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Melodrama, Mythology, and Moral Reform:
Parsi Drama and Agha Hashra Kashmiri (1879-1935)

By

Sonal Acharya

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Professor Vasudha Dalmia, Chair

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Abstract

Melodrama, Mythology, and Moral Reform:
Parsi Drama and Agha Hashra Kashmiri (1879-1935)

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Doctor of Philosophy in South and Southeast Asian Studies
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Parsi theatre was the first institutionalized attempt in colonial India to consolidate a pan-Indian theatrical public, and doing this necessitated the emergence of particular narrative, performance, and genre codes of melodrama. These productive intersections between the development of colonial national theatre, and the development of melodrama also coincided with the rise of cultural nationalism in early twentieth century colonial India. Parsi theatre therefore became the generative site for imagining, producing and circulating the ideas of a nation and national belongingness through a shared idiom of narrative and performance culture, and the shared experience of a consolidated theatrical public. This dissertation analyzes the convergence of moral reform plots, melodramatic genre, and mythological narratives in Hashra's plays between 1910 and 1928 to show the rise of nationalist consciousness in Parsi drama, and its contribution towards cultural nationalism in early twentieth century colonial India.

The plotting strategy in Hashra's plays, circumscribed by emergent nationalist discourse, is focussed on the narrative of individual moral reform where characters' duty toward family take precedence over their desire for love and pleasure. Given the centrality of home and family within nationalist consciousness, the plays do not really displace, but merely subsume the task of reforming and liberating a nation; within the more urgent task of reclaiming the protagonist's self and family. Hashra's plays examined here belong to the Gandhian phase of nationalist mobilization, where moral reform of the flawed and fallen protagonist serves to illuminate the process by which urban middle class can participate in the project of reforming self, community, and nation. Melodrama as an aesthetic, a genre, as well as a mode emerges in these plays to heighten the emotional drama around moral regulation, and fulfill the persuasive agenda of nationalism led reform. The study shows how modern melodrama in popular Parsi theatre emerged in response to these new nationalist and reformist calibrations in colonial India.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Temperance in <i>Silver King</i> (1910) and <i>Turki Hur</i> (1922): Development of Moral Reform Genre, 1910-1922	18
Chapter 2: Religion, Identity and the Melodrama of <i>Qaumiyat</i> in <i>Yahudi Ki Ladki</i> (The Jew's Daughter), 1918.....	39
Chapter 3: <i>Bhakta</i> as a Nationalist Hero: Madness, Blindness and the Imperatives of Moral Reform in <i>Bilwa Mangal</i> (1920).....	58
Chapter 4: Wife, Prostitute, and Actress: The Woman's Question in <i>Ankh Ka Nasha</i> (Intoxication of the Eye), 1923	79
Chapter 5: <i>Sita Banbas</i> (1927), <i>Bhishma Pratigya</i> (1928): Duty, Desire, and the Emergence of Nationalist Dharma in Mythological Plays	95
Conclusion	114
Bibliography	118

Introduction

The development of modern Indian theater is unimaginable without the role of Parsis who were instrumental in the formation and growth of indigenous English, Gujarati, and Hindustani theatre in the late nineteenth century. Within the field of modern theatre and performance studies, film studies, as well as cultural studies, the term ‘Parsi theatre’ has come to signify a nationally recognizable idiom of narrative and performance conventions beginning in nineteenth century colonial India. Although many of these conventions can be assimilated within the rubric of melodrama, a consideration of genre alone cannot fully account for Parsi theatre’s cultural significance during this period. We need to note that the development of Parsi theatre melodrama was fully grounded in the reformist-nationalist discourses of the period, a fact that many theatre and film scholars overlook, when acknowledging Parsi theatre’s contribution to Indian melodrama and modern Indian theatre and film.

Scholars like Hansen have established the significance of Parsi theatre as an important field of historical research and have also pointed out the challenges of writing its history because of the ‘communalization’ of its primary as well as secondary sources.¹ However Parsi theatre’s polyglot and pluralist character is precisely the reason behind its ability to cut across linguistic, class, and community lines and evolve a truly cosmopolitan and national aesthetic². By virtue of its touring companies, ‘Parsi theatre’ was the first institutionalized attempt to consolidate a pan-Indian theatrical public, and doing this necessitated the emergence of particular narrative, performance, and genre codes of melodrama. These productive intersections between the development of national theatre, and the development of melodrama also coincided with the rise of cultural nationalism. Parsi theatre therefore became the generative site for imagining, producing and circulating the ideas of a nation and national belongingness through a shared idiom of narrative and performance culture, and the shared experience of a consolidated theatrical public.

Hansen’s scholarship on Parsi theater is currently developed across four different essays published between 1999 and 2004, the translation of Somnath Gupt’s history of Parsi theatre (2005), and a translated collection of autobiographies of Parsi theater playwrights and actors (2011). The first essay “Making Women Visible: Gender and

¹ Hansen (2001), “Parsi Theater, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge: A Bibliographic Essay”.

² Hansen (2003), “Languages, Community and the Theatrical Public: Linguistic Pluralism and Change in the Nineteenth-Century Parsi Theater”.

Race Cross Dressing in the Parsi Theatre” (1999) examines the relationship of the female performing body to nation and national culture. It shows Parsi theater to be a paradigmatic site of female gender negotiation and construction where the body of the female actress challenged the norms of patriarchy and patriarchal nationalism. Hansen’s second essay “Parsi Theatre and the City: Locations, Patrons, Audiences” (2002) presents a history of Bombay’s cultural geography by examining the locations, patrons, and audiences as they become indispensable to the popularity of Parsi theater. In her essay “Languages on Stage: Linguistic Pluralism and Community Formation in the Nineteenth Century Parsi Theatre”, (2003) Hansen shows the conceptual problems of conducting historical research on Parsi theatre arguing that the term Parsi theater invariably suggests a theatre that was exclusively patronized by the Parsi community whereas the truth is that even though Parsis owned these companies, the playwrights, actors, singers, and audience were drawn from various religious (Hindu, Muslim, Jews), linguistic and regional communities.

In the essay, “Parsi Theater, Urdu Drama, and the Communalization of Knowledge” (2001) Hansen shows that the scholarship on Parsi theater in three Indian languages has come to be divided along communal lines. The extensive literature in Urdu favors Muslim playwrights and assimilates non-Muslims under the rubric Urdu Theatre, whereas the parallel body of writing in Gujarati and Hindi ignores the Muslim contributions or subordinates it to the Hindi-Hindu nationalist ideology. Although the Parsi theater was produced within a cosmopolitan entertainment economy at a time when linguistic and communal identities were overlapping, this history has been overlooked in the process of linguistic canon formation. The result is that Parsis are now marginalized from all the three literary canons (Gujarati, Hindi, and Urdu) and thus are in danger of being written out of national theatre history.

Hansen has pointed out that it is critical for present day South Asian cultural politics to emphasize that Parsi theater neither helped colonial rule in producing religious antipathy in theatre, nor robbed the subcontinent of its indigenous dramatic traditions. In fact it invariably enabled a hybrid, pan-Indian aesthetic of representation that for all of its limitations did manage to capture the popular imagination of an entire nation. Anuradha Kapur’s scholarship extends our understanding of Parsi theatre’s development of performance and staging conventions. In examining the dramatic text for staging direction in order to reconstruct the strategies used for producing ‘spectacle’, Kapur questions the staging of illusionistic ‘miracles’ through the use of ‘realistic’ stage techniques, machinery, sound effects, and lighting. She points out that the effects of spectacle realized through realism restricts realism for its use in the background, rather than reconfiguring representations or spectatorial perceptions.

While film scholars like Vasudevan (2011) have noted Parsi theatre's role in consolidating the genre of Indian melodrama, the relationship between melodrama and the mode of nationalist politics that influenced the genre's narrative and performance conventions has not yet been clearly established. Scholars like Rakesh Solomon (2014), have in fact even argued that Parsi theatre steered clear of politics almost completely because of its focus on commercial success.³ This is a widely held misconception among theatre historians who regard regional theatre (Bengali and Marathi) to be anti-colonial and therefore nationalist and Parsi theatre to be pro-establishment and therefore apolitical. This dissertation aims to rectify such misconceptions by examining the simultaneous development of melodrama, moral reform, and mythology, alongside the rise of nationalist consciousness, in order to fully account for Parsi theatre's significance in promoting cultural nationalism. It does so by examining the plays of Agha Hashra Kashmiri (1879-1935), Parsi theatre's most prolific and popular playwrights.

Dramatic literature remains the most comprehensive access point for reviewing the life of Parsi theatre plays that existed as ephemeral performances on stage. In the case of regional Marathi and Bengali theatre extensive studies of dramatic literature focusing on individual playwrights has allowed for reclamation of regional theatre histories⁴. However, the Parsi theatre plays of Agha Hashra have mostly been overlooked by scholars who have largely focused on opening up the field through reconstruction of Parsi theatre's social or performance history, and the recovery of the subaltern voices of its actors and playwrights⁵. Lothspeich is an exception; she has surveyed the corpus of mythological plays of Radheshyam Kathavachak (1890-1963) and Narayan Prasad Betab (1872-1933) with an eye towards the nationalist appropriation of the mythological genre⁶.

Although, many of Agha Hashra's plays cannot be considered 'original', their status as 'adaptations' does not make them any the less amenable for textual analysis. This dissertation examines some of Hashra's most popular 'social' and 'mythological' plays to show how questions of genre and ideology intersected with the cultural function of Parsi theatre. By doing so, it aims to demonstrate that in early twentieth century colonial India, commercial Parsi theatre did not merely function as an entertainment factory of melodramas but rather as a key site for imagining and representing the idea of a nation and its people.

³ Solomon (2014), "The Historical Terrain of Kichaka-Vadha", 21

⁴ Chatterjee (2004), *Theatre beyond the Threshold: Colonialism, nationalism and the Bengali Stage*, Gokhale (2000), *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama from 1843 to the Present*

⁵ Hansen (2011), *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies*; Also Kapur (2006, 2009)

⁶ Lothspeich (2009), *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of Empire*

Hashra's body of plays beginning in the post *Swadeshi* period until the beginning of the civil disobedience movement (1910-1930) begin to register the anxieties of colonialism and imagine the nascent idea of a unified *jati* (community) and nation. However, unlike the regional Marathi and Bengali theatres that actively sought to engage in outright anti-colonial and even seditious themes, Hashra's plays subordinate their anticolonial themes to the social and political conservatism of their plots. But the plays are neither untouched by the politics of the period, nor devoid of fiery reformist-nationalist agendas that are often articulated through Hashra's plotting and characterization strategies.

The plotting strategy in the plays circumscribes nationalist discourse within a narrative of moral reform where questions of domesticity and conjugality take precedence over nationalist desire. However, given the centrality of home and family within nationalist consciousness, the plays do not really displace, but merely subsume the task of liberating a nation, within the more urgent task of reclaiming the self and family. This dissertation analyzes the convergence of moral reform plots, melodramatic genre aesthetic, and mythological narratives in Hashra's plays to show the rise of nationalist consciousness and its contribution towards cultural nationalism in early twentieth century colonial India.

Subject of Moral Reform Melodrama: The Fallen Self, and the Fallen Nation

At the center of Hashra's plays is a flawed protagonist, an upper class young married man, drawn to the pleasures of alcohol, gambling, prostitution, or some form of a 'western' vice. The protagonist's fallen-ness brings suffering to his chaste wife, dishonor to the family, and humiliation to his *jati* or *qaum* (community, nation). Despite his flaws, the protagonist is inherently virtuous and therefore an ideal candidate for moral reform that would enable his recovery from vice, and ensure reclamation of his self, family, and nation. A family member, acting as a self-appointed 'reformer', usually helps the protagonist admit his flaws, suffer remorse, and reclaim his moral, spiritual and physical strength.

Nationalist consciousness in Hashra's plays is channeled through the perspective of this extended family member whose function as a nationalist spokesman is to establish the relationship between the protagonist's 'home' and 'embryonic nation'. His need to control the protagonist's home becomes an important first step towards the regulation and control of a *jati* and a nation. Preservation of home as a sacred space necessitates a demarcation of the outside world as a threat that needs to be relegated to the peripheries

of domesticity. Degenerate husbands, alcoholics, gamblers, prostitutes, sadhus, servants, and merchants, inhabiting the margins between these two domains of the sacred and the profane, become Hashra's chosen subjects for moral reform and nationalist edification.

The agent of reform, always a single unmarried male, espouses the virtues of sublimating 'desire' to 'duty' and mediates the protagonist's relationship to self, family, and nation. His reformist agenda, marked by a mix of social coercion and emotional persuasion, is carried out through tactics of pleading, shaming, reproach, and eventually the penultimate punitive gesture of social rejection. Characters that would not be deterred by any of the above means usually face a tragic circumstance leading to their death and disappearance from the play. Consequently the reformist and nationalist impulses function as a containment strategy to structure the action and pathos of the play and direct the plot towards the holy grail of blissful matrimony.

The scenes are structured to follow a typical melodramatic topos beginning with an introduction of virtue as innocence that is represented in the play in the character of the protagonist's dutiful wife. Next is the presentation of evil that threatens to eclipse virtue that is usually represented by the character that is channeling a particular 'vice' that will eventually bring suffering upon the innocent wife. And finally the reclamation of virtue and home, and the reestablishment of moral and social order, carried out with the help of a 'reformer'. Melodrama as an aesthetic, a genre, as well as a mode, is well suited to heighten the emotional drama around moral regulation, and fulfill the persuasive agenda of nationalism led moral reform.

Nationalist desire to purify the body and soul of a nation through the purification of an individual was inherently melodramatic in its appropriation of threatened feminine virtue and spectacle of female suffering. It was also reformist because it spoke in the idiom of improving the individual and the nation rather than merely liberating them. The *swadeshi* movement had already clarified the moral distinction between nationalist virtues and westernized vices. But with the Gandhian call for *Hind Swaraj* (1909), ideas of 'self-rule' and 'self-discipline' became intimately connected with the project of rebuilding a nation through rebuilding an individual.

Hashra's plays examined here belong to this Gandhian phase of nationalist mobilization, where purification of the defiled protagonist serves to illuminate the process by which individuals can contribute towards the purification of *jati* and nation. The plays are persuasive but their function exceeds mere propaganda because they both affirm as well as constitute the idea of a reformed nation and nationalism through the affective power of a sympathetic narrative. The plays cover a period of about two decades between the end of *swadeshi* and the beginning of the civil disobedience movement (1910-1930). Within Hashra's oeuvre, these plays, corresponding to the period

of Gandhian nationalism, they offer the most comprehensive insights into commercial theatre's entanglements with cultural nationalism.

The plays examined here reflect the formulation of the 'social' genre where the family was the primary site for staging the protagonist's conflict and modeling its resolution. There are two other genres that Hashra helped to consolidate, the genre of the 'courtly', and the 'mythological'. This dissertation includes a consideration of two of Hashra's 'mythological' plays that also mirror the ideological concerns of the 'social' genre in terms of their thematic commitment to moral reform and the nationalist agenda.

Not included in the discussion, however, are the 'courtly' plays written before 1910. The plays belonging to this earlier phase of Hashra's career are no less significant as they show Hashra's first tentative steps as a poet turning into a commercial playwright. They reveal the influence of Shakespeare, and Hashra's localization strategies to fit Shakespearean plots into a Mughal courtly setting. But the 'courtly' genre is both structurally and ideologically different from the 'social' and 'mythological' genres. It includes a parallel comic sub-plot, a convention that was later dropped in the 'social' and 'mythological' genres. More importantly, the 'courtly' genre does not incorporate the reformist-nationalist agenda that characterized the plotting of the 'social' and 'mythological' genres.

In the following sections, I begin with a brief overview of the development of Parsi theatre in late nineteenth century. I then briefly survey the early phase of Hashra's career (1899-1910), with a discussion of the 'courtly' genre and the influence of Shakespeare. The next section offers an analysis of the 'social' and 'mythological' genre during the most productive years of his career (1910-1928) that also parallels the rise of Gandhian era nationalism. This section therefore explores Hashra's personal position on reformist, nationalist, and anti-colonial politics of the period. In the concluding section, I consider the simultaneous emergence of melodrama as a theatrical genre and as a rhetorical mode in reformist-nationalist politics to point out a history of its mutual entanglements with popular theatre and culture.

Parsi Theater, Hindustani Drama: The Development of Pan-Indian Commercial Theater

Modern theater in Bombay during its initial phase (1846-1853) was an elitist cultural venture designed to encourage economic, social as well as cultural collaboration between the educated mercantile Parsi community and the British community living in South Bombay. Funded by philanthropic contributions from local Parsi merchants, the

Grant Road Theater was the first Bombay playhouse where Parsi and English patrons attended plays in English by Bulwer Lytton, Richard Sheridan, Oliver Goldsmith and other popular British playwrights of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Somnath Gupt has noted that this early phase of Parsi theater was grounded in the accomplishments and deficiencies of the English stage in Bombay.⁷

The British playhouse system, inherited by the Parsi theater was gradually reworked to accommodate the shift in patron demographic profile that now included local Parsis, Gujaratis and Marathis. In order to cater to this new audience the main plays from 1853-1871 were written in Gujarati, and the farces in Hindustani. The dominant mode continued to be European inspired stage melodrama but the turn to regional languages, narratives, and performance traditions gradually transformed the conventions of English melodrama on the Indian stage.

Hansen has shown that this turn toward indigenous languages (Gujarati and Hindustani-Urdu) was inspired by the idea of *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) and the need to constitute a theater that addressed one's own people. The engagement with *swadeshi* was practiced simultaneously as a move away from popular British plays, and toward engaging with the Parsis' own distinctive history and ties with Iran⁸. With the intensification of language debates since the 1860s, the project of linguistic vernacularization turned increasingly troublesome for Parsis who were speakers of languages (Gujarati, English) they no longer claimed as their own. The identification with Iran brought them closer to Persian, Arabic, as well as with Urdu that by 1871 came to be regarded as the language of choice for Parsi theater. The Parsi playwrights argued that the adoption of Urdu was necessary in order to include Hindu and Muslim communities that were already familiar with Hindustani as the lingua franca, as well as to legitimize theatrical practice that existed in the Urdu literary tradition.⁹

The next phase (1871-1920) of Parsi theater's rapid growth across the country was accelerated by this shift to Urdu that continued to dominate Indian theater until the 1920s. The Urdu playwrights writing during this period including 'Raunaq' (1825-1886), 'Talib' (1855-1919) and 'Betab' (1872-1933), drew their inspiration from the genre of *qissas* and *masnavis* that furnished Parsi theatre plays with plots of love, romance and intrigue. Agha Hashra Kashmiri, one of the most talented and competent playwright to

⁷ Gupt (2005), trans., ed., Kathryn Hansen, *The Parsi Theater: Its Origins and Development*

⁸ Hansen (2003), "Languages, Community and the Theatrical Public: Linguistic Pluralism and Change in the Nineteenth-Century Parsi Theater".

⁹ Ibid.

emerge during this period, helped to consolidate new modern genres of the ‘courtly’ and ‘social’ melodramas. The rise of Hindi public sphere after 1920 necessitated yet another shift to accommodate the use of *Khadi- Boli* and the consolidation of the ‘mythological’ genre that borrowed its plots from Hindu epic, Pauranik, and devotional literature. This shift towards a Hindi-Hindu idiom can be seen in Hashra’s body of plays beginning with *Bilwa Mangal* (1920).

Hashra as a Poet and Playwright: Shakespearean Beginnings and the Formation of the ‘Courtly’ Genre (1899-1910)

Agha Hashra Kashmiri was born in Benaras in 1869, where he had a traditional *madrassa* (Islamic school) education that combined language lessons in Urdu, Arabic, and Persian, with an intense study of the Quran under the tutelage of *maulvi* Abdul Samad. In order to study English, Hashra later enrolled in Raj Narayan High School but dropped out in order to pursue his interest in *shergoi* (poetry recitation) and music. He added the *takhallus* (pen name) ‘*Hashra*’ (outcome) to his name around this time. His musical knowledge and recitation skills in *shergoi and gazalgoi* (singing songs) made him a popular poet in Benaras.

Agha Hashra Kashmiri arrived in Bombay in 1898 to find work as a playwright in Alfred Theatrical Company. The Parsi theater companies by then were already producing adaptations of British melodramas, as well as Hindu, Persian, Arabic narratives from a mix of *dāstāns* (tales), *qissahs* (romances), epics, and folktales. As far as the performances were concerned, the productions mixed European stagecraft, lighting with indigenous costumes, rituals, and regional performance traditions. The play titles were sensational and promised narratives of love, intrigue, and romance, for a single production that ran for about seven hours from nine-thirty in the evening to five in the morning with a minimum of fifty to sixty songs, mostly based on a familiar popular melodies or classical ragas.

