium arch rose high above the stage, positioning the players within an expansive picture frame and separating them from the audience. Massive painted curtains, sets that shifted between scenes, and lavish costumes created a sumptuous atmosphere filled with exotic images. Gas lights placed on the apron of the stage lit the players from below, accentuating their gestures in uncanny ways. Seats arranged by class and row, announced times for starting and stopping, and amenities such as refreshment rooms and intervals added a sense of decorum to the proceedings in the hall. Theatricality had suddenly reached a new level.

If the playhouse with its proscenium stage defined the interior spatial set-up, it also altered the older fluid geographies of performance. The physicality of the playhouse in the urban environment allowed the theatre to assume an enlarged social value. Beginning with the Grant Road Theatre, theatrical entertainments were relocated within particular zones of the city. Theatre-goers encountered each other in new spatial configurations that spiralled outward from the purpose-built theatre hall to the entertainment district in which the hall was situated and the larger patterns of traffic between the district and the city. Not only in its innovative visual economy, but in the ecological relationships in which it was embedded, the Parsi theatre introduced new equations between leisure and location.

Herein I consider the set of spatial transformations connected to urban expansion, the development of neighborhoods, the consolidation of the mercantile class, and shifts in public performance. As Bombay developed from a colonial port into a major industrial center, the city's theatre houses in their specific urban locations became indices of emerging social and cultural formations. Subsequently I examine the role of the *shetias*

as cultural agents in the burgeoning metropolis, a group critical to both the growth of the city and the theatre. In the final section, I assemble a picture of audience participation in the urban theatre, based on a variety of historical sources.

Urban Growth and Theatre Houses

In the century between 1776 when the first western-styled theatre house opened on the Bombay Green and 1879 when the Gaiety Theatre was built near Victoria Terminus, Bombay passed through a period of extraordinary prosperity and expansion. Bombay supplanted Surat as India's leading harbor on the Arabian Sea around 1750. With the British conquest of the Maratha territories in 1818, the city usurped Poona's stature as political capital of western India. Both events triggered large-scale emigrations to Bombay, of Gujarati merchants and hinterland Maharashtrians respectively. The population numbered 156,987 in 1816, having risen from 16,000 a century earlier.² Less than forty years later, it had grown more than fivefold. In 1864, on the threshold of the Parsi theatre era, the first official census reported that the inhabitants of the city totalled 816,562, qualifying it for the proud title *urbs prima in Indis*.

This population was notable from the outset for its racial, religious, and linguistic heterogeneity. A small British community, numbering no more than one percent of the total population, comprised mostly men in colonial service. The mercantile communities from Gujarat formed approximately 25% of the city's population. Included within this were the influential Parsis (6% of the total population of Bombay). Muslims constituted 20% of the populace; Hindus made up 65%. Indian Christians and Jews, as well as Armenians, Arabs, Malays, and other groups lent an unusual degree of diversity to the city's character.

Initially the town grew around a central open space, called the Bombay Green, which lay adjacent to the East India Company's fortified Castle. When the European zone was enclosed by walls in 1716, the Green formed the node at the intersection of the main streets leading from the three city gates. Renamed in the 19th c. Elphinstone Circle and now known as Horniman Circle, the Bombay Green formed the focus of social life in the British settlement. It was here that Bombay's first theatre was built. An observer, W. Milburn, described the vicinity in 1813:

² Meera Kosambi, *Bombay in Transition: The Growth and Social Ecology of a Colonial City, 1880-1980* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1986), 35-6.

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.³

The theatre on the Green, also known as the Bombay Amateur Theatre, opened in 1776 and served as the principal stage for amateur theatricals and professional touring companies until its closure in 1835. Its location in the Green not only allowed for easy access by Europeans living close by, it signalled the place of theatrical spectatorship within the round of social and cultural activities that gave the port city its colonial character. The Green was for over a hundred years the 'scene of so many balls, reviews and theatrical displays.'⁴

From the early days, geographical separation along racial lines divided the southern part of the island, the Fort with its European businesses and residences, from the Native Town to the north. The north-south cleavage reflected the unequal relations between the British colonizers and the people they ruled. On the western side of the island, a large open *maidan* known as the Esplanade physically separated the two quarters. To the east, however, the northern section of the Fort acted as an intermediate zone. Bisecting the Fort along an east-west axis was Church Gate Street, leading up to the Bombay Green. Gradually the north Fort was vacated of its poorer residents and became dominated by wealthy merchants, particularly Parsis, Banias, and Bohras. It was here that the Wadias, Camas, and Jeejeebhoy and other prominent mercantile families built their large townhouses and ran their businesses. These affluent residents were among the first Indians to evince an interest in theatre, and they were well situated to observe the fondness of the British for the stage, being so close to the Bombay Green.

After the great fire of 1803, which destroyed much of the northern Fort district, Indian merchants were encouraged to inhabit a separate Native Town, as existed in Calcutta and Madras. With the growth of banking, manufacturing, and retail trade, this area expanded rapidly in the early 19th century, extending to the north. Ethnic enclaves formed marking differences of nationality, religion, and caste. Although there was no central business district, specific localities became known for

³ W. Milburn, *Oriental Commerce* (1813), 170, cited in Mehta, 6.

⁴ Mariam Dossal, *Imperial Designs and Indian Realities: The Planning of Bombay City, 1845-1875* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1991), 19.

artisanal production or trade in certain commodities. Because of this pattern of residential and commercial segregation, Bombay's communities interacted primarily in the marketplaces, bazaars, open spaces like *maidans* and foreshore beaches, or at the judicial and civic centers where issues of the day were discussed. Another site for interaction, in time, would be the theatre.

A key factor in the development of central and northern Bombay was the cutting of roads across lands reclaimed from the sea's flooding. After the Hornby Vellard was built in 1784, the low-lying flatlands became available for settlement and construction. One of the most significant reclamation projects was the completion of Grant Road in 1839. It was built through a tract of open country along a parapet wall at a high elevation. The flats alongside Grant Road remained barren wastes where the town deposited its refuse. To the north of Grant Road began the New Town, including the populous neighborhood of Kamathipura. Later synonymous with the red light district, Kamathipura was named for the Kamathis, artisans and laborers from the Nizam's dominions around Hyderabad who emigrated to Bombay at the end of the 18th century.⁵

It was on Grant Road, at the growing edge of the Native Town and far from the European quarter, that the first theatre was built. Constructed on a plot donated by the banker Jagannath Shankarseh, the theatre was welcomed after the interregnum between 1835 and 1846, during which Bombay had no playhouse. Known variously as the Theatre Royal, the Badshahi Natyashala, the Shankarseh Natyashala, or simply the Play House (*pila haus*), the Grant Road Theatre was the sole building on the street at the time of its opening. According to K.N. Kabra, the influential journalist, it stood 'as an oasis in the desert.'⁶ The area was so desolate that once returning at night with his father in a carriage, Kabra was assaulted by a thief prowling in the dark, who escaped with his gold-embroidered cap. English society, although initially the intended audience for the theatre's shows, had to traverse a substantial distance to come from the Fort or Malabar Hill. The area rapidly developed into a thriving commercial district, but it remained distinctly down-market.

The shift of the theatre to this part of the city suited the Indian theatregoing public, whose numbers were on the rise. Grant Road was

⁵ Sharda Dwivedi and Rahul Mehrotra, *Bombay: The Cities Within* (Bombay: India Book House, 1995), 49-62.

⁶ Dwivedi and Mehrotra, 62.

shortly populated by a number of other theatre houses including the Elphinstone, the Victoria Theatre, the Hindi Natyashala, the Grand Theatre, the Ripon and others. By 1906, five or six theatres on Grant Road were in active use and Maclean's *Guide to Bombay* recommended their performances to the curious European traveler.⁷ This district, separate from the better neighborhoods of South Bombay, suited theatre managers intent on attracting a larger, more heterogeneous audience. Proximity to Khetwadi, Mazagaon, and Girgaum ensured that the Hindu middle classes would have ready access, just as the location of Market, Umarchadi, and Mandvi nearby invited Muslims. As textile mills mushroomed in Tardeo adjoining Grant Road to the west, workers availed of the chance to amuse themselves after long hours of employment. The Grant Road area was like a traditional Indian town where residential, commercial, social and religious activities were integrated into a tightly knit urban fabric.