Hashra’s plays inherited the narrative, structural, and performance conventions of nineteenth century Parsi theater but his adaptations thickened their respective plots with topical issues that concerned social, religious reformers, and moderate nationalists. While the number of song and dance sequences continued to be very high (going up to twenty-five), the dialogues now included both verse and prose, and the characters (even in mythological genre) began to turn realistic. Anis Azmi points out that with Hashra’s plays, for the first time Parsi theater plays began to become somewhat relevant to the

real-life experiences of its middle class and lower class audience.¹⁰ This dash of realism however did not challenge any of the performance conventions that still relied on Shakespearean declamation, vehement oratory, elevated language, metrical rhymed lines, frontal address, and use of frozen tableau to heighten affect. But the realism in the early twentieth century made Parsi theatre come a long way from its formative years as *Indar Sabha* spectacles.

Indar Sabha (Court of Indar), a fairy tale opera by Agha Hasan Amanat Lakhnavi (1815-1859), considered by many theatre scholars to be the first modern Indian drama, was performed in 1853 in the city of Lucknow. Structured as a music drama, *Indar Sabha* comprising 46 songs begins with king Indar's desire to arrange a musical soiree of fairies at his court. Like a typical romance narrative, included within this plot is the love story of one of the court fairies (*Sabz Pari*) and prince Gulfam in which obstacles are set to be ultimately overcome so that the couple can be united in the end. The characters of the drama including kings, gods, fairies, and other supernatural beings (*devs*) invoke the literary traditions of Persianate *dastans* (epic romances) and *masnavis* (epic poems).¹¹ *Indar Sabha*, the first opera to be commercially produced by Parsi theatre companies, provided the scaffolding for the founding of the 'courtly' genre of modern Indian theatre. Hashra's 'courtly' plays continue this *Indar Sabha* tradition of the 'courtly genre' substituting its fantasy plot and supernatural characters with realistic plots and human characters.

During this early phase of constructing five to seven act 'courtly' plays, Shakespeare was a common source of inspiration and plots for Hashra. With the 1835 Education Act, while Shakespeare was moved from the fashionable and cultural to the imperial and ideological axis, a schism between the English educated elite and vernacular speaking masses began to be developed.¹² While the academic literary Shakespeare was still restricted to the English speaking elites, a popular and allegedly vulgar Shakespeare began to be widely translated, adapted and performed on the Parsi theater stage.

Agha Hashra adapted six Shakespeare works for the Parsi theater- *A Winter's Tale* (*Murid-Ai-shaq*, 1899), *Measure for Measure* (*Shahid-Ai-Naz*, 1902), *King John*, *Richard III* (*Said-Ai-Havas*, 1906), *King Lear* (*Safed Khun*, 1907), and *Macbeth* (*Khwab-Ai-Hasti*, 1908). It is not clear if Hashra's English education at Raj Narayan High School in Benaras prepared him to read and absorb a literary Shakespeare in original, or if he

¹⁰ Anis Azmi (2004), "Agha Hashra Kashmiri: Hayat Aur Karname"

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of *Indar Sabha*'s plot and dramatic text, see Taj (2007), *The Court of Indar and the Rebirth of North Indian Drama*

¹² Trivedi (2005), "Introduction"

acquainted himself with Shakespearean plots in Urdu or Hindi translations. However, his adaptations are not unlike the early translations that circulated in colonial India which demonstrated an eagerness to consume indigenized Shakespeare. Trivedi has shown that these adaptations displayed different levels of localization, from a simple Indianization of names and images, to a relocation of tale to a specific period of history, to a retelling with the excision and addition of characters, scenes, and subplots, along with the interpolation of song and dance, or a total indigenization into a traditional theater form.¹³

For Parsi theater playwright like Hashra, Shakespeare offered a readily available collection of plots with strong characters, and plenty of options for staging emotional turbulence, violence of action, and grand spectacle, all things that the audience loved and craved for. Malick has pointed out that a vigorous tradition of adapting, translating and staging Shakespeare in Urdu developed during 1870-1910.¹⁴ He has identified seventy-five texts in Urdu from this period that are direct (and occasionally indirect) translations and adaptations of Shakespeare, covering twenty three different Shakespeare plays. The accessibility and availability of an Urdu Shakespeare culminated with the consolidation of Hashra's 'courtly' genre within Parsi theatre.

In response to critics that bemoan Hashra's 'courtly' genre as poor imitations of Shakespeare, Azmi points out that Hashra's command of English was so weak that adapting Shakespeare was out of the question as he was quite incapable reading Shakespeare in the original. If Hashra's sources were Urdu translations then he deserves to be credited for turning a third degree adaptation of Shakespeare into a formulaic but commercially viable format. It is beyond doubt that Hashra validated his own initial, faltering career by encouraging public perception of himself as the 'Indian Shakespeare'. When Hashra started his own theater company in 1910 he also named it 'Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company' but by this time Hashra as the playwright turned impresario was already a well-known name in the world of modern Indian theatre.

Moral Reform Plot and the Development of 'Social' and 'Mythological' Genre

Reform comedy plotted around the reclamation of rake-heroes was staple fare on the early eighteenth century English stage. The flawed protagonist parading his follies on stage was intended to amuse the audience with its conservative enlightenment agenda.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Malick (2005), "Appropriating Shakespeare Freely: Parsi Theater's First Urdu Play Khurshid" in *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation, and Performance*

Reform comedy reaffirmed status-quo and advocated bourgeois values but its focus was always the flawed individual and his eventual reclamation.¹⁵ Unlike reform comedy's faith in individual change, Hashra's plays for Parsi theatre companies beginning in 1910 appropriated the reform plots, not only for the sake of reclaiming the individual but also for the sake of reclaiming his family, community, and nation. In Hashra's plays, the protagonist and his flaws are not meant for entertainment alone, rather, they provoke sympathy, approval and eventually support for the nationalist cause. In the play, the reform plot served to provoke the protagonist's feelings of shame and indignation, and to coerce him into internalizing the logic of moral reform.

Comedy that was included as a parallel plot in the 'courtly' genre now became extraneous to the primary plot, as it could no longer be sustained alongside the purposeful arc of the reformist plot. Although the comic plot continued in a few early social plays, it was eventually eliminated in the later 'social' and 'mythological' plays. The plays examined in this dissertation, *Silver King* (1910), and *Yahudi Ki Ladki* (1918), have minor comedy sub-plots but they remain quite extraneous to the primary narrative and therefore have not been included in the discussion. The other conventions that persisted in the 'social' genre included the inaugural *puja* followed by an 'invocation' song in the beginning of a play, performance of *viraha* (separation) and *bhakti* (devotional) songs by the *pativrata* (dutiful) wife, and the emblematic 'wedding' or 'family' tableau of the last scene, that served to emphasize and model the image of a reformed patriarch securing his marriage and family.

The 'social' plays examined here frame the question of moral reform within a particular set of social reform issues. In *Silver King* (1910), the problem of protagonist's alcoholism is a moral one, but in *Turki Hur* (Turkish Beauty, 1922), temperance reform is already conceptualized as a social issue necessitating legislative and state interventions. *Yahudi Ki Ladki* (The Jew's Daughter, 1918) problematizes nationalist claims of representation by showing the development of a minority consciousness and the issues of religious identity and moral reform emerging in response to missionary and nationalist propaganda. In *Bilwamangal* (Bilwamangal, 1920), the protagonist's moral reform is incumbent upon his Krishna *bhakti* (devotion), but the path of *bhakti* is deeply entrenched within the social hierarchy of caste. *Ankh Ka Nasha* (Intoxication of the Eye, 1923) brings to the stage the moral opposition between the dutiful wife and the sinful prostitute. In order to reform the protagonist, it turns the prostitute into the evil other woman, but in order to reform the prostitute, it attempts to confront the evil of patriarchy and deeply entrenched socio-economic structures.

¹⁵ Gollapudi, *Moral Reform in Comedy and Culture*, 1-15

The 'mythological' and 'social' have historically mutually influenced each other and have even merged together in an attempt to weave in social issues into existing mythological narratives. The turn toward the 'mythological' genre in Hashra's corpus is marked by a move towards a Hindi-Hindu idiom and a wholehearted endorsement of Gandhian morality that is embodied in the play by divine characters like Rama and Bhishma. Their disavowal of 'desire' and the privileging of 'duty', through the practices of self-restraint and self-denial, transforms mythological heroes into nationalist gods that were meant to not only inspire reverence but also validate a religious moral compass for its theatre audience. Gandhi's penchant for mythological heroes is well known and it was on the stage of a Parsi theatre in Gujarat that Gandhi first got inspired by the story of king Harishchandra, who sacrificed his kingdom and family to follow the path of truth.¹⁶ In king Rama, Gandhi found a role model for dispassion, and filial piety, and in king Bhishma, the realization of the ideals of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and suffering. In Hashra's plays, the mythological exists as a separate genre, but its influence can be felt throughout the social genre as well, especially in the characterization of protagonists who strive to follow the path of *dharma* in exactly the same manner as Gandhi's favorite mythological heroes.

Some critics like Nairang have pointed out that Hashra publicly supported Gandhian values by wearing khadi, turning towards mythological genre, and incorporating the 'spinning wheel' (*charkha*) in one of his most controversial plays *Aj* (Today, 1921).¹⁷ In one of the most sensational scenes of this play *Aaj*, the protagonist Prabhashankar addresses a crowd of westernized men and women attending a fashionable garden party, and asks them to start thinking about *Bharat Mata*'s (Mother India's) poor children and suffering dutiful women. After an inspiring nationalist speech, Prabhashankar motivates his audience to donate all of their personal belongings including watches, jewelry, cash and even clothes to the nationalist cause. As the pile of donations continues to rise, *Bharat Mata* appears to bless them all, encouraging everyone to chant '*Bharatmata Ki Jai*' (Victory to Mother India). At the peak of the Gandhian non-cooperation movement, the production of *Aaj* (1921) with its rousing call to support nationalism, and victory chants to *Bharat Mata* (mother India) attests to Hashra's personal and political commitment to the Gandhian nationalist movement.

Although none of Hashra's social or mythological plays take up an exclusive anticolonial position, they fully support and advocate a reformist-nationalist agenda. This is not to say that Hashra did not engage in anti-colonial rhetoric at all, as there were many

¹⁶ Ranchhodbhai Udayram Dave's theatre adaptation, of Harishchandra's story into a Gujarati play, ran for ten years with one thousand performances. Gandhi saw this play in Rajkot, when he was a schoolboy, and was deeply influenced by it.

¹⁷ 'Nairang' (1978), *Agha Hashr Aur Natak*

plays not discussed here that contained comic sub-plots where the westernized *memsahib*, English speaking *babu*, and the fashionable man, woman, who drinks, smokes, and frequents clubs, are caricatured to show the hilarious effects of western modernity, and its incompatibility with Indian identity.

Hashra's attacks against imperialism are particularly stringent in his *nazm* (poem) titled *Shukriya Ai Europe* (Thank you Europe, 1913) that was meant to be a satire on the British rule in India. The poem begins on a note of sarcasm; thanking Europe for embracing Asia like a pair of scissors embrace a fabric, for protecting it like lightning protects a land, and for turning it into a graveyard. The poem goes on to remind Europe that its knowledge has created chaos, its violent civilization has turned humanity to ashes, and that it has darkened the illuminated palaces of Asia. It warns Europe that the ashes that have been trampled upon are beginning to rise, and Asia is crying out that there are no candles and no flowers left to decorate its graves, no lovers left to lay down their lives, and no *bulbul* birds left behind to sing songs.¹⁸

Unlike the above *nazm*, the plays discussed here are not explicitly anti-colonial because they choose to focus on the question of moral reform that is of utmost importance to the nationalists. Instead of battling with the nation's enemy that is outside of one's sphere of control, the plays focus on battling with the enemy inside, namely the protagonists' own desire. Thus, nationalist desire turned inward produces characters that appear particularly anguished, first by the weight of their own unfulfilled desire, then by the guilt and remorse of having to sacrifice these private desires for the sake of public duty toward family, community, and nation. This emotional turmoil of their inner life is structured and realized within the genre codes of melodrama.

Melodrama and Nationalism: Aesthetic of Excess and the Virtues of Suffering

If moral reform and nationalist desire attempted to contain and neatly order the plot and characters in the play, melodramatic impulse threatened to unravel this attempt. The protagonist subjected to the ideological constraints and coercive tactics of moral reform often responded with melodramatic resistance rather than passive acceptance. Hashra's male protagonists while actively resisting moral reform, frequently ignore their weeping *pativrata* (dutiful) wives, and often submerge themselves deeper into their chosen vices. The turning point in the play is usually foreshadowed in a scene of public shaming when the nationalist spokesman as the agent of reform reminds the protagonist about his suffering wife, and admonishes him for being lacking in shame ("*sharm karo*,

¹⁸ Kashmiri (1913), "Shukriya Ai Europe"

sharm karo”). Public shaming and social reproach trigger just the right kind of guilt, which combined with the self-loathing and internalized oppression of the colonial self, unfailingly inspires the fallen protagonists to give up their evil ways and surrender to the moral compass of nationalism.

Scholars of melodrama have noted that melodrama’s interdisciplinary appeal is derived from its simultaneously dominant status as an essential mode of consciousness, a core rhetoric of discourse of community and identity, a foundational aesthetic in the development of novel, film, television, a dominant language in conduct of public life and politics, and a shaping force in the creation of modern conceptions of family, race, gender, and nation¹⁹. Melodrama as a theatrical genre emerged in India as a fundamentally modern form in the mid-nineteenth century, not so long after it emerged in Europe. Peter Brooks has shown that melodrama can be located historically and culturally as a form that comes into existence near the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe “for a post sacred era in which polarization and hyperdramatization of forces in conflict represent a need to locate and make evident those choices of ways of being which we hold to be of overwhelming importance even though we cannot derive them from any transcendental system of belief”.²⁰

Ben Singer claims that melodrama as it developed as a response to, and in a mutual relationship with modernity, can be defined as a ‘cluster’ of basic features that are deployed in different configurations to set up this Manichean²¹ universe of moral crisis²². The pathos, sensationalism, high emotionalism, and moral polarization that define this universe are devices that internalize and externalize the moral conflict of the characters that are unambiguously designated as heroes, villains and victims. If internalized conflict creates ‘pathos’, and externalized conflict creates ‘action’, then Linda Williams argues, a dialectic of pathos and action becomes a crucial feature of melodrama where action centered melodrama is never without pathos, and pathos centered melodrama is never without, at least some, action²³.

¹⁹ Buckley (2009), “Refugee Theatre Melodrama and Modernity’s Loss”, 176

²⁰ Brooks (1976), “Preface”, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*

²¹ A Manichean worldview incorporates the idea of dualism wherein moral values are divided into polar opposite categories of good and evil.

²² Singer (2001), *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts*

²³ Williams (2002), *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*

Although melodrama in Indian theater can be analyzed as a ‘genre’, the trajectory of its development in colonial Indian theater can only be understood by contextualizing it within the larger cultural and political melodrama of colonialism, moral reform, and nationalism. I argue that the historical experience of colonial modernity, social reform, and nationalism necessitated a dramatic shift in moral positions and melodrama as a cultural ‘mode’ and as a modern ‘genre’ in theater emerged in response to these new recalibrations. In my analysis of Parsi theater melodrama in early twentieth century, I will be showing that the development of melodramatic form, corresponding to the function of cultural nationalism, promoted particular narrative and performance codes.

In his analysis of a classic nineteenth century French melodrama by Guilbert de Pixerecourt (1773-1844), Brooks recognizes that a typical melodrama opens with the presentation of virtue as innocence and that this serves as a central topos for this structure.²⁴ Most prevalent is the setting of an enclosed garden as a ‘space of innocence’ where virtue will be threatened by an intruder. This space of innocence in Hashra’s plays is distinctly sacred. Appropriating the conventions of Sanskrit theater, Hashra’s plays begin with an invocation to God (s), performed as a ritual by the virtuous heroine surrounded by her female friends. It is in these surroundings that the heroine’s virtue is both presented and then threatened.

Thus *Safed Khun* (1907) opens with a chorus of fairies performing a *hamd* (devotional song) to praise the beauty of nature. *Yahudi Ki Ladki* (1918) opens in a garden setting with an invocation to god as an eternal gardener. *Bilwa Mangal*, (1920) opens with a setting in *paristān* (fairylane) in which female devotees invoke the *omkār svarūpa* (manifestation) of Shiva and the drop curtain bursts to reveal the *swarga lok* (heaven) where Shiva meditates upon Krishna. *Ankh Ka Nasha* (1923) begins in the prayer room of a middle class home where the dutiful wife, surrounded by her *dāsīs* (female maids) is immersed in Krishna *bhakti* (devotion). In all of these plays, a presentation of ‘space of innocence’ is followed by a presentation of the threat that disrupts this space of innocence, threatens virtue, and eventually causes virtue to suffer and eclipse until the agent of reform appearing ‘just in the nick of time’²⁵ restores this space of innocence.

Brooks argues that melodramatic imagination is primarily metaphorical, and this is particularly evident in the case of Hashra’s characterization strategy. In all the plays

²⁴ Brooks (1976), “The Aesthetics of Astonishment”, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*

²⁵ See Williams (2002) on ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time’ as crucial features of melodramatic mode in “The American Melodramatic Mode”, 30-38

examined here, the nationalist desire for moral reform in the name of *dharma* produces in the fallen protagonist intense feelings of self-loathing or self-disgust. In the play *Silver King*, Afzal after losing all his money on gambling and horseracing is so disgusted with himself that he attempts to drown his sorrows in alcohol in order to momentarily feel “like an elephant who need not be bothered by the barking of dogs”. Like many of the other Hashra protagonists, despite his attempts to feel ‘like an elephant’ Afzal ends up feeling ‘like a dog’ until he runs away from home, community, and nation, in order to transform himself into a ‘Silver King’.

These metaphors of self-disgust and self-loathing, signifying a particularly pervasive experience of internalized oppression, occur with remarkable consistency in all of Hashra’s plays. The prostitute in *Bilwa Mangal* imagines herself to be like a piece of bone that has been chewed by countless dogs. While the protagonist *Bilwa Mangal*, a Brahmin equally disgusted with his desires, feels ‘like an impure dog’. Ezra in *Yahudi Ki Ladki* is disgusted by Marcus who is nothing but ‘a Roman dog’. Whereas the religious reformer Brutus thinks that it is Ezra who is ‘like a barking dog that needs to be chased away’. When Ezra threatens revenge upon the Romans, it is because he, and his entire community, has been ‘treated like a dog’.

What particularly stands out in all of these outbursts of self-disgust is the veritable deluge of emotions and gestures that accompanies the ‘acting out’ of the character’s ‘self-pity’. The internalized oppression of the fallen hero, the tearful suffering of the *pativrata* heroine, and the fear aroused by the figure of the reformer, converge to produce the emotional roller coaster that is the defining feature of a good melodrama. But melodrama is not the only reason why the characters feel the way they do, and the plays are structured the way they are.

In the following chapters, I consider how the aesthetics of the melodramatic genre, the ideals of a mythological *dharma*, and the nationalist moral binaries of desire and duty, are brought together by Hashra in a unique way to create some of the most popular plays for Parsi theater. In the first chapter, I examine the formation of the social genre in the play *Silver King* that combines the goals of temperance reform and moral reform by casting alcohol and gambling as evil desires to be given up by the fallen protagonist. In the next chapter, *Yahudi Ki Ladki*, I show how the tension between desire and duty for one’s religion and community becomes charged with the anxieties of religious nationalism, threat of conversion, and consolidation of a collective religious identity. *Bilwamangal* offers the path of *bhakti* as a way to both morally reform its fallen Brahmin protagonist and socially recuperate its prostitute as a devotee. But in the process of doing so, it desacralizes the gods, and imagines devotees as, not free agents but, victims of divine oppression.

In *Ankh Ka Nasha*, the opposition between the dutiful wife and greedy prostitute is initially set up to reform the protagonist, but the play eventually collapses the distinction by showing that the prostitute is not evil but merely a victim of poverty and patriarchy. In the mythological plays, *Sita Banbas* and *Bhishma Pratigya*, the dyad of desire and duty is idealized to show gods' extraordinary capacity for *dharma* and *dukha* (suffering) through their sacrifice of worldly desires, and commitment to dispassion and *brahmacharya* (celibacy). In the plays examined here, the constraints of moral reform, and the expressive possibilities of melodrama are circumscribed within the bounds of mythological *dharma*. It is this mythological sense of *dharma* as duty and its denigration of worldly desire that haunts nationalist ideology, the spirit of moral reform, and the aesthetic conventions of melodrama, by providing an overarching context for structuring and realizing these plays within the conventions of Parsi theatre.

Chapter 1

Temperance in *Silver King* (1910) and *Turki Hur* (1922): Development of Moral Reform Genre, 1910-1922

Hashra's 'courtly' plays in late nineteenth century often invoked the splendour and nostalgia of Mughal India through plots of romance and intrigue. *Silver King* despite its title, was set in modern urban India, and marked the beginning of 'social' genre within Hashra's body of plays. Featuring a flawed protagonist and an urgent need for reform, this new genre of the 'social', with its urban domestic setting and middle class characters, brought to the Parsi theatre stage social issues of immediate relevance to its growing middle class audience. *The Silver King* (1910), a melodrama written by the English playwright Henry Arthur Jones (1851-1929) offered Hashra an early prototype of the already established genre in London. Hashra's *Silver King* (1910) shows how the new genre of 'social' came to be constituted within the conventions of Parsi theatre, and how it staged the discourses of reform during the period.

Within Hashra's oeuvre, *Silver King* encapsulated the initial attempt to integrate a bourgeois form of nationalist consciousness that focussed on the troubles within a family as an allegory for the issues that troubled the nation. Remaining firmly entrenched within the constraints of the melodramatic structure, the play's plot, situation, as well as characters were developed not only to represent familial issues but to heighten the emotional and moral drama around them. The plot of *Silver King* featured a married middle class protagonist addicted to alcohol and gambling, and consequently neglectful of his wife, children, and home. The protagonist's alcoholism, as a result of colonial disempowerment, perversely offers fleeting moments of dignity only during fully inebriated states. This figure of the unconscious alcoholic as colonialism's most tragic victim appeared with regular consistency in many of Hashra's later plays like *Turki Hur* (Turkish Beauty, 1922), *Ankh Ka Nasha* (Intoxication of the eye, 1923), and *Dil Ki Pyas* (Thirst of the Heart, 1932). However, the flawed protagonist's reform and emancipation in the plays were matters of increasing importance not only to his family but to an entire nation.

The production of Hashra's *Silver King* (1910) preceded the publication and production of more iconic temperance dramas like Ram Ganesh Gadkari's Marathi musical *Ekach Pyala* (Just One Glass, 1917) that offered far more enduring, nuanced, and complex characterization of the decadent, rebellious, and alcoholic 'anti-hero'. But Hashra's *Silver King* as an early example of the genre, more or less established the tone for some of the genre's immediately recognizable attributes. Thus a morally flawed,

utterly bourgeois hero, hopelessly addicted to the momentary panacea of alcoholism, gambling, prostitution, and other modern ‘evils’ came to symbolize a threat, as well as an opportunity for nationalists looking to purify the body and soul of a fallen nation. In this chapter, I look at how the nationalist appropriation of temperance evolved into an elaborate discourse symbolizing a moral regime of self-discipline and self-control. Hashra’s plays *Silver King* (1910) and *Turki Hur* (1922) circulated these ideas through emotionally charged narratives that helped build popular momentum for temperance reform at a national level.

Henry Arthur Jones’ ‘The Silver King’, first performed in 1882 at the Princess Theatre, London established Jones’ career as a playwright. A contemporary of Shaw, Ibsen, and Oscar Wilde, Jones remained the most popular English dramatist of the decade (eighteen nineties), recognized not only for his plays but also for his efforts in creating an English ‘national theatre’. Inherently hostile to the principles of Ibsen school of ‘realism’, Jones wanted public theatre to be educational but less intellectual so that it could appeal to the masses.²⁶ Jones saw himself as a ‘transition dramatist’ between two different eras pioneering the move from ‘sentimental melodramas’ and ‘spectacular pictorials’ to modern ‘problem plays’. But in his engagement with ideas and questions of moral, social and political responsibility, he was accused of espousing conservative ‘bourgeois morality.’²⁷

Jones’ status as a playwright of melodramas as well as his criticism from more literary playwrights is mirrored in Hashra’s own uneasy relationship with the progressive writers of his time.²⁸ Although theatre and film scholarship in recent years has dismantled the opposition between melodrama and realism, it is important to note that both Jones and Hashra, as theatre practitioners in late nineteenth century, already saw ‘realism’ and ‘melodrama’ as mutually compatible rather than oppositional genres.

Jones’ *The Silver King* in drawing together the various narrative strands of alcoholism, poverty, homelessness, and urban crime, successfully portrayed a realistic picture of late nineteenth century domestic life in London. It purposefully moved the audience towards witnessing and validating moral virtues without sermonizing about

²⁶ For a detailed discussion on Jones and Ibsen, see Cordell’s, “Jones and Ibsen” 56, 60, 66, in *Henry Arthur Jones and the Modern Drama*

²⁷ Ibid, ‘Jones’s Decade’, 80, 89

²⁸ See Oscar Wilde’s comment in Doris Arthur Jones, 156: “There are three rules for writing plays. The first rule is not to write like Henry Arthur Jones; the second and third rules are the same.” Hashra was later similarly ridiculed by many of his contemporaries; see Manto’s comic sketch of Hashra in his essay, “Agha Hashr Se Do Mulaqaten” in *Ganje Farishte*.

them. Melodramatic devices thus were intended to serve the goals of moral and ultimately social reform. Hashra's adaptation of *The Silver King* not only focussed on borrowing Jones' plot construction, as well as melodramatic devices, but also echoed the imperatives of moral-social reform that in Jones' play were motivated by his desire of building a national theatre. In comparing the two plays, I show how Hashra's play while remaining deeply indebted to Jones' plot and moral impulses, redefined the 'social' genre to accommodate the nationalist impulses in the post *Swadeshi* period.

Jones' *The Silver King* (1882): English Prototype of National Moral Reform Drama

Moral reform dramas beginning with the production of Douglas Jerrold's *Fifteen years of a drunkard's life* (1828) regularly incorporated the themes of alcohol abuse into their narrative. Jerrold's play, produced in 1841 in Boston, marked the beginning of early American temperance drama that was also modelled after the English original. George Odell, the chronicler of the New York stage, contended that Jerrold's play was "the true prototype of the nineteenth century temperance play", and a predecessor of all moral dramas of the period.²⁹ In his analysis of *Fifteen years of a drunkard's life*, Frick points out that Jerrold's play contained many of the identifying characteristics of temperance drama including the visual representations of the effects of drink through costume and makeup, the depiction of alcoholism as a form of slavery, the portrayal of the drunkard as a good but weak man, the deleterious impact of intemperance upon women, and the inclusion of stock characters of villain and the temperance spokesman.³⁰

As a reform minded author, Jerrold's dramatization of the social, political and personal consequences of intemperance displayed a cultural reflexivity that sought to stretch the goals of popular theatre. Frick shows how Jerrold's choice of subject was representative of the historical context in England where intemperance had already reached epidemic proportions, destroying entire families, creating havoc in the workplace and causing a host of social disruptions from urban crime and poverty to increased unemployment and homelessness. Popular theatre, in England as well as in America, played a crucial role in creating the perception of public drunkenness as a significant threat to the moral, social and economic wellbeing of the country.³¹

Frick shows that by early 1850s, alongside the 'catastrophic' melodrama in which entire families perished because of the sins of the drunkard, emerged a new, more 'optimistic' form of temperance drama. Here, the drama focused not upon the ultimate destruction of the drunkard and his family, but instead upon his reclamation and restoration to moral and societal health and his reintegration into his family. Since the drunkards in such plays were represented as weak but good men, their redemption was morally, physiologically and socially possible and allowable.³²

²⁹ See discussion of Odell's 'Annals of the New York Stage' and analysis of Jerrold's play in Frick's "Every Odium within a Word", 79-82

³⁰ Ibid, 81

³¹ Ibid, 82-83

³² Ibid, 108-109

Henry Arthur Jones' *The Silver King* was the culmination of this second type of optimistic temperance drama. Although the plot in Jones' play is not motivated by the problem of alcohol abuse, the play successfully exposed the complex relationship between alcohol abuse, gambling, and urban crime, and the need for 'moral reform' as a way to solve all of the play's problems. Like most of the other middle class reformers of the period, Jones' strictly puritanical upbringing sought to appeal to the moral sense of his audience by subtly showing how the protagonist's guilt and self-control helped him to overcome all kinds of temptations and restore his and family's honour. By the 1880s, the middle class view that the theatre had an educational function and could be a force for moral good was driven by the awareness that "a new public, escaping from the prison of Puritanism, was extending, if not transferring, its patronage to the theatre and that it would need, expect even, a prevailing tone of morality there, as a reinforcement or substitute for what the Church provided."³³

Jones' dramaturgy in *The Silver King* was remarkably different from Jerrold's and his predecessors because the characters did not preach virtue but acted it. Rather than spouting a discourse of self-denial they showed it through their actions. The play also excluded featuring stock characters such as a temperance spokesman or a sermonizing reformer. What it offered instead was a representation of images that were "designed to involve the spectator and lift him into a world of high emotion and simplified morality." Instead of attention seeking tableaux, the images were more 'natural', the style more 'subdued' and the dialogue and diction more 'realistic'.³⁴

Jones' play begins in a Skittle Alley with a group of men at the bar discussing the race at the Epsom Derby where the protagonist, Wilfred Denver, has 'lost everything'. Before Wilfred Denver arrives on the scene dead drunk, his loyal old servant Jaikes, who has come into the bar looking for him, tells everyone why master Denver is a fine man despite his flaws.

Jaikes: Well, he's a bit wild, but there ain't no harm in him. Bless you, it's the blood; he's got too much nature in him, that's where it is. His father was just like him when he was a young man. Larking, hunting, drinking, fighting, steeple-chasing- any mortal spree under the sun, out all night, and as fresh as a daisy in the morning! And his grandfather, old Squire Denver, just such another. There was a man for you if you like. The last ten years of his life he never went to bed sober one night. Yes, he did one

³³ Foulkes, "Henry Arthur Jones and Wilson Barrett", 193

³⁴ See Jenkins' analysis of Jones' *Silver King*, "Terrible leanings towards respectability", 132-133

night, when the groom locked him in the stable by mistake, and then he was ill for months afterwards.

Teddy: Oh, he could take his lotion pretty reg'lar, eh?

Jaikes: I believe you. Well, when I was a dozen years younger, I could take my whack, and a tidy whack it was too, but bless you, I was'nt in it with old Squire Denver, and Master Will's a chip of the old block. He'll make a man yet.

Bilcher: He'll make a madman if he does'nt leave off drinking.

Jaikes: You let him be! He's all right- Master Will's all right!
(Denver rolls in gate)

Denver: (Very Drunk) Yes, I'm all right- I'm all right! I'm 's drunk as a fool, and I've lost every cursed ha'penny I've got in the world. I'm all right!

Tubbs: What, backed the wrong horse, Mr. Denver?

Denver: No Tubbs, no, I backed the right horse, and then the wrong horse went and won.

Jaikes believes that Denver's alcoholism is not a character flaw, but rather a symptom of his youthful indulgence and upper class upbringing. Jaikes knows that Denver is all right, and that soon, 'he will make a man'. But as the scene develops the audience realizes that Denver is not quite all right. Ashamed of his gambling losses and his alcoholism, Jones' protagonist is an emotional wreck, who would rather stay drunk than go home and face his wife and kids.

Jaikes: Come Master Will, you'd better come home.

Denver: Home! What should I go home for? To show my poor wife what a drunken brute she's got for a husband? To show my innocent children what an object they've got for a father? No, I won't go home, I've got no home. I've drunk it up.

Jaikes; (Going) Poor Master Will! Ruined! What'll become of poor Missus and the dear little 'uns?

- Denver; (Takes out a revolver) There's always one-way out of it. If it wasn't such a coward's trick I'd do it.
- Ware: Ah, there you are, my fine fellow. I think my plan in working pretty well. I think Nellie had better have married me after all. Stick to it, I'll bring you to the gutter...
- Denver: I'm three parts drunk and the rest mad, so keep out of my way, Geoffrey Ware.
- Ware: Come, Will, I don't bear you any grudge for taking my sweetheart, I'm only too glad to see what a nice, kind, sober husband she's got.
- Denver: I've warned you once. Take a fool's advice and keep out of my way. The devil's in me tonight, and he'll break out directly.

In the above passage, alcoholism is a source of protagonist's embarrassment but it is also his only escape from facing his own 'failures as a man'. In the scene, his drunkenness is already getting out of control as he threatens his friend with a revolver. By the end of the first act, our innocent protagonist, holding his revolver, staring down at the dead body of his friend, is well on his way into becoming a runaway fugitive. Wrongly believing that he has committed the murder, Denver's escape from law does not resolve the guilt he feels for abandoning and ruining his family. As Jenkins points out, this most sensational episode of the play does not depend on wondrous stage machinery but on the moral drama unfolding inside Denver's head as he wakes to find the corpse of the rival he believes he must have killed.³⁵ The horror of the moment and the weight of his guilt have a moral purpose in the play, as they motivate him to run away to America, and transform himself into a 'Silver King' in the silver mines of Nevada.

The moralising drive in *The Silver King* works through scenes that focus on Denver's psychological battles with his own conscience. As Peter Brooks has shown this kind of inner conflict emerges from the character's need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order.³⁶ Thus Denver carries the cross of his victimhood and waits for the day when he can return home and find the truth about the murder. In the meantime, his wife Nellie's suffering worsen as she is left caring for her sick and starving children, without any food, fire or money. Like any good melodramatic

³⁵ Ibid, 133

³⁶ Brooks, 13

plot, Jones' play finds its proverbial silver lining 'in the nick of time' when a millionaire Denver returns as 'The Silver King', rescuing her from homelessness, and finding the real culprits.

The happy ending of Jones' play rewards the protagonist for his capacity to bear an inordinate amount of wrongly placed guilt and shame. Scenes that dramatize Denver's psychological suffering are intended to serve as public confessions, and signal the presence of his awakened and reformed conscience. The religious tone of these scenes and images emphasize the relationship between the play's moral force and the promise of redemption for those whose virtues are recognized. They also configure the narrative of the play into "a spectacular homage to virtue", where "virtue persecuted is the source of its dramaturgy", and the protagonist's struggle is for "virtue's salvation from persecution".³⁷

The following passages capture the moral drama of virtue, the moment of its eclipse and the urgent need for its recognition.

Denver: (Fleeing from his crime) And yesterday at this time I was innocent! Oh god! Put back Thy universe and give me yesterday! Too late! Too late! Ah, my wife, how thoughtful she was. Shall I ever see her again-and my children? Ah, Heaven, work out some way of escape for me -not for my sake, not to shield me from the just consequences of my crime, but for the sake of my dear wife and innocent children who have never done any wrong. Spare me till I have made atonement.
(Act 2, Scene 4, 59)

Denver: Jaikes, do you know what a murderer's sleep is? It's the waking tie of conscience! It's the whipping-post she ties him to while she lashes and stings his poor helpless guilty soul! Sleep! It's a bed of spikes and harrows! It's a precipice over which he falls sheer upon the jags and forks of memory! It's a torchlight procession of devils, raking out every infernal sewer and cranny of his brain! It's ten thousand mirrors dangling around him to picture and re-picture to him nothing but himself. Sleep -oh! God, there is no hell like a murderer's sleep! That's what my sleep has been these four years past...
(Act 4, Scene 2, 118)

³⁷ Brooks, 25-27

The protagonist's extended reflections, of atonement, guilt, and redemption, are integral to Jones' playwriting and conception of a morally good theatre. In Hashra's world, these moral categories persist but the religious context is significantly undermined. Although Hashra's characters continue to invoke the oppositions between heaven and hell, or good and evil, by referring to Islamicate formulations of *Jannat-Jahannum* (Heaven-Hell), and *Shaitan-Farishta* (Devil-Angel), their moral context is more liberal-humanist than religious.

Hashra's *Silver King* (1910) aka *Nek Parvin* (virtuous Parvin) or *Achuta Daman* (untouched border): Moral Reform plays in Parsi theatre

In Jones' play, it is not alcoholism but a wrongfully framed murder that drives the action of the plot. In fact Jones' critics often point out that the play's excessive focus on alcoholism is one of its major flaws as it stalls the pacing of what could have been a high action crime thriller. Jones' play was not conceptualized as a didactic temperance drama but as a 'morally purposeful' drama in which alcoholism was one of the many evils that overshadowed the protagonist's virtue. In Hashra's adaptation, the primary bearer of virtue and innocence is not the protagonist Afzal but his wife Parvin. Alcoholism is a social problem because it leads to his wife's suffering, threatens her honour, and ultimately ruins her home. The play's moralizing drive then works in ways that are different from Jones'. As the alternate titles suggest, it is the protagonist's wife's virtue that motivates the action as well as the moralizing mission of the plot.

Unlike Jones' utterly self-conscious and easily embarrassed protagonist, Hashra's protagonist is defiant, rebellious, and self-righteous. Afzal's opening speech in the play begins with an elaborate defence of both gambling and drinking.

Afzal: Many languages of the world have their own way of expressing their anger and hatred towards this place. Some say, it's an evil place where people collect to gamble. They say the gambling tree grows in a soil of greed when watered with the blood of honour and wealth. Once the tree grows it brings forth fruits of poverty, shame, and ruin. Ha..ha..ha, how strange are these people and how strange is their judgement. I ask them, if entering a gambling house is a crime, then why not punish the entire world?

Tell me, is the world not a gambling house where every man is trying to outmaneuver the other? At the king's court, minister's mansion, army's camp, and merchant's market, are people not wagering their best bets in

pursuit of some luck? Are bigger, more powerful, and more intelligent men, not trying to swallow, outwit and destroy their smaller, less powerful, and less intelligent adversaries? Yes, they are all gamblers. They are all gambling.

A king gambles with his power, a soldier gambles with his sword, a philosopher gambles with his ideas, and those who have nothing, gamble with cards and dice. If gambling is a crime, then everyone must be punished or none should be charged. If there is evil, it is everywhere, or it is nowhere. Afzal, drink away and gamble away! Like an elephant that cannot be bothered by dogs barking behind him, you let the world bark behind you, and keep marching ahead. (16-17)

The angst in Afzal's opening speech is meant to serve as an introduction to his character in the play. What the speech tells us is that this angst is coming from a mind that is trying to grapple with the 'judgement' being passed on 'alcoholics' and 'gamblers'. In place of Denver's guilty conscience, what Afzal exhibits is an exaggerated anxiety over social persecution and rejection, the source of which is the nationalist drive against both these vices. In other words, moral reform in Hashra's play is not about recognizing the virtue of temperance for individual uplift, but mobilizing this virtue towards restoring the honour of one's family and nation.

The play's alternate titles 'Nek Parvin' and 'Achuta Daman' focussing on the protagonist's wife Parvin's chaste character further complicate the status of 'virtue' and turn it into a gendered moral category. Parvin's 'virtue' seems intrinsically tied to her chastity that is in turn tied to Afzal's honour as a man. Afzal's motivation to become a 'Silver King' in Hashra's play is therefore motivated by the desire to protect his wife's chastity and reclaim his own honour as a man. However, unlike Denver's wife Nellie in Jones' play, Parvin is not a passive victim for she is shown to be quite capable of physically defending herself from the villain Asad. When Afzal is on the run after the murder, Parvin prevents Asad from chasing after her husband, grabbing him by the neck, and forcing him down on the ground with the help of her servant and daughter. After Afzal's escapes, the play continues to follow Parvin's life as single mother, showing her 'transformation' from a passive to an action heroine.

Parvin: The way a large rock stands firm in a stormy sea,
 I too will endure the lashes of time, in the sea of suffering,
 like a terror struck mountain,
 But will not swerve from the path of honour and virtue.

Unlike Jones' play that follows the male protagonist's journey to rebuild himself into a 'Silver King', Hashra's play focuses on the wife's narrative in order to allow her various opportunities to reinvent herself as a fierce and ferocious wife and mother. In the following scene, the villain Asad has kidnapped Parvin and her daughter, and threatens her with rape and murder.

Asad: If you do not follow my word,
 I will destroy your world and your womb
 If you do not fall down at my feet with joined hands,
 I will break apart this toy of yours.
 You do not know the frenzy of my passion,
 I will bathe you in the blood of your daughter.

Parvin: So be it, mothers have always sacrificed
 themselves for their daughters,
 I will think, that today a daughter
 has sacrificed herself to save her mother's honour.
 that she has returned to me the favors
 that I once bestowed upon her,
 that she once drank my milk, and now she has paid back her dues.