With the employment of professional actors and actresses, the value of segregating entertainments in a separate district also increased. Theatre personnel whose reputations and nocturnal activities might be questionable were separated from the neighborhoods of their well-to-do patrons. The affluent public was inconvenienced by the rigors of travel to the Grant Road entertainment district. But they also could take some satisfaction in the compartmentalization between their everyday world and the tainted *demi monde* of the theatre district.

Although the shift to Grant Road marked a broadening of the class base of theatrical spectatorship, the Bombay theatre world did not abandon its ties to elite patronage, nor did it confine its activities to the Native Town. An impressive wave of urban development and architectural activity altered the character of the Fort section of Bombay beginning in the 1860s. The construction of large public buildings was now embraced as a visible expression of Britain's hold over its colony in the age of empire. The Secretariat building was completed in 1874, the vast Law Courts in 1878, and the University clock tower in 1878, all based on the Gothic Revival style. At the site of the old Bori Bandar railway station the massive Victoria Terminus arose between 1878 and 1887. This feat of modern engineering was the largest building constructed by the British in India. Attesting to the Victorian synthesis of science, industry, and commerce, these monumental edifices were located at the heart of the administrative and commercial areas of

the city. Their magnificence created the imperial aura of the city that radiated outward, traveling along with the Parsi theatrical companies as they toured South and Southeast Asia.

Eager to plant themselves firmly in this part of the city, Parsi company owners opened two large theatres near the Victoria Terminus. The first was the Gaiety Theatre built by C.S. Nazir, a leading Parsi actor-manager, in 1879. Designed by an architect named Campbell, its stage dimensions were seventy by forty feet with a curtain height of twenty-two feet. The Governor, Sir Richard Temple, took responsibility for supervising the crafting of the painted drop scene. The image chosen was one to reinforce civic pride: 'a fine view of Back Bay with the new public buildings of which the High Courts, the Clock Tower, and the Secretariat are the most prominent—from Malabar Point.'⁸ The Novelty Theatre, constructed by the Victoria Company's owners Baliwala and Moghul in 1887, was even larger, with a stage size of ninety feet by sixty-five feet. It seated fourteen hundred people and featured a drop scene by the German painter Maurice Freyberger. The Novelty was torn down and the Excelsior Theatre erected on the same spot in 1909.

The extravagant fittings of these new theatres generated rivalry on Grant Road, where the old theatre houses were given a quick refurbishing. The foremost location of the Gaiety and Novelty renewed elite interest in the productions of the Parsi theatre. Wacha hailed the Gaiety as the 'first theatre of any civilised pretensions,' crediting much of its appeal to its 'eligible place.'⁹ Both houses became the leading venues for Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi theatrical performances. They also were leased by dramatic artists from England who stopped in Bombay on their global tours. The two halls were used for early cinematic exhibitions as well. After their first shows at Watson's Hotel, the Lumiere Brothers moved their Cinematographe to the Novelty in 1896.

The three areas in which theatre houses came up in Bombay mapped out distinct locations in the urban landscape. Grant Road was a busy cross-town thoroughfare, whereas the Bombay Green and Victoria Terminus area were each hubs where commercial and civic activity converged. Each facilitated a high degree of public access, but in distinctive ways. In the days when Bombay was a small outpost, the theatre was next to the church at the heart of the colonial quarter. As the city expanded to

⁸ *Times of India* (Bombay), Jan. 7, 1880.

⁹ D.E. Wacha, *Shells from the Sands of Bombay, Being My Recollections and Reminiscences—1860–1875* (Bombay: Bombay Chronicle Press, 1920), 342–3.

⁷ James Mackenzie Maclean, *A Guide to Bombay: Historical, Statistical, and Descriptive*, 31st edition (Bombay: Bombay Gazette Steam Press, 1906), 336.

the north, the entertainment district shifted to accommodate its growing public in the Native Town. Then as Bombay acquired its metropolitan skyline and became linked to the hinterland, the city center assumed renewed significance as a focus for leisure and sociability.

Enclosed in the European-style playhouse, the Parsi theatre presented new solutions to the problems of boundaries and visibility. The building's design symbolized status and order; its specified timings required discipline even in the pursuit of leisure. As an enclosed physical structure, the theatre was capable of restricting access. Through its internal compartmentalization it could separate groups by assigned seating within the pit or orchestra, galleries, and boxes. Yet its location within a densely populated area, crisscrossed by the commerce of multiple groups, also made it available and connected to the world outside. The space of theatre was inscribed at times with different, even opposed, meanings. Sometimes it tended to enclosure and separation, working in the interests of class differentiation. At others it yielded to openness and excess, merging into the liminal space of its surroundings. The use made of the theatre space depended on the desires of its patrons, performers, and audiences, who themselves were extremely diverse.

Commerce, Theatre, and Cultural Patronage

The early Indian patrons of theatre in Bombay were upper class men whose gains had been acquired through trade and finance. A colonial city based on commerce and access to the sea, Bombay lacked both an aristocracy with strong ties to the agricultural hinterland and a priestly caste of Brahmins to legitimate their regime. Many Parsis did become large landowners in Bombay, both as a result of *inam* grants from the British and from their own investments in real estate, but their holdings did not extend beyond the city proper.

The mercantile elite, or *shetia* class, consisted of families of diverse caste, regional, and religious origins. These were, in the main, communities and castes that had long been involved in trade in western India. They had been invited to Bombay, as in the case of Parsis from Surat in the 17th c., or were attracted to emigrate to take advantage of the economic opportunities and political stability attendant upon British rule. Collaboration with the British earned them unprecedented profits as well as the dubious honor of becoming 'compradors'.¹⁰

¹⁰ Amalendu Guha, 'The Comprador Role of Parsee Seths,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5: 48 (Nov. 28, 1970), 1933-6.

Most numerous among the *shetias* were members of the Parsi community. As immigrants from Iran in the 8th c., Parsis had maintained their distinct faith of Zoroastrianism, while adopting the Gujarati language and other customs of the surrounding society. Before the 18th century, their economic activities were diverse, with many engaging in agriculture and artisanal occupations such as weaving. A persistent trading practice among a section of the Parsis linked India and the Islamic world in premodern times. Hindu and Jain Banias from Gujarat were the second important group, which included several subcastes. The third important trading community was the Bohra community, converts from Hinduism to Islam, who also were present in Bombay from the 18th century on. Later they were joined by the Memons and Khojas. These groups established the markedly Gujarati character of the *shetia* class; the Gujarati language became the lingua franca for business negotiations in the city. Non-Gujarati mercantile groups also were represented among the *shetias*. Jagannath Shankarseth came from the Maharastrian Sonar caste of goldsmiths and jewellers. The shipbuilding Konkani Muslims, descendants of Arab seafarers, and Baghdadi Jews, 19th-century immigrants from Iraq, were other important trading communities.¹¹

There were many avenues to profit for this class. In the 18th century, a number of wealthy Indian brokers financed British military expansion and territorial conquest. Middlemen staffed the Company's houses of agency and supplied servants to its private or 'country' trade. Indian merchants disposed of imported goods on local markets and obtained new goods for export. They also supplied the ships, on which the entire trade was dependent; most ships were built by one family, the Wadias, who migrated from Surat to Bombay in 1735. As a result of these new kinds of transactions, by the 1780s a commercial revolution had transformed western India. When the Company lost its monopoly over the lucrative China trade in 1833, new opportunities burgeoned for the Bombay *shetias*. They made enormous fortunes in opium and cotton and established a number of large merchant houses. Later in the century, while some families lost fortunes in the crash of the cotton shares market, others generated new wealth by investing in the manufacture of textiles.