The focus on Parvin's moral transformation, instead of Afzal's, is a crucial shift in the politics of the play and shows Hashra's preference for strong willed heroines and weak willed heroes. Like Parvin, many of Hashra's later heroines, were also shown to defy genre and gender expectations. In being 'like a rock' Parvin portrays physical as well as moral endurance, but in her willingness to sacrifice her daughter, she also oversteps the image of the selfless maternal mother. Parvin's assertiveness and transformation in the play momentarily sidesteps the question of temperance reform, in order to highlight women's issues that were equally important for nationalists during the period. Hashra's *Silver King* in addressing the problem of temperance and women's role in temperance provided an early model for social plays that wanted to more fully engage with these questions as the nationalist debates intensified.

The play ends when a reformed Afzal returns to rescue his wife and daughter and bring the villains to justice. Like an angel (*farishta*) in disguise, Afzal returns home and leaves behind a bag of gold coins (*ashrafiyan*) to help his family pay off their debts and buy the necessities of life. In the final scene of the play, Afzal in disguise confronts

Parvin who believes him to be an unusually good hearted and generous fellow human being (*nek aur faiyaz insan*). After a rather stretched out ending, Afzal reveals his true identity and Parvin almost faints with delight. Their reunion is followed by a celebratory song of love, hope, and gratitude for all the wonderful things of life. As the curtain falls, the chorus girls begin their song and dance sequence, a banquet is laid out, and everyone is shown feasting and drinking alcohol. The play ends by ridiculing its own moralizing agenda and gesturing towards the challenges of implementing temperance reform.

***Turki Hur* (1922): The Turn towards Gandhian Nationalism in Temperance Dramas**

One of the most important temperance dramas to emerge during the post-*Swadeshi* period was Ram Ganesh Gadkari's highly successful Marathi musical 'Ekach Pyala' (1917). Far more successful, in drawing out the psychological and social problems of alcoholism, and its tragic effects on the protagonist, and his family, Gadkari's play extended the discourse on temperance by suggesting that individual 'self-reform' could not solve the national crisis of alcoholism. In the play, Sudhakar, a young lawyer from a poor background, starts drinking after being humiliated by a court officer, and thrown out of his job. Sudhakar's wife, Sindhu, is forced to do ill-paid work, and seek aid to feed her starving baby son. Sudhakar tries to find employment through his drinking buddies but is spurned by all, driving him back to alcohol. One of Sudhakar's drinking buddies is reformed and inspired to work for the nation, but Sudhakar sinking further into alcohol, kills his baby son, his wife and ultimately commits suicide by adding poison to his last cup of alcohol. Gadkari, like Hashra, located Sudhakar's despair and humiliation in his sense of powerlessness that was also triggered by a financial loss that threatened his ability to be an ideal male provider and protector to his family.

Shanta Gokhale in her analysis of Gadkari's play has shown that when Sudhakar has his first drink, he announces that he is no weakling - he can have a glass of liquor and never touch another. When his drinking mates urge him to go to court drunk, he assures them that he has the guts to do so. When Sudhakar returns from court after losing his practice permanently and finds that the news of his addiction has reached home, he admits that he does not care for the loss because he is man enough to take it in his stride. Taliram, Sudhakar's drinking buddy, who incites Sudhakar against his wife, claims that he is man enough to tear the *mangalsutra* off his wife's neck. When Sudhakar, spurned by his drinking buddies, turns to Taliram he asks him if taking one's own life is a sign of lack of manly courage. Taliram finally points him towards the poison of liquor that produces a state of death without destroying the body. Gokhale locates Sudhakar as well

as other male characters' anxieties around 'manhood' as the primary motivation for their alcohol addiction, and their destruction of self, women, and family.³⁸

Like Hashra's play *Silver King*, Gadkari's play is also calibrated around the dominant discourses on drinking and drunkenness, and its effects of young men and families. But it is particularly interesting to note that nationalist position on alcoholism in 1910s is very different from the one in 1917. If the problem of temperance was primarily a 'social' problem in the *Silver King*, by 1917 it had turned into a 'political' problem that encompassed the entire nation, and encouraged state intervention through legislative reforms. Gadkari's play not only foregrounded the question of 'manhood', but through its tragic ending it insisted that temperance reform was not an individual or familial issue but an issue that deserved national attention. In Hashra's next play, *Turki Hur* (1922), staged almost a decade after *Silver King*, during the Gandhi led Non-Cooperation movement(1920-22) the goal of 'temperance' is fully and passionately integrated into the 'nationalist' agenda.

In *Turki Hur* (1922), Arif an upper middle class Muslim is a teetotaller, and well aware of the 'evil' of alcohol that affects 'policemen' who spend their nights picking up drunkards on the streets, and 'wives' who spend their nights getting hit by their drunk husbands. (Act 1, Scene 2). In the following *ghazal* (song), Arif soliloquizes on this 'evil' and warns everyone to not let the poison of a drink destroy one's mind and body.

Arif: Those who drown into their glasses, never again come up in life
 Thousands have been swept away in the tides of these bottled waters.
 Do not waste away your life, you bottle-crazed one,
 For you shall reap in your old age, what you sow in your youth.
 This glass of drink, is a bitter glass of death
 This sherbet is poisonous, and this water is full of fire
 For it will burn your blood and destroy your body.
 How will the watch keep time,
 When the spring has lost its drive?

As the play unfolds, Arif is tricked into trying alcohol by a cunning relative, who convinces him that it is only *sherbet* (a non-alcoholic drink). Once addicted, Arif not destroys his health and wealth, but also ends up stabbing his wife Rashida. The play ends with a drunken Arif being dragged away by the police. The play's ending, like the ending in Gadkari's '*Ekach Pyala*', was far grimmer than *Silver King* and offered no hope for an

³⁸ Gokhale, "Introduction", 39-50

alcoholic's moral transformation, or social assimilation. *Turki Hur* like *Ekach Pyala* not only denied the possibility of 'self-reform'; it explicitly suggested that social, and state interventions were crucial for bringing about temperance reform. It also framed the alcoholic as a 'violent criminal' and thereby a threat to the safety of his wife, children and community

In the characterization of Arif's wife Rashida, the play championed the role of women as active agents of temperance reform. By focussing on the role of education and theatre in spreading awareness about 'reform', it showed how public institutions could be used to serve the nationalist cause and create a public opinion on the issue.

In the opening scene of the play, Rashida is reading a drama and examining theatre's potential for bringing about social reform and social change.

Act1, Scene 1

(Rashida focussed on reading a book. Her friends sitting nearby are reading a newspaper)

Rashida: In moments of solitude, only a book is a man's best *dost* (male friend) and a woman's best *saheli* (female friend). Like a mother, a book nurtures excellent thoughts in one's heart and mind; like a teacher, it trains one in virtue and morals; like a wise traveller, it recounts interesting tales of past and present; like a north star, it guides one on the difficult and dark paths of life. Like a ray of light that sparkles in the snow, each of its letters is full of wisdom and knowledge. Like a particle that contains a cosmos, a book, inside its covers, contains a whole new world of existence.

No.1: You are looking at it with such interest and attention, what kind of a book is it?

Rashida: A newly written literary drama

No.2: Come on sister, you read dramas?

Rashida: Why, is it a crime to read dramas?

No.2: Undoubtedly

Rashida: Sister, if it is not a crime to read tales of gods and fairies that encourage superstition and blind faith, or to read filthy ghazals and novels that

destroy one's shame and innocence, then why is it a crime to read a drama?

No.2: If it were not a crime, then why would people think that watching plays is inappropriate?

Rashida: We no longer live in a world of blind beliefs; we live in a world of reason and experience. In this modern world, when old beliefs are being blown away, thinking of drama as inappropriate is erroneous thinking.

No.2: What is erroneous?

Rashida: Dramas that are full of inappropriate language, meaningless poetry, superficial ideas, and corrupt immoral themes, surely do not deserve to be attended and patronized. But to treat even good dramas with such disdain is to destroy the possibilities of knowledge and expression.

No.2: Whether dramas are good or bad, how are they useful?

Rashida: A drama is a powerful medium to wake up those who are asleep, and redeem those who have fallen. The motivation for progress and the desire for reform that religious sermons and educational lectures cannot achieve in decades, a good drama can achieve in a single night.

No.2: You have completely changed my thoughts on this. Benefits of drama! I used to think of them as nothing but sinful.

No.1: What is the title of the drama that you are reading?

Rashida: *"Turki Hur"*

No.2: Who is the playwright?

Rashida: *Agha Hashra Kashmiri*

No.2: He is a famous poet. I have read his poems in newspapers and novels. What has he written in this drama?

Rashida: *Sharabkhori aur Fizulkharchi ka natija.*
The consequences of excessive drinking and wasteful spending

No.2: Meaning?

Rashida: Sister, our nation that used to eat simple food, wear simple clothes, and lived life in a simple way, is today turned into a follower of consumerism and exhibitionism, a slave of fashion, and an addict of alcohol. Not only are the rich, but also a poor worker spending one part of his daily earnings on tea and cigarette, and offering two parts of his earnings, at the altar of alcohol. In this wave of excessive drinking and wasteful spending, one's health, wealth and honour is being squandered away. The goal of this drama is to draw the attention of our nation towards reforming these problems.

This opening scene of *Turki Hur* states that the *maqsad* (goal) of the drama is *islah* (reform) necessary to caution an entire nation that is threatened by the forces of westernization. In casting the opposition between India's *sadgi-pasand* (simple) culture against the excesses of westernized *faishan-pasand* (fashionable) culture, and the parallels between *sharabkhori* (alcoholism) and *fizulkharchi* (consumerism), Hashra's play extends the 'moral' and 'nationalist' argument for temperance reform into an 'economic' argument for advocating prohibition.

In proposing a historically *sada mulq* (simple nation) that believes in *sada khana* (simple food), *sada pahanana* (simple clothes), and *sada culture* (simple culture), Hashra invents a 'temperate' Indian identity. But alongside 'temperate' are other Gandhian notions of 'simplicity' and 'austerity' that are also readily assimilated into the construction of this national identity. Alcohol is framed as an 'enemy of the nation', because it freely circulates in the outside world of 'bazaars' and 'streets', and must be kept out of the sacred inside world of 'home'. Women as guardians of the home are therefore ideally positioned to fight this invasive enemy with the help of education and theatre.

Temperance drama during the Gandhian Non-Cooperation phase (1920-22) betrays a desire to posit an abstemious, austere and temperate Indian identity in order to draw together, unify, and mobilize the diverse communities, classes and castes towards the nationalist cause of prohibition. In keeping with the spirit of non-cooperation movement, *Turki Hur* (1922) not only exposes the evils of alcoholism, but explicitly critiques imperialism, and proposes a model of reform that advocates participation of women, and collaboration with public institutions (education, theatre) as well as state legislation, for advocating a nationalist temperance movement. To understand how Hashra's plays in particular were so closely aligned with the nationalist discourse of the

period, I provide below a brief summary of the evolution of temperance reform and its integration into Gandhian nationalism.

Nationalist Discourse on Drinking and Drunkenness in late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century

Subaltern and colonial historians bemoan the neglect of scholarship on the history of drink and drinking during the colonial period despite the fact that the issue is central to colonial taxation, subaltern history, as well as nationalist history.³⁹ The rise of temperance narratives in popular drama and literature, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, remind us of its deep entanglements with nationalist propaganda. Robert Colvard's dissertation shows how the histories of nationalism and temperance were closely intertwined from its inception. Long before anti-alcohol agitation became a key aspect of Swadeshi (1905), Non Cooperation (1920) and Civil Disobedience movement (1930), temperance reform created a rhetorical space within which criticism of colonial rule on moral grounds was possible. Colvard argues that it was the temperance component of early Indian nationalism that influenced the social character of Congress, as early reformists and activists predominantly came from college educated and high caste middle class families.⁴⁰

Early temperance reform organizations in India like the Anglo-Indian Temperance Association (AITA), and Women Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) drew their members from middle class and college educated backgrounds. Lucy Carroll has shown that the Indian temperance movement, erroneously understood to be a component of 'Gandhianism' or an example of 'sanskritization', was in its early phase more English than nationalist. In looking at the formative years of the movement in late nineteenth century, Carroll shows how the Anglo-Indian Temperance association (AITA), found with English and Indian members, conducted lecturing tours of William Caine, a British Liberal member of Parliament visiting India, and Revered Thomas Evans, a retired Baptist missionary living in India. Caine had twenty years of experience in temperance work in England, "where the question of temperance was a political one at least as much as a moral one, and where temperance advocates had long believed that governmental regulation was more efficacious than unaided individual self-discipline in the face of temptation".⁴¹

Both Caine and Evans eventually brought together the Indian National Congress and the missionaries as important sources of support for the Indian temperance movement. At the Allahabad session that Caine attended, Congress recognized alcohol as

³⁹ For more discussion, see David Hardiman, 2006; Lucy Carroll, 1976; Indra Munshi, 1999, Robert Colvard, 2013

⁴⁰ Colvard, 3, 21, 92

⁴¹ Carroll, 419

a subject fit for inclusion in its political programme. The annual report of the Anglo Indian Temperance Association in 1890 expressed “gratification at the assistance rendered to our movement by the Indian National Congress, and its branches throughout the Indian Empire”.⁴² Besides the Congress, Caine and Evans also found allies in the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, and Christian organizations, particularly mission run schools and colleges. Indeed they claimed credit for bringing the Aryas and the Brahmos actively into the temperance agitation.⁴³

As new temperance societies were formed all over India, the London Association provided the branches with suggested bye-laws and rules, pledge cards and literature, and expected them to translate suitable Temperance tracts and articles from Abkari (the journal of the Anglo-Indian Temperance Association) into the vernacular, and to foster the growth of a sound Temperance sentiment among the people. To further temperance propaganda, the Anglo-Indian Temperance Association engaged salaried Indian lecturers (like Bipin Chandra Pal in Calcutta), provided them with magic lanterns and slides, and equipped branch societies with select libraries, as there was nothing published in India to help them.⁴⁴ The Amritsar Temperance Society was distinguished for its highly successful attempts to popularize the temperance cause through exploitation of dramatic and literary forms.

According to the branch secretary’s report in 1894, the following novels, short stories, etc, were prepared by the different members of the society.⁴⁵

1. Sharabi-Ki-Biwi (“Drunkard’s Wife”) – of which the Civil and Military Gazette (1893) says: the story of a drunkard who squandered away all his fortunes in drinking and brought about his premature death.
2. Sharabi-Ka-Beta (“Drunkard’s Son”)- ...
3. Sharabi-ka-Yar (“Drunkard’s Friend”)- It is...far way the best...account of the discussion between the drunkard and his friend about the different vices to be reformed, such as alcohol, Nautch, child marriage and other social reforms...
4. Sharabi-Ki-Amman (“Drunkard’s Mother”)- An admirable novelette by the same author, who has adapted the commentary of the Temperance mission with great

⁴² Ibid, 421

⁴³ Ibid, 423-424

⁴⁴ Ibid, 426

⁴⁵ Ibid, 429

skill to the requirements and capacities of the readers to whom the series is addressed.

5. Darus-Sarur (“The Public House”)- A drama after Shakespeare, which contains everything desired for Temperance teaching.
6. An Urdu Translation of Milton’s ‘Comus’.

Hashra’s plays show how the commercial theatre appropriated these popular temperance themes, stock characters, stock situations, and reformist messages to theatre audience in the early twentieth century. In analysing a set of ‘lantern slides’ used by Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1920s, Colvard argues that the temperance propaganda and images in 1920 had turned distinctly Indian, and both temperance activists and temperance discourse by this time became more nationalist⁴⁶. But more importantly, Colvard’s research shows that temperance activists as well as colonial administrators agreed that there was an increase in drinking among the elite, middle classes, and educated classes by early twentieth century.⁴⁷

The social character of Hashra’s urban theatre audience ensured that the discussion of temperance themes and the representation of middle and upper class characters in these plays remained relevant and effective for nationalist mobilisation. Temperance was also a social problem that cut across the religious and regional divide, and in fact brought together Hindu and Muslim social reformers that jointly claimed that alcohol was foreign to India and forbidden in both Hinduism and Islam⁴⁸. Hashra’s plays, *Silver King*, *Turki Hur*, and later *Dil Ki Pyas*, *Ankh Ka Nasha*, by focussing on this elite educated class of Hindus and Muslim characters, managed to bring together both Hindus and Muslim audience that saw the problems of temperance, prostitution, and gambling as a common national problem with a distinctly ‘western’ origin.

This sustained critique of alcohol as fashionable, excessive and a symbol of westernization, foreshadowed and furthered the nationalist agenda of the non-cooperation movement during the Gandhian era. In Hashra’s second play about alcoholism, *Turki Hur* (1922), this sustained critique of alcohol as a ‘western’ influence, the call for increasing participation of ‘women’, and the significance of ‘theatre’ as a site for social reform, reflected the urgency and scale by which such ideas were accepted and circulated by Gandhian reformers. In the 1920s, Gandhi’s writing in *Young India*, publicized his views

⁴⁶ Ibid, 157-160

⁴⁷ Colvard, 114-116

⁴⁸ Ibid, 117, 176

on the abstemious Indian past, the evil of westernization, and the significant role for women in temperance as well as nationalist reform.⁴⁹ Hashra's plays from this period onward betray a desire to engage and espouse Gandhian nationalism through commercial theatre.

⁴⁹ Gandhi, "Young India" (1921) in M.K Gandhi, *Drink, Drugs and Gambling*

Chapter 2

Religion, Identity and the Melodrama of *Qaumiyat* in *Yahudi Ki Ladki* (The Jew's Daughter), 1918

Yahudi Ki Ladki (1915), an adaptation of French grand opera *La Juive* (Paris Opera, 1835) reworks the subject of Jewish-Christian conflict to examine issues of religious identity, missionary propaganda, and conversion anxieties emerging in early twentieth century colonial India. *La Juive*, a powerful and successful nineteenth century 'grand opera', by French dramatist and librettist Eugene Scribe, portrayed the subject of Jewish-Christian conflict on stage in order to critique the intolerance and abuse of power by an autocratic Church and State in the aftermath of the 1830 Revolution and the advent of the July Monarchy in France. Hashra's *Yahudi Ki Ladki* incorporates the plot of *La Juive* to critique the injustice of the colonial state and to represent the heightened anxieties around religious and communal identities that marked the advent of religious nationalism.

Eugene Scribe (1791-1861), French theatre's most prolific dramatist and librettist in the nineteenth century, wrote a staggering amount of material for stage including 244 vaudevilles, 95 operas comiques, 47 comedies, dramas and melodramas, 28 operas, and 8 ballets⁵⁰. But it was in the genre of 'grand opera', in collaborations with composers like Auber (*La Muette De Portici*, 1828), Halevy (*La Juive*, 1835), and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*, 1835, *Le Prophete*, 1849), that Scribe created some of his most enduring and provocative works engaging with religious and political themes that captivated and moved a wide range of audience across the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

After its successful premiere at the Paris Opera in 1835, *La Juive*, one of the masterpieces of nineteenth century French opera, was frequently adapted and staged in other parts of the world. In London it was staged as an opera as well as a historical drama after its premiere in 1835.⁵¹ In Europe, it was regularly staged in Paris as well as in the provinces, and in public theatres in Leipzig, Berlin, Kassel, Frankfurt, Vienna, Brussels, and Budapest. Introduced to American audience in 1885 at New York's Metropolitan

⁵⁰ Pendle, 3

⁵¹ WT Moncrieff wrote two melodramas in English that referenced 'The Jewess'. One was '*Ivanhoe or the Jewess: A Chivalric Play in Three Acts*' based on Walter Scott's novel. The second was titled '*The Jewess or the Council of Constance: A Historical Drama in Three Acts*'. The second one was an adaptation of Scribe's opera '*La Juive*'.

Opera, *La Juive* returned to American stage in 1919 in a new production that was performed regularly in the 1920s.⁵² In colonial India, Parsi theatre companies routinely staged various adaptations of this drama in early twentieth century, but it was with Hashra's version in 1918⁵³ that *Yahudi Ki Ladki* gained national recognition. The play continued to be successfully performed in theatres until the advent of the talkie film, at which point Hashra adapted it into a Hindi film for New Theatres Calcutta in 1933.⁵⁴

In this chapter, I first look at Scribe's opera to examine its significance within nineteenth century theatre, especially within the related genres of 'grand opera' and 'melodrama' that allowed for the fullest exploration of the work's central themes of religious tolerance and individual liberty. I then analyse how Hashra's play in twentieth century colonial India, reworked these themes, structures, and conventions into Parsi theatre framework, in order to turn the subject of Jewish-Christian conflict into a critique and commentary on religious identity, communal propaganda, and conversion debates that raged during the Indian nationalist movement.

Yahudi Ki Ladki, thus becomes a play that while recounting a narrative of French anti-Semitism, becomes a dramatized reflection on the complex process by which religious identities in colonial India were constituted and contested in response to missionary activities and threat of Christian conversions. Finally in comparing the two works, I look at the ways in which Hashra, while being criticized for being a petit-bourgeois playwright, was radical enough to stage highly charged political discourses of religion and identity in commercial theatre.