By the beginning of the 19th century, the *shetias* had begun to crystallize into a self-conscious group. Their physical proximity symbolized the tight network of relationships that ensured mutual benefit. *Shetia* presence

¹¹ Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India: Politics and Communities in Bombay City, 1840-1885* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 2-16.

became inscribed in the public space of the city as the great families clustered in the Fort area. By the 1830s, they were uniting in ways that went beyond simple commercial collaboration. They founded the Bombay Chamber of Commerce, and through this body petitioned for the construction of roads and bridges. Three years later they petitioned Parliament to protect the trade in opium. A wider set of concerns were voiced in the request to the House of Commons for Indian representation on the Bench of Justices, which resulted in the appointment of 13 Indians as Justices of the Peace in 1834. By the 1850s, most of the leading *shetias* had become Justices, and this became an avenue for direct involvement in the municipal administration of the city in the sixties and seventies.¹²

During this period of expanding civic activity, the *shetias* also participated as spectators at the English-language theatre. It is likely that in the exchange of sociability and mutual hospitality, *shetias* were first invited to the European theatre, just as their colleagues had been hosted at entertainments like the Nautch. The theatre was perceived as one arena in which social intercourse with both British officialdom and the European business community could be sustained. By 1821 they had begun attending the Bombay Theatre on the Green, and in 1830 they played a major role in its renovation. Among the box seat holders at the Bombay Amateur Theatre in 1821 was one Balcrustnath Sunkerset. Hormusji Bomanji and Sorabji Framji attended *The Rivals* there in 1822. When an appeal was launched in 1830 for funds to refurbish the aging theatre house, eleven Indians—all prominent *shetias*—appeared on the list of fifty donors. Maneckji Cursetji, whose services had been solicited for the renovation effort, was issued a silver ticket of perpetual free admission. Advertisements for the Bombay Amateur Theatre were posted in Gujarati in the weekly newspaper *Bombay Hulkaru and Vartman*, an indication of wider attendance among Indian spectators in the 1830s.¹³ *Shetia* support for the Grant Road Theatre showed the nexus between civic leadership and theatre as an object of cultural philanthropy, marking the mercantile class for their status and taste.

Simultaneously it laid the foundation for much broader class participation in the years to come. Whereas the Parsi theatre companies were largely financed by *shetias*, who bought and sold shares in them

¹² J.C. Masselos, *Towards Nationalism: Group Affiliations and the Politics of Public Associations in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1974), 11–18; Dobbin, 21–5.

¹³ Mehta, 46–8.

and stood to gain or lose sizeable amounts of money, the Parsi theatre depended heavily on the emerging middle class of Bombay for its audience and corpus of dramas. Members of the middle class were distinguished more by their educational histories and public roles than by their sources of income. Some continued to carry on commercial activities or priestly duties; others were pioneers in professions such as law, education, medicine, and journalism. Although the *shetias* who flourished early in the century were informally acquainted with European knowledge and attitudes, the middle-class group were distinctly marked by formal induction into English education. Education opened pathways to entirely new sources of livelihood such as government service, making available occupations that were neither desired by the rich nor accessible to the poor.

With the founding of the Bombay Association in 1852, the middle class began to compete with the *shetias* for control of civic organizations. Voicing their views through political bodies and the press, the earliest generation of Elphinstonians, known as 'Young Bombay,' and later a broader section of lawyers and graduates challenged the unity and numerical strength of the upper-class coalition. Gradually they introduced a more inclusive agenda that reflected the gamut of issues facing the middle classes. Pherozeshah Mehta emerged in the 1870s as a leader of the educated in opposition to *shetia* predominance, a role that flowered with his participation in the Bombay Presidency Association and the Indian National Congress, both formed in 1885.

The middle class attempted to free itself from material want and the symbolic tyranny of wealth by finding respectable alternatives outside the pursuit of commerce. The early Gujarati playwrights of the Parsi theatre and many of the pioneer performers were men who made their livings in journalism, law, medicine, and other professions. One of the first Parsi groups to appear on the Grant Road stage, the Elphinstone Club, was founded at Elphinstone College and comprised students and ex-students from the prestigious college. The Victoria Theatrical Company was established by K.N. Kabra, an eminent journalist who edited the Gujarati newspaper *Rast Goftar*. He was succeeded as manager by Dadabhai Sohrabji Patel, one of the first Master of Arts graduates from the University of Bombay. The growth of the middle-class audience was aided and abetted by Bombay's assorted English and Gujarati newspapers, which displayed paid advertisements, commented avidly on performances, and created a continuous furor of debate and sensation around the fledgling theatre.