⁵² Hallman (256) in Charlton, *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*

⁵³ Azmi (2004) points out that *Yahudi Ki Ladki* was first adapted as *Karishma-e-Kudrat* by Munshi Vinayak Prasad Talib for Victoria Theatrical Company in 1913. Abdul Alim Nami claims that Talib's drama based on W.T Moncrieff's play, was in fact first written in 1907. For a history of other Parsi theatre adaptations of *Yahudi Ki Ladki*, see Somnath Gupt, 2005

⁵⁴ Hashra wrote the screenplay as well as song lyrics for this film directed by Premankur Atorthy with actor-singer KL Saigal, and Rattanbai. The later film adaptations of *Yahudi Ki Ladki* included a 1956 film titled *Yahudi Ki Beti*, directed by Nanubhai Vakil with actors Anita Guha and Tabassum; a 1957 film titled *Yahudi Ki Ladki*, directed by SD Narang with actors Pradeep Kumar and Madhubala; and a 1958 film titled *Yahudi*, directed by Bimal Roy with actors Dilip Kumar, Meena Kumari and Sohrab Modi.

***La Juive* (1835): French Grand Opera and the Subject of Jewish-Christian Conflict**

Scholars of grand opera and nineteenth century French theatre have examined different aspects of *La Juive* in their quest to uncover the work's immense popularity and appeal to audiences across the world. In reviewing the scholarship on 'grand opera' Hibberd shows how some studies attribute its popularity to audience demand for bourgeois entertainment, while others have pointed towards its appeal as a spectacle to new urban modes of seeing.⁵⁵ Jane Fulcher has argued that 'grand opera' was a politicized genre for state propaganda, while Cormac Newark in his analysis of *La Juive* has shown that it was the genre's lavish productions with richly decorated sets, and a cast of hundreds in precious period costume that attracted opera goers with its visions of wealth and exoticism.⁵⁶ Hibberd points out that grand opera as a genre frequently offered multiple political perspectives simultaneously through visual, musical and textual means, and it even confused, exaggerated, and invented reality for the purposes of aesthetic pleasure, rather than aiming at factual transparency.⁵⁷

La Juive's narrative attention on the subject of Jewish-Christian conflict was a key factor in making this particular grand opera highly controversial and widely popular. In her contextualization of *La Juive*, Diana Hallman has identified the hidden complex attitudes to Jewishness in the opera, concluding not simply that two sides of an argument were presented to satisfy the government while appealing to audiences with an apparently subversive story, but that 'the balanced presentation of Catholics and Jews may also have been motivated by the desire to strike a *juste milieu* tone and to represent multiple points of view coexisting in the government and among the public.'⁵⁸ Robert Letellier in his analysis of *La Juive* argues that although Scribe's liberal Voltairian beliefs supported a political centre-ground, and the concept of *le juste milieu*, his work constituted a reflection on the nature of freedom and choice in the context of the great social forces of politics and religion, and moved beyond them to address eternal human concerns.⁵⁹

The dramatic plot of Scribe's *La Juive* is set in 1414 in Constance, Switzerland where crowds are celebrating the victory of Prince Leopold over the Hussites. Despite the celebration, Eleazar the Jewish goldsmith continues to work and is therefore dragged out of his house. Cardinal Brogni who arrives at the scene recognizes Eleazar from his early days in Rome, when he had banished him and other Jews from the city. He asks Eleazar

⁵⁵ Hibberd, 6

⁵⁶ Newark, 155-156

⁵⁷ Hibberd, 6

⁵⁸ Hibberd, 7; Hallman, 298

⁵⁹ Letellier, 49-51

for forgiveness, and Eleazar returns home. Eleazar's daughter Rachel invites Samuel (Prince Leopold disguised as a Jew) to a Passover service in which Leopold throws his bread to the floor thus revealing to Rachel that he is not a Jew. Rachel confronts him about his identity and finds out that he is a prince, married, and a Christian. Feeling betrayed Rachel follows Leopold to the palace where disguised as princess Eudoxie's slave, she publicly announces their love.

Cardinal Brogni condemns Eleazar and Rachel, as well as Leopold to death for breaking the Roman laws. Princess Eudoxie, in order to save her husband, begs Rachel to retract her accusations against Leopold. In a last attempt to grant both of them life, the Cardinal appeals to Eleazar to renounce his faith and adopt Christianity. Eleazar refuses but reminds the Cardinal of his daughter who was lost during the pillaging of Rome, and who, Eleazar knows, did not die but was saved by a Jew. Eleazar refuses to tell the Cardinal the name of the Jew, vowing that Rachel will die a martyr. In the final scene, the crowd has gathered for the auto-da-fe, and Eleazar and Rachel are led to the cauldron of boiling oil. In the final moment, Eleazar asks Rachel if she wants to convert and save herself but she refuses preferring to die with her Jewish father. At this final moment the Cardinal begs Eleazar to tell him where his daughter is, and as the executioners hurl Rachel into the cauldron, Eleazar points to her saying "there she goes" before climbing the scaffold to meet his own fate.⁶⁰

Letellier has shown how the narrative structure of Scribe's libretto alternates between public ceremony and private rituals. Act 1 begins with the public act of Christian worship, as the setting moves from church to the city square. Act 2, begins in Eleazar's house with the secret celebration of the rituals of Passover, and Act 3 marks the public court celebrations of Leopold and Eudoxie's nuptials, and so on.⁶¹ This scenic shifting between a public and private setting allows the libretto to establish multiple points of view, and encourage identification with a public point of view in the acts that focus on public ceremony. In such scenes, the Jewish characters, cast as 'stereotypes', reinforce public perceptions of the racial and religious difference prevalent at the time. But in the scenes that focus on private ritual, these same perceptions are challenged, when the audience is forced to see the characters more closely, from inside their own familial and community perspective.

The access to a character's subjective point of view and his psychological emotional state creates a higher degree of audience sympathy allowing the character to fully emerge as a unique individual rather than as a stereotype. In offering glimpses into a character's religious, social, and political identity (Eleazar as a Jewish goldsmith who

⁶⁰ Hallman, 309; English translation of libretto of *'La Juive'*

⁶¹ Letellier, 64-66

hates Christians), as well as his emotional and spiritual identity (Eleazar as a devoted father, a man of faith) the opera allows for contradictory ideologies to be sustained within the dramatic world.

Act 1 portrays Eleazar as a pious but embittered Jewish goldsmith who appears anti-establishment, and resistant to the authority of the state as well as the church. Act 2 beginning in Eleazar's house, shows him to be a devoted, traditional man celebrating the Passover, until the visit by princess Eudoxie (Eudossia) when once again Eleazar, reveals himself to be a greedy, embittered Jew. In this scene, Princess Eudoxie has come to buy a rare jewel for her husband prince Leopold who has returned home after defeating the Hussites. In the following passage, notice how the conversation between Princess Eudoxie and Eleazar, develops through spoken and unspoken dialogue to reveal their moral differences that seem to emerge from their religious worldviews.

In the following conversation, Eudoxie is verbalizing all of her thoughts, but Eleazar is making 'aside' remarks that only the audience can hear, Eudoxie cannot.

Eleazar: I trembled lest this woman
 Discover all our secrets.
 How I did curse within my soul
 Those Christians whom I hated.
 Yet how this beloved gold,
 Will fill anew my life with pleasure!

Eudossia: O Sweet hope.
 He that I love will soon return to me.

Eleazar: These good gold crowns, this beloved gold.
 Will soon be mine once more.
 Ducats, florins,
 How fine to fool these Christians!
 How I hate them all, these fiends.

Eudossia: And I will bear him in my heart
 To pledge my soul.

Eleazar: I hate them all, these enemies of our soul,
 These enemies of our God.

This scene at the end of the second act shows Eleazar to be a greedy, cunning and spiteful Jew. Pitted against Princess Eudoxie's naiveté and innocence, as she pledges her love and loyalty towards a husband that the audience knows is cheating on her, Eleazar appears to be the very personification of evil. In her analysis of *La Juive*, Hallman argues that although Scribe's plot seems to place Christian oppression and anti-Semitism at the forefront of the drama, it also highlights Eleazar's anti-Christian hatred and alienation from Christian society.

Eleazar's self-representation as a victim, forced to endure marginalization as a race, and immense suffering as an individual, in the opera's prehistory, sets the tone for establishing him as a sympathetic character. Yet, while the drama highlights the victimization of both Eleazar and Rachel, there are implications that Eleazar's hate-inflected religiosity borders on the Voltairean idea of fanaticism. Viewed within the liberal context, the Jew as an individual ostracized by the dominant group and denounced by the institution elicits compassion as he evokes the principle of individual freedom. But the Jew's individuality bordering on separatism, and Eleazar's characterization with elements of the Jewish stereotype, take him further away from the role of the oppressed minority and deprive him of being fully sympathetic.⁶²

If Eleazar's character vacillates between being a poor oppressed victim, and a greedy, revengeful Jew, then his daughter Rachel's characterisation appears to be even more ambivalent because of her status as an adopted daughter. Although Rachel is a Jewess, Eleazar knows that she was born a Christian, and at some point, the audience also knows this, and perhaps sees the futility of trying to convert her back to Christianity. But it is in her final refusal to convert in the end, to stay loyal to her Jewish father, and accept martyrdom instead, that she turns into a real Jew. This dual religious identity of Rachel and her final rejection of Christianity even when faced with death, alongside Eleazar's own revenge and martyrdom, is crucial for opera's attempts to liberate its protagonists from their oppressive history.

***Yahudi Ki Ladki* (1918): Threat of Christian Conversion and Assertion of Religious Identity in Colonial India**

If *La Juive* imagined a world divided between Christians and Jews, *Yahudi Ki Ladki* imagined this world to exist in colonial India and to be divided between a religious majority and multiple religious minorities. Scribe's Jewish characters assume fluid identities in Hashra's play, combining attributes of Indian Muslims, Parsis and Jews.

⁶² Hallman, 151

Sharif, a term used to denote upper class Muslims, is repeatedly used to identify the Jewish characters in the play, so that Eleazar (now Ezra) becomes a *sharif yahudi* (Sharif Jew), a composite figure that brings together both Muslim and Jewish identities into a single character. When Ezra, invokes his gods, he sometimes calls out to *Allah*, and at other times to *Khuda* and *Yazdan*, once again projecting his religious identity to be a combination of Muslim and Parsi heritage.

Although the play translates the term ‘Jew’ into *Yahudi*, the latter was not commonly used as a religious category to identify all Jews in colonial India.⁶³ In fact, it was only the Baghdadi Jews of colonial Bombay and Calcutta, imagined to be ‘foreigners’, as they were more recent immigrants from Baghdad, with a recognizably Muslim culture, who were called *Yahudis*.⁶⁴ The older communities of Jews including the Cochin Jews or the Bene-Israelites that had more or less assimilated with the Hindus, were not identified as *Yahudis*. In the play, *Yahudi* therefore becomes a racial, religious, and cultural hybrid that on the one hand refers to a Jewish identity, and on the other hand to any other race, religion, or culture that is considered ‘foreign’.

In other words, *Yahudi* in Hashra’s play functions as an ‘empty’ term that represents any community that sees itself as a religious and cultural ‘other’ of either the Hindus and/or Christians in colonial India. Hashra’s play appropriates the discourse of Jewishness to show how the religious ‘other’ was constructed in the decades prior to the consolidation of religious identities and religious nationalism. Although Christians remain the named ‘enemy’ in the play, signalling the religious threat of missionaries as well as the cultural, social, and political threat of imperialism, the ‘Hindus’ as the category of religious ‘other’ remain conspicuous by their very absence. *Yahudi Ki Ladki* reinforces many of the nineteenth century colonial discourses by Hindu and Muslim reformers that constructed Jews and Jewishness as the ‘other’ of Hindus and/or Christians. Scholar Yulia Egorova in her analysis of such discourses, points out that the purpose of referring to a Jew was often to make a statement about a more immediate other and/or about the self. The Jews as the ‘second other’ were either associated with the Indians and were opposed to the West or were identified with the West and were dissociated from the Indians.⁶⁵

⁶³ For a discussion of Jews in colonial India, see Joan Roland. For a discussion of Baghdadi Jews and their middle-eastern, Arabic influences, and cross linguistic identity (Judaeo-Arabic, Arabic written in the Hebrew alphabet), see Nathan Katz, 126-158

⁶⁴ Visual representations of *Yahudis* in Middle Eastern costumes also marked them as ‘Muslims’ and ‘Foreigners’. Photographs of KL Saigal (as Ezra) from the first film adaptation of *Yahudi Ki Ladki* (1933) show a headdress and long flowing robes that were typically worn by the Baghdadi Jews in colonial Bombay

⁶⁵ Egorova, 130

Yahudi Ki Ladki borrows the plot of a Christian prince (called Marcus) and his illegitimate love relationship with a Jewish girl (Rahil) but unlike *La Juive* where the prince is a married man, here the prince is engaged to be married to princess Eudoxie (Desia). The play begins not with their love story, or with Eleazar's confrontation with the Roman Church, but rather with a presentation of princess Eudoxie (now Desia) yearning for her fiancé. In the palace interiors, surrounded by her female attendants, Desia pines away for the Prince while "time pricks her like a thorn" and "the day weighs down heavy upon her heart".⁶⁶ The setting of the palace *zenana*, (women's quarters) where Desia and her *saheliyan* (female friends) occupy themselves with singing, dancing, and playful revelry, establishes the genre's 'space of innocence' and offers a presentation of what Peter Brooks has identified as one of the key features of melodrama. The play begins with a "presentation of virtue as innocence", and "virtue, momentarily, in a state of taking pleasure in itself, aided by those who recognize and support it."⁶⁷

In a significant departure from Scribe, Hashra's play turns Desia, the legitimate but soon to be spurned lover of Prince Marcus, to be the primary bearer of 'virtue' and 'victimhood' in the play. In Scribe's opera, princess Eudoxie, as Prince Leopold's wife, despite being a perfect embodiment of Christian values, had nevertheless been reduced to playing a minor character to the Jewess. But in Hashra, she is a primary contender for audience sympathy, because her unconsummated love relationship with the Prince marks her as more sacred and pure than the Jewess. In introducing Desia in the opening scene, and casting her as the play's more morally upright character, Hashra inadvertently turns the Jewess Rahil into the more exotic and erotic 'other woman', a stereotype that Scribe had wanted to overcome in the first place in *La Juive*.

The threat of religious conversion and the assertion of one's religious identity are central themes to the plot of *Yahudi Ki Ladki*. But the characters' contestation over religious identity is not a matter of individual choice, as they affect one's entire *qaum's* (community) identity and solidarity. Ezra in *Yahudi Ki Ladki* is not only an embittered Jew with a personal story of Christian oppression, but a spokesman of his entire *qaum* (community), his own suffering functioning as a mirror to reflect the collective suffering of his entire *qaum*. His contestations and defence of his *mazhab* (religion, faith) are most vigorous in passages where he is asked to convert, and abandon his faith. Passages in the play, that focus on Ezra's confrontations with a Christian priest and a religious reformer (Keenshash and Brutus), while representing a religious debate driven by the plot, indirectly comment upon the real threat perceived by minority religions that confronted Christian missionaries in colonial India.

⁶⁶ Hashra, *Yahudi Ki Ladki*, 170

⁶⁷ Brooks, 29

The following passage gives a sense of how such religious provocations often led to episodes of anti-colonial resistance.

Keenshash: Look at the audacity of this heretic who believes in an unseen god.
How he hates us and our religious authority.
Go, grab him, and drag him down here while spitting upon his face.

Sardar: Prostrate

Ezra: To whom shall I prostrate?

Sardar: To this mighty one

Ezra: To this mortal man?
We prostrate before our own glorious god.
Blow me into pieces but I will not bow down with fear.
To no man, shall this head ever bow down.
No, I will never bow down.
Let disaster strike or catastrophe befall,
Let the world be doomed or my life perish,
But it is impossible for a man of faith to lose his honour,
Only on His doorway shall one prostrate,
Wherever He is,
only there one shall prostrate
For no one but my God, has my will ever bent,
nor shall my head ever bow down.

The conflict in the above passage over the performance of *sijda* (prostration), shows the manner in which Ezra is torn between the demands of his faith (Islam), and the commands of the Church and State. *Sijda*, one of the most significant aspects of the ritualistic dimension of Islam, is also a very performative and visible symbol of Islam, as its observation, at the appointed five times in a day, is a religious obligation, for all Muslim men and women, from adulthood until death. As a spiritual exercise, the ritual of prostration perpetuates the remembrance of God and produces purity and excellence of the soul.⁶⁸ In forcing Ezra to prostrate in front of the Christian priest and in Ezra's stubborn refusal to do so, the play not only allows for a public performance of colonial

⁶⁸ Abraham, 91, "Islamic Reform & Colonial Discourse of Modernity in India"

resistance but also public assertions of one's *mazhab* (religion), and *qaum* (community) in the legitimized space of commercial theatre.

As the argument continues, Ezra complains about the injustices of the state, and how his *qaum* (community) has faced religious persecution in the past. Ezra bemoans the suffering of his people in Rome, and this repeated invocation of suffering at the hands of an unjust and merciless Empire are intended to rouse and resonate with the theatre audience, reminding them of their own suffering in British India.

Ezra: What is the use of power, if it is merciless?
 Courage of the unjust is useless.
 The tyranny inflicted upon our *qaum* in the past
 Has been etched upon our hearts in blood
 A thousand blows have been struck upon our heads,
 Our huts have been shattered and torched.
 It is you, who have, tortured us for so long,
 It is we, who have, continued to bear this oppression all along.

Sardar: This man is a hardened enemy of our gods.

Ezra: We are neither enemies nor ill-wishers.
 Each one of us is a mirror to one's own faith.

Sardar: Our god is obvious,
 but where is your god?

Ezra: Our god is here, and there.
 All over the earth,
 and all over the sky.

Sardar: If god is not apparent, not manifest,
 then He is nothing.

Ezra: Everything exists because of god,
 if He is nothing, then there is nothing

In the beginning of the passage, Ezra's narrative of religious persecution becomes symbolic of the colonial angst in general, and the anxieties of the religious minority groups in particular. In lamenting the absence of the Empire's capacity for mercy and

justice, Ezra points out its failures to comprehend the reality of religious difference. In claiming the suffering of his *qaum*, he produces a discourse of collective injury fully resonant with religious minorities and especially Muslims who were fast becoming aware of their 'separate' status after the granting of 'separate' electorates (1906- 1909). Unlike Scribe's Eleazar, aware of his identity as an individual and therefore a strong advocate of individual liberty and freedom, Hashra's Ezra acutely aware of his communitarian identity, is preoccupied with the question of collective rights and representation.

In the above passage, Ezra's back and forth dispute with the Christian priest over the legitimacy of his god is a parody of a typical nineteenth century *munazara* (debate) between a Christian missionary and a Muslim religious reformer, when abstract religious questions were contested in a highly theatrical manner. Various scholars have shown the sense of urgency felt by the Muslims, Parsis,⁶⁹ Jews, and even Hindu⁷⁰ communities, during late nineteenth century, to defend their faith when Christian missionaries were publishing literature attacking Islam and Hinduism.

Jalal has shown that the public debates between Christian, Hindu and Muslim reformists that took place in bazaars and fairs during festivals provided a captive audience for lively *munazaras* (debates) between defenders of faith, and were critical in shaping the discourse on Muslim Identity.⁷¹ Powell has shown that public disputations of this kind were an excellent medium for Muslim leaders' single-minded purpose of restoring the confidence of the community after years of persistent missionary pressure. Since the target audience for such debates were primarily co-religionists, no time was to be wasted on seeking or evaluating either equivalence or difference on doctrinal questions.⁷²

Rafiuddin Ahmed in his analysis of Muslim Christian polemics in nineteenth century Bengal, talks about the threat of missionary conversion and the Muslim response to counter the anti-Islamic propaganda and destroy the effectiveness of Christian arguments. The ordinary, uneducated person was the primary target for both Christian missionaries and Muslim reformers, and for the ordinary public such religious debates provided fun and entertainment. The manner in which the debates were often conducted, including the questions asked and discussed, made it obvious that the combatants played

⁶⁹ For a discussion of confrontation between Christian missionaries and Parsis, see Palsetia, 124-126

⁷⁰ For a discussion of missionaries and Hindu reform movements, see Veer 42-52

⁷¹ Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 78; Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, Ch.5

⁷² Avril Powell, "Muslim-Christian Confrontation", 79-80

to the gallery more than answered serious theological questions.⁷³ Pithy, passionate, and poetic one-liners, as in the above passage, were more likely to be popular and crowd rousing, and were frequently appropriated by the preachers.