As the Parsi theatre entered the phase of professionalization in the 1870s, more of the actors were drawn from Bombay's lower classes, and

class differentiation among the audience also appears to have increased. Kavasji Khatau, C.S. Nazir, Jehangir Khambatta and other actors are known to have lived in the narrow lanes of Dhobi Talao, a poor district centrally located in the city. Accounts of Parsi prosperity in the 19th century obscure the fact that Bombay's Parsi community also comprised large numbers of poor people. Many of the poor descended from Parsi artisans and farmers who arrived in the city after the decline of Surat and the famines that afflicted Gujarat between 1780 and 1840. Lower class groups eked out a living as domestic servants, petty clerks, mechanics, waiters, and carpenters.¹⁴ The 1881 census of Bombay Parsis listed 2,079 men and 416 women with the occupation of 'servant,' out of a total of 11,578 men and 705 women enumerated. A genteel brand of poverty also characterized families whose traditional occupation had been the priesthood. Offspring of some of these families, e.g. Dadabhai Naoroji, K.N. Kaba, and M.N. Dhalla, with scholarships or other support were able to work their way into the middle class.

The prices for admission to the Grant Road Theatre ranged from an upper ticket of Rs. 2.50 or 3 for a box to a place in the pit for one rupee or less. It is therefore unlikely that the indigent were able to attend shows in the Parsi theatre, at least in mid-century. The companies however depended on working-class Parsis and other communities for all the labor and services that were necessary to sustain their productions. As the base of support for the Parsi theatre broadened, ticket prices declined and audiences shifted downward in class composition. Patrons and dignitaries, including British officials, would still fill the boxes and promenade at society events such as benefit nights. The middle class viewers came to include more Hindus, Muslims, and non-Parsi spectators, an outcome in part of the Grant Road location but also related to the companies' attempts to diversify the thematic content of their dramas and present perennials such as stories from the epics and puranas, Muslim historicals and romances, and social dramas aimed at the middle class.

A bipartite structure of presentation, consisting of a serious drama or social comedy followed by a farce or other variety acts, also strengthened the diversified class basis among the audience. The serious play would be announced for a fixed time, usually early in the evening, e.g. 8 p.m. However, in keeping with traditional theatrical performances which ran

¹⁴ James Mackenzie Maclean, *A Guide to Bombay: Historical, Statistical, and Descriptive*, 2nd edition (Bombay: Bombay Gazette Steam Press, 1876), 93.

through the night, the main drama would be followed by farces and skits whose performance time was not fixed and which can be assumed to have catered to an audience whose daily routines were less influenced by the European temporalities of work and leisure. The farces, in other words, probably attracted a low-brow audience, and admission rates seem to have been reduced for the late show.

Prominent among the lower-class audience were soldiers and sailors. The military forces were invested in promoting theatrical evenings as a harmless form of entertainment. Theatre could distract the soldiers from visiting the red-light districts, with the ensuing dangers of sexual contact and venereal disease. In the absence of playhouses, regimental theatre formed a regular part of cantonment life, and the garrison band was frequently pressed into service even in the Gaiety and Novelty. Acts of disrespect and rowdiness are often attributed to soldiers and sailors by the press, although such behavior was certainly not limited to this group.

Family shows, that is, special performances for women only or women properly chaperoned, were also a feature of Parsi theatre's popularity and growing respectability among the middle class. Certain companies made it a point to cater to female spectators and even their dependent children, as for example the Natak Uttejak Mandali which set up creches outside the playhouse where children were tended by their ayahs. Although separate sections were reserved for women during mixed performances, the presence of women of easy virtue within these areas was a source of comment in the press. When actresses began to appear on stage, a furor once more erupted. Certain companies such as the New Alfred upheld a ban on women performers, whereas the Victoria led the way in employing women, a move considered a sign of progress by certain reformers and a rank concession to commercialism by others.