Barbara Metcalf in her study of these polemical debates points out that only rarely did a debater enter in any significant way into the frame of reference of his opponent, and each side invariably claimed to have won, which in a sense, each did, for the goal was to stand forth to champion one's own side and foster self-esteem.⁷⁴ In his study of Muslim identity construction through print and orality, Zaidi designates the *munazaras* as 'theatrical'. More importantly he sees this tradition of dialogue and polemic between Muslims, Christians and Jews- in terms of a 'majlis' in Arabic, a practice that has continued since 9th century.⁷⁵

In Saadat Hasan Manto's memoirs, *Dastāvez*,⁷⁶ one finds lively accounts of Hashra and Abul Kalām's personal experience of *munazaras* with Christian missionaries. Hashra was well acquainted with the form and content of these public disputations, and had actively participated in some of the religious propaganda campaigns for a few years prior to the writing of *Yahudi Ki Ladki*.⁷⁷ Through the play, Hashra offers a glimpse of how these debates were produced and circulated beyond the actual event itself. Theatrical representations of *munazara*-like debates actively mobilized the commercial stage for constituting and asserting one's religious identity in the public sphere. In Hashra's play, minority characters not only actively defended their faith, but went a step beyond, to actually force conversion upon their adversary, a kind of subversive gesture that would have been unthinkable to Scribe.

In the following passage, Ezra having discovered that the prince is not a Jew but a Christian agrees to offer his daughter's hand in marriage provided the prince agrees to convert his faith.

Ezra: Without religious conversion,
 a Roman cannot marry a Jew.
 Therefore, I will first have you
 recite our scriptures (*kalma*)

⁷³ Rafiuddin Ahmed, "Muslim-Christian Polemics and Religious Reform in Nineteenth Century Bengal" 92, 97, 111

⁷⁴ Metcalf, "Polemical Debates in Colonial India", 236

⁷⁵ Zaidi, 77-80

⁷⁶ Manto, "Agha Hashra Se Do Mulakaatein"

⁷⁷ Azmi 'Introduction'

before bringing you into our faith.
Then as per the *shariyat*
I will arrange a *niqah* (marriage) for both of you.
Do you agree?

Marcus: So do I have to pay the price
for love by offering my faith?

Ezra: Yes! If you desire to win her hand
then the price is your faith.

Marcus: I can forsake Rahil but cannot forsake my faith.
She is more dear to me than the whole world,
But dearer than her is my religion (*mazhab*).
It is not an easy thing to sacrifice for someone,
A man can give up his life but not his *iman* (faith)

The process of ‘conversion’ here innocuously encompasses rules of *shariyat*, a required reading of *din ka kalma* and the formalization of *niqah*. The incorporation of Arabic terms intended to invoke Islam rather than Judaism, and emphasizing Ezra’s composite identity as a ‘Muslim-Yahudi’. In the above passage, the transformation of bourgeois romantic love into an instrument of religious conversion to level the playing field for minorities is a move that would have been inconceivable for Scribe.⁷⁸ Prince Marcus, forced to choose between romantic love and faith (*Iman*), or desire and religion (*mazhab*), chooses to forsake his love but not religion. Rahil, the Jewess must also choose between romantic love and filial loyalty.

The play becomes a prime example of how Hashra’s entire corpus of social realist dramas turns the romantic plot into an instrument of nationalist desire to privilege and protect the sacred space of conjugality and home. In the play’s climactic scene, when Ezra, dragged to the cauldron of boiling oil, must make a final choice between conversion and death, he chooses to annihilate himself and his daughter, but not lose his *mazhab* (religion).

In foregrounding Marcus, Ezra, and Rahil’s loyalty towards their *mazhab*, *Yahudi Ki Ladki* encapsulates the frenzy of late nineteenth and early twentieth century identity discourse, when assertion of one’s religion, and religious community (*qaum*) became a primary focus for validating one’s social and political identity. Scholars studying

⁷⁸ For a detailed discussion of real life ‘conversion’ cases documented in the 1901 colonial census that were a result of ‘romance’, see Viswanathan 163-166.

religious and reform movements in colonial India have shown that these debates with Christian missionaries took place from at least the 1830s and continued until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The campaign against Christian conversion polarized Hindu as well as Muslim leaders to better organize themselves and actively assert their religious and communal identity as 'separate' from the Christians as well as from other religious groups such as the Hindus and Parsis. The culmination of this process was the the Morley-Minto reform (1909) that formally marked the process of political separatism for the Muslims.⁷⁹ What is interesting in the context of the play is to see how and why this process of constituting one's *qaum* (community, nation) in late colonial era was mediated and modelled after the Jewish experience in the European context.

The Jewish Model and the Desire for a Separate Community and Nation (*Qaum*)

Scholars who perceive a relationship between Muslim nationalism and Zionism have suggested that various Muslim intellectuals and leaders, as well as Parsi thinkers and politicians, identified with the 'Jewish question' in order to imagine their own political future as a minority in India, or as a majority within their own nation state.⁸⁰ In his study of Muslim Nationalism, Devji argues that it is not just the structural similarities between Zionism and Muslim nationalism that is important, but rather the role that world Jewry played in the latter's imagination. New political forms such as religious nationalisms that gave rise to Pakistan and Israel took shape in an international arena and cannot be studied as part of regional histories alone. Both states established in the name of 'minorities' emerged from the common desire to structure a political community around the idea of religious belonging. But Devji's overall argument is that it was the conception of Jews as a global community rather than a regional minority that made it such an attractive mirror for Muslim nationalists. The invocation of Jewish narratives by Muslim intellectuals (Iqbal, Abul Kalam Azad, and Aga Khan) was significant because the Jews represented not simply a minority that sought to become a nation so much as a potentially international or global polity.⁸¹

⁷⁹ For a discussion of Muslim religious and reform movements, see Barbara Metcalf, Rafiuddin Ahmed, David Lelyveld, Gail Minault, Francis Robinson, Dietrich Reetz, Ayesha Jalal, Farzana Shaikh, Bimal Prasad

⁸⁰ For more, see Aamir Mufti's *Enlightenment in the Colony* and Faisal Devji's *Muslim Zion*.

⁸¹ Devji, 16-18

Devji points out that both Muslim and Jewish nationalism became state building enterprises only in the early years of the Second World War. But the early decades of Muslim Nationalism, following the Morley-Minto reforms in 1909, were marked by the simultaneous processes of first asserting one's status as a minority, and then immediately making efforts to escape this minority status by way of pan-Islamism.⁸² *Yahudi Ki Ladki* becomes an early example of how a Jewish narrative was appropriated by a Muslim playwright and put in circulation by Parsi theatre entrepreneurs, to show their solidarity with the Jews as an international minority.⁸³

Aamir Mufti, in perceiving a parallel between the 'minoritization' of Muslims in India, and Jews in Europe points out that the commonality of powerlessness, organized violence, coercion and collective punishment that characterized the treatment of Jews in Europe, bears a striking resemblance to practices of governance and forms of culture that were prevalent in a colonial setting.⁸⁴ Mufti argues that the paradigmatic narratives that were formulated around the figure of the Jew and his assimilation, emancipation, separatism, conversion, exile and homelessness were disseminated globally under colonial conditions.⁸⁵ In this way, minority discourse among Jews, Muslims, and even women, marked by continuities, parallels, and overlaps, is most recognizable in cultural narratives such as Hashra's plays that sought to represent worldviews that could not be accommodated within mainstream discourses.

In a close reading of Iqbal's Persian poem *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi* (Mysteries of Selflessness), written in 1918, Devji has shown that Iqbal invokes the Jews' fate in diaspora as an example of endurance that Muslims might have to follow. Jewish suffering here offers a model for imagining victimhood, establishing solidarity, and demanding a homeland. It is important to point out that Iqbal was also one of the most vocal proponents of the idea of religious belonging (*qaumiyat*) for the shaping of Muslim identity and nationalism.⁸⁶

⁸² For more on Pan-Islamism and Khilafat Movement, see Bimal Prasad 170-175

⁸³ Aga Khan, first president of Muslim League, noted that Indian Muslims occupied a role similar to the Jews in Europe or the Parsees and Christians in India. Cited in C. A. Bayly, 323

⁸⁴ Mufti, 4, 5

⁸⁵ Mufti, "A Genealogy of Post-Colonial Secularism" in *Enlightenment in the Colony*

⁸⁶ For a discussion of Iqbal's poem *mazhab* and the finer distinctions he makes between *qaumiyat* and *millat*, see Jalal, "Religion as Difference"

In the following passage from Hashra's play, notice how religious belonging (*qaumiyat*) emerges in response to a community's injured consciousness and how the collective desire for revenge (*intiqam*) constitutes a *qaum*'s political will.

Ezra: If we are really like this
 Then you and your *qaum* have made us like this.
 If you are going to resent our *pāq mazhab* (*holy religion*),
 and spit on our faces,
 treating us like dogs
 then why will the dormant fire of revenge
 not rise in our hearts?⁸⁷

Brutus: Alright can you tell us in what way we have
 Behaved badly towards your community?
 What suffering have we given you?

Ezra: Don't ask me this question,
 ask your own cruel heart,
 Ask your blood soaked hands,
 Ask your daggers and your swords,
 Did you not mercilessly slaughter
 thousands of Jews, only because
 they prayed to a different god?
 Did you not turn thousands of children
 into orphans, and thousands of women into widows?
 Did you not fill up your prison quarters
 with innocent people from my community?
 If this is good behaviour and good conduct,
 Then tell me what is injustice and tyranny?
 The hatred you have inflicted upon us
 has had its opposite effect,
 for it has blossomed into an even more
 passionate love for our faith.

⁸⁷ Hashra, *Yahudi ki Ladki*, 243-244

In the passage, the horror of the images invoked through Ezra's memory of Christians 'spitting on our faces', 'treating us like dogs', 'followed by his claim that 'suffering is a badge of our tribe' are closer to Shakespeare's Shylock than Scribe's Eleazar, for such extreme expressions of contempt are not found in *La Juive*.⁸⁸ But it is not the proclamations of contempt for one's enemy, rather the declarations of love for one's own religion and co-religionists that constitutes a new idea of belonging in Hashra's play. This sense of collective belonging in the play is simultaneously anti-Christian and anti-Colonial, and embodies the idea of a consolidated religious community, and nation.

As Devji has convincingly argued, religion here is not some old fashioned theological entity, but an abstract and modern idea, it is another aspect of the social contract, where the sense of brotherhood provides a people with the foundation of its nationality. For Muslim nationalism, religion was conceived of not as a supplement to geography but as its alternative.⁸⁹ The play shows us how these ideas of religion and religious belonging were conceptualized and invoked during the early decades of religious nationalism in mainstream public theatre. The play both idealizes *qaumiyat*, and legitimizes it as an alternative to the forces of imperialism and Hindu nationalism.

What is unique about Hashra's conception of *qaumiyat* in *Yahudi Ki Ladki* is its desire to not be unitary but inclusive enough to accommodate other minority religions.⁹⁰ This formulation of *qaumiyat* is not *muttahida qaumiyat* (composite nationalism), because it leaves the Hindus out of the equation. But it is inclusive nevertheless because it seeks to merge religious difference between Parsis, Jews, and Muslims in order to suggest a shared minority identity. The eternal battle of good versus evil is recast in terms of a majority-minority opposition, where minority suffering and virtue are ultimately recognized and rewarded. As Williams reminds us, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately concerned with retrieval and staging of virtue through adversity and suffering, then we must realise that the operative mode is melodrama. Given the heightened sensitivity around these issues in 1918 when *Yahudi Ki Ladki* first appeared on stage, Hashra's socio-political melodrama can also be seen as advocating a particularly strong position against communalism as well.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Although, Eleazar (in Scribe's opera) has also been compared to Shylock, he is less extreme in his outbursts than Ezra in Hashra's play.

⁸⁹ Devji, 47

⁹⁰ There are no references to 'Hindus' as a religious majority anywhere in the play. The anti-Christian propaganda was shared by Hindus as well, and so Hindus were seen as potential allies. But in the play, they are neither the enemy, nor the allies.

⁹¹ The fact that Hindus do not exist at all in the dramatic universe of *Yahudi Ki Ladki* betrays Hashra's own position on the divide between the Hindus and Muslims. As I've

Scribe's attempt to strike a *juste milieu* tone prevents his characters from becoming predominantly good or evil as they are caught between 'political symbol, social projection and literary stereotype'⁹². In a narrative structure that sustains a high level of conflict, and multivalent subject matter, both Christian and Jewish characters display a mix of good and evil tendencies. The thrust of the opera is not to stage a narrative of victimization but to engage with the complex questions about the meaning and extent of religious freedom, associations between the Catholic Church and the state, governmental tolerance and protection of religions other than Catholicism, and the social integration of Jews and Christians in France. The tone of religious conflict permeates the first act that begins in the public square where one sees the portals of a church on the right, and a goldsmith's shop on the left.⁹³ The choir inside the church is singing 'Te Deum', and amidst the joyous chants of the crowd and the chorus, one hears the sharp, dissonant, obtrusive sound of hammers arising from the goldsmith Ezra's shop.

The rest of the opera, beginning on this presentation of contrast between the Church and the Jew, institutionalized religion and the individual, continues to build upon this opposition by offering evidence of unresolved differences between the characters' worldviews. The unfolding of Scribe's opera from crisis to crisis until its final tragic tableau with the Jewess (Rachel) being hurled into the cauldron of boiling oil, and the Jew's (Eleazar) revenge and execution, is structured to invoke its heritage of 'tragedie lyrique', where all characters lose and no one really wins. Scribe's work following the conventions of the grand opera at the time, including a tragic ending, a passive hero incapable of making crucial decisions, and above all the final tableau, is effective precisely because of the scale and effect of this tragedy.⁹⁴

In adapting this work to the Parsi theatre framework, Hashra minimizes the former's tragic effect by insisting on resolving all conflicts through timely revelations, resolutions, and a conventional 'happy ending'. For all its invocations of collective injury, *qaumiyat* and the desire to extract revenge and retribution, the play ultimately rejects *La Juive's* 'auto-da-fe' climax. Ezra's confession to the cardinal 'in the nick of time' saves himself and his daughter from being burnt to death. Once the cardinal finds out that Rahil is his own daughter, he immediately apologizes to Ezra. Not only is Ezra

shown in the 'Introduction', Hashra's Hindu plays with no Muslim characters, and Muslim plays with no Hindu characters, are conceptualized as hermetically sealed worlds.

⁹² Hallman, "Introduction"

⁹³ Scribe, *La Juive*, Act1, Scene 1

⁹⁴ For a discussion on conventions of grand opera, see Gerhard, 9

pardoned of all his sins, but the cardinal is more than happy to let Rahil continue with her religious identity as a Jewess, and her relationship with Ezra as her father.

Brutus: Ezra, be merciful. Pardon my sins,
And cleanse your heart of your ill-feeling
My older brother! As Rahil has
Thought of you as a father for so long,
Let her continue being your daughter.
And let her stay with her faith until her very last breath
So that she may follow the religion
in which she has been brought up.

Rahil: My dear father! Your benevolence
has rescued me from idolatry
And shown me the path of *tawhid* (indivisible oneness of Islam),
I will neither leave the path, nor leave you,
and will never turn away
From honoring you and serving you.

Following the cardinal, all characters turn magnanimously forgiving of each other, forgetful of one's past, and all too eager to reconcile differences in order to ensure a satisfactory closure. Marcus asks Rahil to forgive him for abandoning her, while Princess Desia, having realized that the Jewess is after all a Christian, is pleased for her marriage to the Prince. The play ends on a note of jubilation and celebration, casting aside its own loose ends in order to resolve the plot. The final wedding tableau, emblematic of Hashra's quintessentially ordered universe, betrays the bourgeois desire to preserve home and conjugality as the ultimate 'space of innocence' in a rapidly changing world.

Chapter 3

***Bhakta* as a Nationalist Hero: Madness, Blindness and the Imperatives of Moral Reform in *Bilwa Mangal* (1920)**

Competition from rivals like Radheshyam Kathavachak and Narayan Prasad Betab, and the intensification of Hindi-Urdu controversy in early twentieth century, motivated Hashra to turn towards a Hindi-Hindu idiom in order to fulfil the rising demand for plays based on mythological and devotional subjects. Mythological plays based on epic and Pauranic heroes had always been popular with Bengali and Marathi playwrights, but now they were becoming standard in Parsi theatre as well. In Hashra's next play *Bilwamangal* (1920), the genre conventions of the mythological and social were brought together to create a work that blended myth, melodrama, and moral reform into a single purposeful narrative. *Bilwamangal* dramatized the life of a medieval poet-saint in order to show his moral transformation through the path of Krishna *bhakti* (devotion). Set in mythic time and space concurrent with colonial India, *Bilwamangal* presented the figure of a modern *bhakta* (devotee) as an ideal nationalist hero to lead the battle against wickedness (*adharma*) and imperialism.

Bengali playwright Girishchandra Ghosh (1844-1912) first dramatized Bilwa Mangal's narrative in his play *Vilwamangal* in 1886. Ghosh's play adapted the legend of a fourteenth-century blind poet Lilasukha, also known as Bilwa Mangal or Vilva Mangal, who has been identified as the author of the devotional poetic work *Krishnakarnamrita*. Composed in Sanskrit, Lilasukha's work was recognised as a central text in the sixteenth century by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, founder-figure of the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement. Within the *bhakti* traditions of devotional recitation and singing, Krishna Lila performances, and nineteenth century folk traditions in Bengal, the work's title 'nectar for the ears' (*Karnamrita*), and its attendant hagiography of the blind poet-seer, emphasized the aural genre as a dominant mode for invoking devotion.

In the late nineteenth century, beginning with Girish Ghosh's play *Vilwamangal* (1886), and then in Agha Hashra Kashmiri's play *Bilwamangal* (1920), the dramatization of this *bhakti* narrative incorporating elements of realism sought to present the figure of the *bhakta* as an ideal hero to lead a spiritually fallen nation. The key distinction between the two versions was that Ghosh's play remained deeply entangled with the regional concerns of late nineteenth century Bengali *bhadralok*, Hindu revivalism, and popular saint Ramakrishna's beliefs in *bhakti*, women, and *dasatya* (bondage)⁹⁵. While Ghosh's

⁹⁵ For an explication of 'dasatya' see, Sarkar, 'Kaliyuga, chakri and bhakti', 300-305

play did not refer to contemporary colonial India, it presented devotional madness as a panacea to the spiritual and social malaise of bondage (*dasatya*). Ghosh's play allegorized colonial *dasatya* in terms of a moral 'blindness' that could only be corrected through the unreasonable 'madness' of devotion.

Hashra's adaptation of Ghosh's play in early twentieth century constituted a break from regional Bengali theatre, and calibrated *bhakti* as a viable solution for addressing problems of contemporary colonial India. Hovering between fantasy and realism, Hashra's play further complicated the status of *bhakti* even as it attempted to address its intersections with existing problems of caste, conjugality, and patriarchy. The characterization of a fallen Brahmin, a morally upright prostitute, and domineering gods, simultaneously replicated and challenged social hierarchies of power. In examining the 'nationalist' potential of *bhakti*, Hashra's play imagined a reformed *bhakta*, as a representative of the gods, duly chosen to play a pivotal role in leading the nation's Hindu *jati* and dharma.

Girish Ghosh's *Vilvamangal* (1886): Colonial Bondage and the Path of Madness and Mendicancy

Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1922) steered the rise of Bengali theatre for more than two decades until modern drama was permanently established in Bengal. Utpal Dutt in his study of Girish Ghosh has shown that as an assistant for Monmohan Basu's *yatra* troupe, Ghosh practiced musical repartees, and song improvisations for a largely uneducated and noisy audience. Beginning with his own *yatra* troupe in 1867, Ghosh's first play *Sarmistha* (by Michael Madhusudan Dutta) was an attempt to combine the five act structure of modern drama with the lively performances of traditional *yatra* in order to please this kind of a typically loud and boisterous audience.

Utpal Dutt, shows that Girish's training as a 'street poet' helped him utilize the techniques of *yatra* to overwhelm his audience with narratives that were full of intense passions and emotional turmoil. Guided by emotions and desires rather than by reason or logic, Ghosh's characters were deliberately larger than life and thereby stage worthy.⁹⁶ Ghosh's fascination for historical characters, mythological heroes, and for medieval saints like Bilwa Mangal was a result of his own individual belief in the power of awakening one's devotional and spiritual capacities to fight the assault of imperialism and *adharmā*.