The kind of atmosphere generated by this mixed audience within the theatre can be judged from contemporary newspaper reports. Notices published in newspapers, as well as handbills posted about the town, were the main method of informing the public of upcoming theatre events. Journalists, who often were in the employ of one company or another, acted as opinion-makers and leaders, urging the public to greater attendance and castigating performers for their shortcomings. They also commented upon behavioral norms and acted as a tribunal in cases of dispute. Despite the spatial regulation that the proscenium theatre introduced, audiences were exuberant and fulsome in their

praise or blame of theatrical performances. A favorable reception was demonstrated by loud applause, shouting, and demands that a song or dance be repeated 'Once more.' Multiple curtain calls and showering of artists with cash gifts or *inam* were also common. Disfavor was indicated by hurling of chappals, rotten fruit, empty liquor bottles, and shouts of 'shame, shame.' Fighting and rowdiness were common, on stage and backstage among the artists, between the artists and the audience, and among different groups in the audience. Shows could not start without the necessary display of force by a police constable. A night out at the theatre was made even more unpredictable by the frequent mechanical disasters and foul-ups that besieged the theatre companies. Fires were also a common menace, as they were in theatres in England and America. Given all the obstacles, it is no wonder that theatre managers spoke of their successful performances as 'victories' and begged the audience through their prologues and prefaces to show mercy and favor them with kindness.

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Arvind Kala

Babri Alang: Banaras's Ideology of Leisure

Is there a definite pattern to how people spend their leisure time in small towns? There is. Their favourite entertainment is to meet in the *bazaar*. And within the *bazaar*, at *paan*-shops which are the chief social centres. 'Come, let's go have a *paan*,' is a sentence you often hear in small towns. When a man says this to a friend, the *paan* is only an excuse. What he means is that he and the friend should loiter around some more.

Whichever small town you go to, whether Sonapat in Haryana, Samastipur in Bihar or Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, this meeting in the *bazaar* is many men's daily ritual. After, they get home from work in the

evening, they head for the *paan*-shop, knowing they'll find their friends there.

The *bazaar* is a meeting-place in small towns in the hills too. Except that hill towns have one more social centre. This is any road that runs along a river. The weather being cold in the hills, it isn't comfortable just to hang around near a *paan*-shop. Therefore, hillfolk often take long walks along the river, and when they meet, they shake hands, chit-chat for a few minutes, and then go their own ways.

Coming to think of it, it seems rather impractical that any sociologist should study how people spend their free time. But I have stumbled upon a fascinating piece of research of how people of Banaras like to use their leisure. Apparently, for many generations, the favourite pastime of Banaras men is to 'go outside' as they put it. 'Going outside', or *babri alang jana*, means a constellation of four activities: preparing *bhang*, defecation and bathing, and washing clothes. It seems Banaras men consider this pure bliss.

The researcher who has studied the Banaras male's favourite entertainment is Dr Nita Kumar of the University of Chicago, who is a former graduate of Lucknow University. Her understanding of this outwardly trivial subject unravels a fascinating sociological study.

Babri alang jana, Dr Nita Kumar says, is the activity of going out. But geography alone doesn't determine a likely location. *Babri alang* is equally a matter of mood, time and a ritualised pattern of activities. Places where one chooses to go should be places of solitude (*ekaant*). They should have the following requisites: access to water, or river, tank, pond, or well; openness of the sky and fresh air, and a spot to grind *bhang buti*.

Three sets of activity constitute the *babri alang* trip. *Nipatana-nahana* (defecation and bathing) go together. *Bhang chanana* means both to grind and to strain the *bhang* very fine. *Safa lagana* is to wash your clothes very vigorously, with a lot of soap, very clean. On the surface, this ritual seems to be mundane. But Banaras men describe it as a quintessential Banarasi activity that has been elaborated into an ideology of freedom or an ideology of leisure.

An average person would ask: So what is so great about going out to defecate, bathe and swallow *bhang*? To a Banarsi however, this *babri alang* is sheer *mauj* or *masti*, terms which are virtually untranslatable, Dr Nita Kumar says. It gives a tremendous sense of freedom and contentment that comes from the *malish* (massage), *snan* (bath), the exercise, the *safa-paani*, the *bhang*, the outdoors. It means to feel on top of the world, and also to feel intoxicated.