⁹⁶ Dutt, 'A theatre of wonder', 1-26

Criticized for being overtly religious and didactic, the Bengali intellectuals and bourgeois puritans not only condemned Girish's theatre but campaigned against the immorality of Bengali theatre itself where they saw prostitutes, rebels, saints, and other degenerates indulging in violence, vulgarity and sentimentality in the name of drama. In Dutt's analysis, Girish Ghosh's preference for devotional, historical, and mythological subjects was a way to express "his disgust with bourgeois realism". Ghosh's heroes were not meant to be identified with but in fact revered. Dutt points out that while Bengali intellectuals and critics found Ghosh's play to be full of "cheap sentimentality, or sob stuff and stage tricks", such criticism was motivated by class prejudice because Ghosh's "violence and raw sensuousness threatened to swamp the quiet inoffensive world of the bourgeoisie."

More importantly, Ghosh's plays went beyond the conventions of modern drama because his association with the saintly figure of Sri Ramakrishna gave him a sense of social purpose, and some of the features of his work, like passionate love of one's country and bitter hatred for imperialism, were informed by his faith in Ramakrishna. Dutt points out that Ramakrishna was Girish's teacher and so Ramakrishna's ideas not only formed the subject matter of his plays, but more than that, they moulded his mind, his way of thinking, his passions and preferences.⁹⁷

Historian Sumit Sarkar's account of Bengal's social history shows the pressures of modern colonial life within which Ghosh's plays and Sri Ramakrishna's mysticism gained popularity. Sarkar identifies the period of 1880s as a period of hiatus in *bhadralok* history. This is the period when the renaissance dream of improvement and reform under British tutelage was turning sour, and the alternative patriotic vision of solving the country's ills by overthrowing foreign rule did not yet appear viable. The hiatus bred disquiet about *bhadralok* endeavours, and made Ramakrishna's rejection of social activism popular with middle class audience. The loss of myths of renaissance improvement encouraged moods of introspection, nostalgia and a partial turning away from male activism. This new sensibility found resonance with the traditions of *bhakti* promoting subordination of external action to inner piety, and a preference for mad, feminized, childlike behaviour. Sarkar reads 'subversion' of imperialist ideas in the face of increased rationality of education, and time-bound *chakri* (job) as driving forces behind Ramakrishna's influence within a particular milieu to which Girish Ghosh belonged.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Dutt, 'The Sword and the Bible', 60

⁹⁸ Sarkar, 'Kaliyuga, *chakri* and *bhakti*', 300-305. For more on Ramakrishna's influence on Bengali middle class, see Chatterjee, 'A religion of urban domesticity'.

Girish Ghosh's *Vilwamangal* begins with an introduction to its protagonist, an upper class Brahmin madly in love with a prostitute called Chintamani. Gradually, the play introduces other characters that facilitate the transformation of Vilwamangal's madness for Chintamani into madness and devotion for Srikrishna. In the very first scene, the play introduces a character called *sadhak*, who has recently returned from Benaras, and is searching for a disciple to impart the mysteries of divine love. The second scene introduces another character called the 'prophetess', a mad woman who wanders about the streets singing of divine love. When a fellow 'beggar' asks her to identify herself, the 'prophetess' tells him that she is a daughter of the mad people, who has been married in the house of the mad.

Prophetess (Sings)

Prophetess: Mad is my Father,
Mad is my Mother,
Mad am I.
My Father dances the dance of creation,
And the dance of destruction.
Shyama, my Mother,
Drunk with the bliss of Her own being,
Remains forever one with my Father.
Ah, do you not see Her hair waving?
And look, how beautiful are the anklets.
On Her lotus feet!
Hark-
Their music!

By the end of the first act, various nameless and homeless characters offer eloquent discourses on madness, love, and divinity, foreshadowing Vilwamangal's impending transformation. In the meantime, the play's fallen protagonist, feverish with desire for the prostitute Chintamani, abandons his father's corpse waiting for his death rites, and sets out to meet his beloved. It is a stormy night, and to cross the raging river, Vilwamangal is wandering about the river banks hoping to find a log when he sees the Prophetess. Seated on the cremation ground beside the river, the prophetess is absorbed in meditation before a wood fire, and calling out to Chintamani. Confused and disoriented, Vilwamangal asks her how she knows of Chintamani.

Prophetess: He is my own. He is mine indeed.
I cannot call Him by His name,
for He is my Beloved.

Vilwamangal: But Chintamani is a woman!

Prophetess: Chintamani, a woman? Sometimes, Her long hair waving, one hand offering boons, the other strength and courage, She is a woman; then, delightful to the hearts of Her devotees, She dances on the bosom of Him who moves not. Again, as Krishna, She plays on the flute, and by Her sweet music enchants the dwellers in Braja. Again, a silvery white form, naked, with matted locks, She exults in the joy of Her own being. Again, charming, playful, drunk with bliss, Her beauty indescribable, a garland of flowers on Her bosom, She embodies divine love. Now, a dual form, She is both man and woman; now She is one-the One Existence Alone. Time is no more, not motion, nor any sign of change. Nothing is left but stillness, Reality Itself, the Eternal Present, the Inexpressible, the Unimaginable.

The Prophetess' mysterious responses about Chintamani's identity and gender, suggest the symbolic significance of Chintamani's character. Chintamani as a prostitute and Chintamani as a god/goddess are invoked as a symbol of an idea that exceeds representation. In simultaneously becoming form and formless, human and divine, man and woman, and overcoming all notions of duality, Chintamani is shown to be the very essence of *advaita Vedanta* (monism), a metaphysics of non-dualism, where the self is considered to be inseparable from the divine. This 'inexpressible' and 'unimaginable' truth is beyond Vilwamangal's comprehension for he is deluded by his desire. His mind clouded with lust, Vilwamangal leaps into the river, while the Prophetess sings an ode to madness.

Prophetess (Sings)

Prophetess: The Mad One hath made me mad,
No longer I stay at home;
Seeking Him everywhere, weary and sad,
Over the world I roam.
The Mad One waits by the lonely way,
He weeps, and He calls to me-
Ah, sweeter than sound of the lark's sweet lay
Is the voice of Chintamani !

Dark is the night as He waits for me,
As He waits by the lonely way:
The jewel rare of my heart is He-
Chintamani!⁹⁹

The mad Prophetess sings of the mad Chintamani who has turned Vilwamangal into a ‘mad one’ who driven by the storm of his passions, can no longer stay at home. The Prophetess wanders about the streets in search of another mad one, Krishna, whose divine love has turned her mad. The entire first act thus is a poetic reflection on madness as a transitional state between the human and divine, a state of being, that is equally empowering and liberating.

According to Sarkar, this valorisation of madness was crucial to Ramakrishna’s devotees who were caught up in the bondage of ‘clock time’, *chakri* and plagued with a sense of alienation from their roots. Sarkar shows that Ramakrishna and his devotees’ excessive display of emotions, ecstatic dancing and public weeping constructed an alternative mode of being that was outside the goal-oriented rationality of the adult male. In the context of the play, this model of madness helps to conceptualize the figure of *pagal* (mad) as one outside the bounds of colonial bondage. Sarkar shows that the runaway *pagal* in rejecting responsibility, masculinity, and adulthood expressed defiance to the civilizing mission, and stood in opposition to the rigid code of Victorian responsible male behaviour.¹⁰⁰

Scholars like Chattopadhyay who see Ramakrishna as the ‘patron saint for the Calcutta public theatre’ have shown that Ramakrishna was quite intimately involved with the plot construction and conceptualization of Girish Ghosh’s play *Vilwamangal*. Prior to *Vilwamangal*, Ramakrishna’s visit to Ghosh’s play *Chaitanya Lila* (The Play of Chaitanya, 1884) had already won him the devotion of courtesan-actress Binodini Dasi, and a large circle of female devotees who, being courtesans and actresses were treated as outcasts by *bhadralok*. This is precisely the period, from the mid-1880s that Sarkar identifies as a period when Ghosh introduced the figure of the wandering *pagal* or ‘holy fool’ in at least three of his plays including *Vilwamangal* (1886), *Nasiram* (1888), and *Kalapahar* (1896). The figure of the *pagal* as mad to the conventional world but purveyor, really, of divine wisdom, appears to embody pure irresponsibility or playfulness, but eventually presides over and inspires substantial moral change.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ *Vilwamangal*, 49, Act 1, Scene 4

¹⁰⁰ Sarkar, ‘Kaliyuga, chakri and bhakti’, 302-303

¹⁰¹ Sarkar, ‘Kaliyuga, chakri and bhakti’, 344

True to her name and character, the *pagal* prophetess in the play both inspires and guides Vilwamangal and Chintamani's moral transformation, encouraging them to renounce their homes, and walk the path of devotional madness. However, unlike the Prophetess who is liberated by her madness, Vilwamangal's madness is delusional because he is unable to overcome his lust for Chintamani. While crossing the river, he mistakes a corpse for a log, and while climbing the wall of Chintamani's house, he mistakes a snake for a rope. Chintamani reveals to him the extent of his mad delusions.

Chintamani: I doubt you no longer. You are mad indeed!
You have neither shame, nor hatred, nor fear.
You grasp a snake thinking it a rope.
You grasp a corpse, thinking it a log.
I went once to hear the Scriptures read:
how it all comes back to me now !...
What might you not have attained
if you had turned your thoughts
to the lotus feet of the Lord
instead of to me - to me, a prostitute !

Chintamani sees Vilwamangal's madness in terms of his inability to distinguish between reality and delusion. Vilwamangal is mad because he cannot see the corpse as a corpse or the snake as a snake. In this way, Vilwamangal's madness is implicated with his inability to see clearly. In other words, it is his eyes that are posited to be the real cause behind his desire, misperception and suffering.

Vilwamangal: Tempted still, O eyes! And you, O mind,
still the slave of the eyes!
Let me see how long you will keep me enslaved!
Ah eyes, love's topmost warriors,
you bring home a deadly serpent
as if it were a friend.
Fretting to find happiness, the deluded mind
suspects not your guile and makes room for its enemy
in the very shrine of the heart –
where God alone should dwell.
There the serpent distils its venom.
Again this evil thing takes place:
again the eyes, by beauty tempted,

lead home the serpent;
and again, though sorely suffering,
the foolish heart bids it welcome.
To such sad round of misery there is no end;
no respite is there from passion....
Mind, you are a beast!
But how can I put the blame on you alone?...
On, O mind, on, if so I must, whither the eyes lead!

In the above passage, Vilwamangal's eyes lead him towards a state of bondage where his mind and his heart remain enslaved by the 'serpent of lust'. The invoking of 'serpent of lust' leading to the 'temptation of beauty' that traps a man in 'eternal misery' is reminiscent of Ramakrishna's formulation of the suffering of *kaliyuga* brought on by the shackles of *kamini-kanchan-dasatya* (woman, gold, bondage)¹⁰². Sarkar has shown that Ramakrishna's conception of evil repeatedly linked together *kamini*, *kanchan* and *dasatya* of *chakri*: lust, as embodied invariably in women, gold, and the bondage of the office job. What we find in Vilwamangal, is precisely this triad conveyed through images of his lust for Chintamani, and Chintamani's lust for gold, Vilwamangal's subsequent delusions, and finally his sense of reconciliation that ties it all to the evil of his eyesight.

Vilwamangal: Let me consider to myself what a fool
my eyes have made of me.
Born a noble Brahmin, I became slave to a prostitute.
Even on the day set apart to honour my dead father,
my heart knew no patience. It was an awful night,
a wild storm was raging, I did battle with towering waves.
My life I saved by clinging to a corpse.
Then I mistook a snake for a rope.
It is my eyes, my eyes that have made me so blind...
And what was my reward.....

(Aloud): Please give me two hairpins. (Ahalya gives them to him.)
Mother, go tell your husband I am your mad son.

Vilwamangal: Fool, are you still attached to your eyes?
Kill your foe quickly!
Thus will you find the best of eyes,

¹⁰² See Sarkar, 289 for how late nineteenth century vernacular plays, farces, and tracts correlated the evils of *kaliyuga* with the evils of *kanchan-kamini-chakri*.

eyes that behold the beloved Krishna as your own,
and will look upon all else as trifles.
Out with it, out with it-
this deceitful, transitory sight!
(He pierces his eyes with the pins.)
Go now whither your feet may lead! (Exit)

The impact of watching Vilvamangal piercing his eyes with pins might have been extremely shocking to a theatre audience that was not particularly accustomed to violent images on stage. Intended to be an awe-inspiring moment in oral storytelling traditions of bhakti this pivotal moment turns into a moment of shock and horror in the visual and performance context of theatre. The linking up of the evils of everyday vision alongside the problems of *kanchan-kamini-dasatya* is crucial to the moralizing message of the play. Ramakrishna's discourses on the problems of *kanchan-kamini-dasatya* are not merely hinted at, but overtly verbalised by a saintly guru like character called Somagiri, who in the play is Vilvamangal's spiritual master. Somagiri sermonizes to his disciple on the existence of *maya* (illusion), that in the two forms of lust and gold draws man powerfully to itself, and thus deluded, man remains forever in bondage.

This conceptualisation of *dasatya* (bondage) linked with the pleasures of woman and gold and entangled with the privilege of vision is paradoxical in the context of theatre where visual knowledge is the primary mode of representing and apprehending a dramatic narrative. The play denigrates vision and visual pleasure by claiming that Vilvamangal's sexual madness was caused by an improper lower 'vision' that provoked lust, whereas his spiritual transformation was inspired by the destruction of such vision through self-inflicted blindness.

It is possible that Vedantic notions of 'seeing as touching'¹⁰³ might have informed Ramanakrishna's notions of 'lower vision'. But such vilification of seeing seems to be contradictory to Ramakrishna's own privileging of 'direct perception' as the only valid form of knowledge. Sarkar has pointed out that Ramakrishna, in fact, liked to say that 'seeing is better than hearing, and hearing is better than reading', because the realm of the visual-oral-sensuous was a form of direct perception or 'knowing' that was held to be superior to abstract textual knowledge. Claims to 'seeing' were the only way less educated devotees could claim superiority over the textual knowledge of bhadrak lok intellectuals. So the critique of everyday vision in Ghosh's play muddles his 'religious materialism' where seeing and watching was privileged over scriptural reading and

¹⁰³ See Diana Eck, 9, for quotes from scholars Stella Kramrisch, and Jan Gonda 'Eye and Gaze in the Veda' that show how 'seeing is a kind of touching' in the Indian context.

hearing.¹⁰⁴ Although in the philosophical tradition of *pratyakshyabad* (positivism), a distinction is drawn between ‘spiritual seeing’ and ‘everyday visual experience’, such distinctions were not made explicit in the play.

The play in fact selectively appropriates Vedantic and scriptural notions to lend credibility to the characters’ moral claims. When Chintamani argues that Vilwamangal is mad because his perception is perverted, it is because she remembers this from having ‘attended the reading of scriptures’. The inversion and appropriation of Shankara’s ‘rope as snake’ metaphor also shows an innovative misreading of a Vedantic analogy in order to motivate Vilwamangal towards bhakti.¹⁰⁵ Vilwamangal’s desire for Chintamani constitutes a perversion of his vision and necessitates the horror of self-blinding in order to initiate him on the path of bhakti.

Vilwa’s resulting blindness thus resolves the dilemma of his ‘lower vision’, and opens his awareness to higher ‘mystical vision’ where he can now have *darshan* (vision) of Krishna. However, the denigration of everyday vision and its equation with perversion, lust, and sexuality are important in making the play morally legible to the masses. After his blindness, Vilwamangal’s relationship with women (Chintamani as well as Ahalya) transforms into that of a child with a mother. In other words, Vilwamangal’s blindness is not enough to overcome his sexuality, but it is through his transformation into a child-like (or *pagal*, or feminized) figure, and the transformation of Chintamani and Ahalya into maternal figures, that the play finally liberates the protagonist from the bondage of *kamini-kanchan-dasatya*.¹⁰⁶

Sarkar has shown that Ramakrishna’s own aversion to female sexuality, and conjugality thus offered a formulation of bhakti to his devotees where liberation was only possible through a sublimation of the erotic. But within the medium of theatre, Girish Ghosh’s plays offered its audience this liberation through the very recuperation of the visual and the erotic encoded in his choice of prostitute like characters, and recruitment of prostitute-actresses to perform these roles. The play resolves this dilemma by

¹⁰⁴ See, Sarkar 298 for a discussion on ‘direct perception’ in Ramakrishna, and in the materialist tradition of Lokayata

¹⁰⁵ In Shankara’s *Vivekchudamani*, one sees a snake (delusion) when there is really only a rope (reality) because of one’s fear of the snake. This is inverted in the play to show that Vilwa sees a rope (delusion) when there is a snake (reality) because of his intense desire (maya) to see Chintamani that night.

¹⁰⁶ See, Sarkar, 302-303, for a fuller discussion on Ramakrishna’s privileging of ‘balak bhava’ (child-like being), and the conceptualisation of divinity in maternal terms. For a discussion on gender paradox where feminine is source of evil as well as valorised as goddess, see Sarkar, 289, 312-313

rewarding Vilwamangal for his bhakti through a miraculous recovery of his eyesight, through which he gains a vision of divine Krishna, and this *darshan* is received by all the characters in the play, as well as the theatre audience.

In the final scene of the play, a lighted figure of Krishna appears at the rear of the stage, and everyone assembles to receive the *darshan* of Krishna. Somagiri's disciple reminds everyone that "the gain from a vision of Krishna- is a vision of Krishna". Vilwamangal offers salutations and enchanted they all sing of Krishna's divine play.

Chorus: With sight by love made bold, see now the eternal play
 In blessed Brindaban, the shrine within thy heart...
 Since Heaven's richest treasure within thyself lies hid.
 Why wilt thou trifle longer: why, restless, wander more!

In the chant, the devotees in the play ask the theatre audience, to behold the tableau as an instance of Krishna Lila ('eternal play') in Brindaban, thereby suggesting that they mimic the gestures of the stage characters in the closing tableau. In turning Brindaban into a 'shrine within one's own heart,' it paradoxically also forecloses the possibility of 'darshan'¹⁰⁷, as the chant suggests a general withdrawal of the 'visual', and once again, a privileging of the 'aural' in order to attend to the hidden treasures within one's heart. It is this ending that makes Girish's play 'devotional' because it brings about the final closure through a practice of a shared ritual. In Hashra's play such devotional endings and participatory closures are replaced with an emphasis on the external, purely visual, and usually spectacular tableaux where a magnificent setting like Brindaban would be made to appear on the stage only in order to keep the audience spellbound right until the final curtain falls.

Hashra's *Bilwamangal* (1920): Reformed Brahmin as the Nationalist Hero

Hashra's play was not the only Parsi theatre production dramatizing the life story of Bilwa Mangal. Radheshyam Kathavachak, a rival playwright, has pointed out that Bilwa Mangal, translated by Nathuram Sundar Shukla, the court poet of Rajkot, was frequently

¹⁰⁷ It is important to point out that theatrical *darshan* was also a two way process, it was not only the audience who gazed at the actors and gods on stage, but also the actors and gods who returned their gaze. For more discussion, on the significance of *darshan* in Hinduism, see Diana Eck, "Seeing the Sacred", 1-15

staged in Parsi theatre style productions in Gujarat. It is likely that Hashra would have been familiar with the Gujarati play and could have also had access to the script through Parsi theatre owners.¹⁰⁸ While Girish Ghosh's play emphasized that "the action takes place in fourteenth century India, over a period of several months", Hashra's play incorporates an ambivalent setting that alternates between mythic time and space, and twentieth century colonial India. Scenes set in *paristan* (fairylane), *brindaban* (holy city), *swargadham* (heaven), and urban *kotha* (brothel), stretch the play's devotional landscape to match Hashra's preference for realist situations. In the play, gods are humanized and turned into central characters, while the protagonist is turned into a child-like figure, waiting to be awakened and reformed by the gods.

Following the stage directions, the play begins in Paristan (fairylane) where *gopis*, carrying earthen pots are singing a devotional chant and performing *raslila* (divine dance of love). The backdrop reveals a vision of *swargadham* (heaven) where Shankar is shown to be immersed in Krishna *bhakti* (devotion). When Shankar begins his invocation to Krishna, a star bursts upon the stage bringing into view a perfectly round earth upon which Krishna stands playing his flute. Shankar, asks Krishna why the world is full of so much suffering, and Krishna sermonizes to his devotee on the entanglements of *maya* and the urgent need to educate men on how to conquer one's desire and end the cycle of *karmic* (action) suffering. Shankar tells Krishna that he would be most willing to visit earth and impart this *gyan* (knowledge) to earthly men. Krishna, although sceptical about the efficacy of 'path of knowledge', agrees to let Shankar try his *gyan* (knowledge) on Bilwa Mangal, a Brahmin bent upon destroying his dharma over a prostitute. Setting up the narrative frame of the play in this manner, Hashra presents the play's plot, conflict, as well as moral arguments, from the point of view of gods rather than any of its worldly characters.

The usurping of narrative control by gods in the beginning of the play also encourages audience to identify with the gods' objective of restoring *dharma* (righteousness) and realizing *sudhar* (reform) on earth through a combination of *gyan* (knowledge) and *bhakti* (devotion). Although gods are humanized and made more realistic, their parental authority serves to characterize the protagonist as a child-like hero waiting to be rescued and reformed. This invoking of gods as father-figures is an interesting departure from Ghosh's play that had imagined a mother-figure to be an ideal parent for reforming the play's fallen protagonist. Hashra's play begins with an explication of gods' desire to re-establish social and moral order of a *jati* (Hindu) and nation (Bharat). During the course of the play, Krishna's scepticism is proven right as

¹⁰⁸ Radheshyam Kathavachak in his autobiography 'Mera Natak Kaal' has stated that Hashra was familiar with the Gujarati translation of the play. However it is quite likely that the Gujarati play itself was a translation-adaptation of Girish Ghosh's play.

Shankar's discourses on knowledge fail to have any impact on Bilwamangal, and it is only through Krishna's intervention that the path of bhakti becomes a viable solution for his moral reform.

Unlike Ghosh's *Vilwamangal*, Hashra's protagonist is a married man and his passion for a prostitute is the primary cause for his pativrata wife's suffering. Hashra's play is sympathetic to both of its female protagonists, the *pativrata* (dutiful) Rambha, who cannot win her husband's love, and the *veshya* (prostitute) Chintamani, who cannot be accommodated within the hero's upper-class and upper caste Hindu household. But the ideal subject of reform is unequivocally the upper class Brahmin protagonist who must be rescued from sin and suffering for the sake of *Hindu* dharma and *jati*.

The second act begins with the crucial scene of Bilwamangal's desire to meet with the prostitute Chintamani on a dark stormy night. Running away from his home, leaving behind a dead father, and a hysterical wife, Bilwamangal has crossed the raging sea floating on a corpse, mistaking it to be a log, and climbed a dead snake outside Chintamani's house, mistaking it to be a rope. Chintamani, having discovered Bilwamangal's madness, implores the gods for assistance. The above scene in Ghosh's play ends with Chintamani provoking Bilwamangal to self-reflect on his madness, and realize the need for self-reform, but Hashra's play, denies its protagonist this agency.

Chintamani: Have mercy, O god! Have mercy on this son of a Brahmin.
Prabhu! A Brahmin is your representative on earth!
A Brahmin's status is like that of a garland around your neck.
The world owes to a Brahmin,
Religion, action, thought, and wisdom.
If a Brahmin turns blind and is guilty of misconduct,
Then who will reform Hindu dharma, and Hindu jati?¹⁰⁹

Chintamani: Bilwa Mangal! You are a Brahman.
You are Supreme! You are Pure!
You are the crown of Arya Jati.
But because of your sinful actions, apart from your name,
You are left with no other signs of being a Brahmin.
Sinner, Wanton, Lustful, Blind man, go and see!
Is it a block of wood that brought you here or have you
Reached here with the help of an object
that is as polluted as you are.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Bilwamangal, 514

In the first passage, Chintamani invokes Bilwamangal's caste identity to reinforce the high caste position of a Brahmin and to uphold him as the moral centre of a *Hindu jati*. She argues that the future of *Hindu dharma* and *Hindu jati* are in need of *uddhar* (uplift) and *sudhar* (reform), but since a Brahmin can no longer provide moral leadership, an intervention from the gods is urgently required to bring about reform. In the second passage, while reminding Bilwa of his high caste identity, and how low he has fallen, Chintamani also shames him by telling him that he has polluted himself by staying afloat a dead body, a polluted thing like him (*apni jaisi ashudh vastu*), in order to cross the sea. The question of purity is brought up to shame Bilwa, and to mark Bilwa's tenuous status within the Brahmin caste as a result of his pollution.

Chintamani: Bilwamangal! What is your religion?

Bilwamangal: Hindu

Chintamani: What is the highest caste of Hindu?

Bilwamangal: Brahmin

Chintamani: If a Brahmin is offered polluted food
that has been spat out by another,
Then would he eat it?

Bilwamangal: Shiv-Shiv! The Brahmin will die
But will not look in the direction of polluted food.

Chintamani: Then why don't you contemplate,
That if a Brahmin cannot eat
Food that is spat out by another,
Then how can he be obsessed with
A bazaar prostitute whose eyes, nose, cheeks
Mouth, lips, each and every body part,
Has been mouthed by countless other people?
Who is like a bone that has been devoured,
by thousands of hungry dogs.
A man who is drawn to such a polluted and dirty object,
would be shunned even by a low caste man.

¹¹⁰ Bilwamangal, 515

A man that has fallen so low, and is in such a pathetic state,
Even if he is a Brahmin by virtue of his birth,
by virtue of his actions he is really like a Chandal !

In leaving his dead father behind, staying afloat a dead body, and climbing a dead snake, Bilwa has polluted himself multiple times, and in the process has turned from a Brahmin into a *Chandal* (low caste)¹¹¹. Bilwa has also polluted himself through his sexual relationship with a prostitute, but it is through the metaphor of prostitute as body-object for consumption like food, that Chintamani claims that Bilwa has polluted himself irrevocably. The patriarchal construction of purity and pollution here do not explicitly prohibit a high caste Brahmin from sexual contact with a low caste woman, but it is in consuming her 'like food', that Bilwamangal stands to lose his caste status and purity. In the above passage, Chintamani compares herself to '*jutha khana*' (food touched or eaten by others) because different parts of her body (eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth, lips, etc) have been mouthed by many men countless times. Like a 'bone' that has been chewed, clawed, nibbled, bitten and devoured by thousands of hungry dogs, Chintamani perceives herself to be a body-object that is both *jutha* (polluted) and *ganda* (dirty), and thus a source of pollution to a high caste Brahmin.

What is interesting about this passage is that on the one hand, it seems to offer an anti-Brahminical argument that makes a Brahmin's caste position dependant on the morality of his action rather than his birth. Thus Bilwamangal's depraved, hyper-sexual, immoral actions bring him down to the level of a low caste man (*Chandal*). Chintamani's criticism of Brahminical superiority is consistent with the overall casteless and egalitarian logic of medieval bhakti that informs the narrative of the play. However, in the passage, her criticism is not meant to advocate a turning away from Brahminical codes, but rather a stricter enforcement of such codes.

Chintamani is alarmed by Bilwa's spiritual fallenness because it deprives the entire Hindu community of the kind of moral leadership that only a 'pure' Brahmin can provide. In other words, the passages critique Bilwamangal not because he is a Brahmin, but because he is not the kind of 'pure' and 'moral' Brahmin that is required to lead Hindu *jati* and Bharat. During the course of the play, both Chintamani as well as the gods will ensure that Bilwamangal is awakened and transformed into precisely the kind of pure

¹¹¹ A ten day period following one's father's death marked by the observation of 'sutak', would make Bilwa 'internally impure'. Contact with a dead body and dead snake would make Bilwa 'externally impure'. For a discussion on "pure and impure", and on the low caste status of Chandal, see Dumont 46-53

and morally superior Brahmin that can eventually lead the entire Hindu *jati* as well as nation.

In the context of the anti-Brahminical movement of early twentieth century,¹¹² as well as the Hindu revivalist movements that were especially critical of the legitimacy of caste,¹¹³ these passages show Hashra's contradictory positions on the colonial debates on caste and Brahmin identity. More importantly given the largely anti-Brahminical thrust of the medieval bhakti movement, this valorisation of Brahmin as an ideal *bhakta* for the moral leadership of Hindu *jati* as well as the nation (Bharat), seems to undermine Hashra's own liberal-reformist position on women, lower castes, and minorities.

Scholars like Susan Bayly have shown that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there was a very striking consensus that was forged from these caste debates, and that there was considerable common ground among those who commented on caste matters either as 'traditionalists' or 'liberal reformists' or a hybrid of the two. Bayly argues that virtually all of these thinkers exalted ideals of purity, hierarchy and moral community as being both truly virtuous and truly Indian. As a result, the new, free and spiritually regenerated India which they visualized was, in almost every case, an India in which the forms and values of so called traditional caste were to remain prominent and active, even if in a modified 'modern' form. This was true even in the case of the many public moralists who campaigned for 'modern' causes including education, freedom for women, as well as the uplift of untouchables¹¹⁴.

In Bilwamangal, the social and moral privileges of a Brahmin as well as his moral failures are not an expression of a medieval tradition, but rather a result of caste politics in late nineteenth and twentieth century. Beginning with the tradition of missionary and evangelical writings, as well as orientalist polemics that denounced the religious and social tyranny of the Brahmins, Indian religious reform movements also saw caste reform as integral to the project of modernity and nationhood. The Arya Samaj's *shuddhi* (purification) campaign was explicitly designed to make the question of 'purity' not less but more entrenched within Hindu religion. Bayly points out that Arya Samaj's *varna vyavashtha* (caste order) was nevertheless hierarchical, and those at the top of the founder, Dayananda's moral scheme were to be people who had attained learning and spiritual purity by personal attainment. Brahmin birth was therefore of no account in this scheme, and indeed the Aryas' most aggressive polemics were directed against the claims

¹¹² For a discussion of Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj, and rise of Anti-Brahman movement in twentieth century in Maharashtra, see Omvedt.

¹¹³ For a discussion of these revivalist movements (Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj), and their critique of caste, see Bayly, 169-173

¹¹⁴ Bayly, 151-152

of the Brahmins. But the Aryas' purified social order was still a hierarchy that rested on an ideal of collective moral affinities.¹¹⁵

Dirks has shown that the antipathy of caste to nationhood was also a common assumption among Indians, that motivated many aspects of social reform from the early nineteenth century and produced many a disagreement about the relationship between caste politics and nationalist politics as the twentieth century wore on. For many nationalists, caste had either to be discarded altogether or acknowledged as a cultural inheritance that could be seen as another glorious, if frequently degraded, aspect of Indian civilization that had to be returned to its original religious and cultural form.¹¹⁶ For Dirks, it is the decennial census and its emphasis on caste that gave rise to agitation over caste denomination and the assignment of social status by caste groups, eventually developing into political movements based on caste mobilization.¹¹⁷ More importantly, as caste became the primary mode for contestations of social identity in the last years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries, its appropriation by nationalists constituted a turning toward medieval models of bhakti to fulfil contradictory aspirations.

In Hashra's play, the narrative context of medieval bhakti is invoked not only to rally against caste hierarchy, but to also express the impossibility of constituting a social hierarchy outside of caste politics. Thus Bilwamangal's transformation into a bhakta, on the one hand, allows the play to resolve the problematic question of ascribing the nation's moral leadership into the hands of a high caste Brahmin. But as the above passages show, the legitimacy of bhakti is nevertheless derived from its pro-Brahminical position, which is consistent with the play's mockery of other itinerant sadhus, ascetics, and monks (presumably lower caste and lower class men) as corrupt, fake, and a threat to the country's social and moral order.

In the following passage, women are talking about a new sadhu who has recently arrived in town.

Act 2: Scene 5

Second Saheli: But, who is this (new Sadhu)?

Third: God knows his name or where he is from! But by his behaviour and disposition, he seems quite enlightened.

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, 170

¹¹⁶ Dirks, 231

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, 236

- Fourth: If he was really enlightened, he would have taken Samadhi either on a mountain top or inside a forest. Why would he be visiting a town to put his spiritual power on display?
- Second: Sister, half of our Bharat is ruined because of ill-education and social divisions, and the other half is ruined because of these greedy sadhus. These fake men have no dharma, no shame, no karma, no bliss, no dignity, no awareness and no knowledge. They fool and rob the poor Bharatvasis (countrymen) of their hard earned money. Wait until this mahatma becomes famous, and then watch how he will steal whatever he can get his hands on, before strangling some woman or child and disappearing with all his money.
- First: Sister, you use the same yardstick to measure everyone. It is true that these days many fattened up *faqirs* keep hovering over the nation's (Bharat's) head like vultures. They are blind and misleading others too. But one can still find a genuine saint who has overcome the demons of desire, greed, lust, and anger.

Unlike Ghosh's play that is inspired by the narrative, aesthetic, and ritualistic potential of bhakti (devotion) as an instrument of moral reform, Hashra's play betrays a cynicism for devotion, and devotional characters, including ascetics, saints and bhaktas. Even gods in the play remain sceptical of all of bhaktas and Krishna is forever devising *lilas* (plays) to separate the fake bhaktas from the real ones. Nevertheless, it does offer its protagonist a chance to redeem himself through bhakti but not without emphasizing his high caste position. It is not bhakti per se, but Brahminical birth that makes Bilwamangal the ideal candidate for bhakti -led reform in the play.

Ghosh as a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna was a Krishna devotee himself, and consequently, the symbolism in his play was motivated by authorial belief in the power of bhakti, and its potential to confer a higher moral ground to all devotees irrespective of caste or gender. Hashra, on the other hand, undermines both Bilwamangal's and Chintamani's capacity for self-transformation by giving narrative control to the gods. In many ways, Hashra's play denies Bilwamangal any agency for self-reform, empowering the gods on one end, and the prostitute on the other end, to carry out Bilwamangal's reform. The duly reformed protagonist, emasculated as well as disempowered, turns into an exemplar bhakta.

Bhakti in Hashra's play is neither a state of madness, nor a child-like state of being; it is more about supplicating Krishna and moving beyond the hurdles of *gyan* (knowledge). In the very first scene of the play, Shankar is at Chintamani's brothel and realizes the limits of *gyan* (knowledge), when his efforts to preach, are ridiculed and rejected by the pleasure-seeking *kotha* patrons.

Shankar: Brothers. Can a poor Brahmin sit in a corner and participate in your merriment?

Tamashbeen2: Brahmin devata. What are you doing here abandoning your scriptures, stories, and sermons?

Shankar: I was walking by when I heard the sounds of drums, cymbals along with a melodious voice singing to the requests of adulations. I thought that a Krishna bhajan might be happening in a devotional gathering. My mind greedy for the sight of such elegant people, wished to gain the merit of being in the company of Harijan (children of Lord Vishnu) like you all, so I came over here.

Tamashbeen5: Brahmin *devata*. The devotional gathering singing a classical malhar is held near the holy river of Yamuna in Mathura. Here we are listening to Chintamani's songs.

Shankar: Krishna Chintamani's name! That is exactly what I thought. Wah-Wah ! Thank you, Thank you!

Bilwa: Maharaj! Have you had *bhang* or something before coming here? What is the point of mentioning Krishna to love sick men like us? Chintamani is the name of this sweet enchantress born in the house of the *Nayika* (courtesan).

Shankar: O god, save me from these people of Bharat, and their total destruction of Hindu dharma. You keep your Hindu dharma and Hindu name, and yet the name with which you think of Srikrishna, you offer that title to a shameless prostitute.

Bilwa: Enough Maharaj! Shut your mouth. Have you no shame, first of all you come here, barging in on someone else's property, without any invitation. And then on top of it you insult the owners of the house.

Shankar: So what? If you are not convinced, then why don't you have a debate (*shastrartha*) with me?

Chinta: Someone please ask this wild animal which zoo has he escaped from?

Marwadi: Kishan maharaj! Are you done with your lecturing! Now if you want to enjoy the song, shut your mouth and sit down.

In the scene, despite repeated requests to shut up, Shankar insists upon explaining why *Chintamani* should be called *Chitamani* (jewel of the funeral pyre) because she burns down a man's dharma and intellect to ashes. He warns everyone at the *kotha* that the melody that brings pleasure to their ears conceals a reproach, and the rhythm that lulls them into drowsiness, is indeed a wakeup call. But Shankar's moralizing moves no one, and assuming he is a mad man, they end up beating him up and kicking him out. Embarrassed about being thrown out, Shankar acknowledges the limits of *gyan* (knowledge) and admits that although he had come to reform others, it is he who has got reformed (*haye-haye, unko sudharne aaya tha aur khud hi sudhar gaya*)¹¹⁸.

Hashra not only collapses the distinction between the sacred and profane world by bringing a god into the vulgar space of *kotha*, but privileges the *kotha* attendees with a point of view that the Parsi theatre audience was more likely to identify with. In the scene, Chintamani's brothel, like a theatre, symbolizes an urban site for pleasure and entertainment where paying customers demand an uninterrupted performance. Shankar's moralizing attempts are therefore duly ridiculed and rejected, because 'knowledge' is shown to be incompatible with the culture of the *kotha*, as well as that of popular theatre. Bhakti on the other hand, performed through the ritual of storytelling, or song and dance performance, is a more effective medium to emotionally move the audience to an exalted feeling-state.

In the play, Shankar's failure at knowledge-based reform, finally wins him over into becoming Krishna's most ardent devotee (*bhakta*). Krishna, as the supreme deity, and the ultimate patriarch, then engages Shankar, to also put his other devotees' claims to test. In the final scene, to fully satisfy the demands of Krishna bhakti, Bilwamangal having renounced the world, is led to stabbing out his eyes, while Chintamani also having renounced the world, is led to carving out her heart to become exemplary Krishna devotees. Krishna quite naturally pleased with their devotion declares that true bhaktas are like his servants as well as his master (*Jo sacche bhagat hain voh mere sevak bhi hain aur swami bhi*).

¹¹⁸ Bilwamangal, 481-487

Upon meeting Krishna, Bilwamangal admits that although he has seen Krishna with his heart's eyes, he would like to receive Krishna's *darshan* (vision) with his real eyes. Krishna, touching a flower to Bilwamangal's eyes, utters *tathastu* ('so be it'), and upon seeing Krishna face to face, Bilwamangal's heart is filled with bliss (*anand*). The final scene is set in Brindavan, where Krishna, Radha, and Shankar as presiding deities are shown attending a bhajan performance by Bilwamangal and Chintamani. As the curtain falls, the scene once again shifts back to the other-worldly setting of *parlok* (heaven) where the play first began. Gopis immersed in the performance of *raslila* (divine dance of love) reenact the beginning of the play, invoking the eternal performance of *krishnalila* (divine play) that is without any beginning or end.

Chapter 4

Wife, Prostitute, and Actress: The Woman's Question in *Ankh Ka Nasha* (Intoxication of the eye), 1923

In Hashra's corpus of social plays the male protagonist's struggle to reconstruct and reconstitute his relationship to self, family, and nation, is plotted in terms of his inner moral conflict between duty and desire. In *Bilwa Mangal* (1920) and *Ankh Ka Nasha* (Intoxication of the eye, 1923), the figure of the prostitute externalizes this conflict by personifying desire that threatens to destroy the protagonist's wife and family. Partha Chatterjee has shown how the discourse of nineteenth century nationalism created a dichotomy between the material and spiritual dimensions that were mapped onto the domains of home and the world, and where control over the family was central to nationalist politics¹¹⁹. In constructing the moral opposition between the sinful prostitute and the dutiful wife, Hashra's social plays turn the middle class home into an ideological battleground where subordination of his desire allows the protagonist to assert his moral leadership at home and in the world.

Tanika Sarkar has shown that the home was not merely an escape from the world but its critique and an alternative order in itself, where love and affect served as organizing principles. The terms of conjugality whereby the woman remained subordinated replicated the colonial order, but it also constituted the grounds for challenging and contesting such an order. Conceived as an embryonic nation, expertise in conjugality could equip the man to a share of power in the world; equally, proof of the absence of moral leadership here would disqualify him and justify his subjection.¹²⁰

The *pativrata* (dutiful) wife at home, who suffers throughout the play in order to bring about her husband's moral transformation, symbolizes virtue and purity that must be recognized and protected from the evil presence of the prostitute that inhabits the outside world of streets and bazaars. This narrative structure, encapsulating the problem of conjugal love, and necessitating the subordination of male desire, constitutes the very process by which the relations between 'family' and 'nation' were conceptualized and represented in the nationalist discourse.

¹¹⁹ Chatterjee, 237-239

¹²⁰ Sarkar, 38-39, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*

In the plays, the sphere of the 'home', frequently disrupted by the husband's moral failure, is fiercely guarded by a self appointed 'reformer'. Usually a close friend or relation of the family, this character comes to the rescue of the family and motivates the protagonist to take pity upon his suffering wife, and save the honour of his family and nation through self-transformation. Within the narrative structure of the plays, this transformation is accomplished through an erasure of the prostitute's identity by means of reform or punishment.

The urban prostitute as an evil force threatening to destroy the protagonist's wife, family, and middle class respectability, was first conceptualized in Hashra's play *Bilwamangal* (1920). As we saw in the last chapter, the erasure of the prostitute's threat was carried out by reforming and turning her into a Krishna devotee. The question of the evil prostitute comes up once again in Hashra's next play *Hindustan qadim va jadid* (Hindustan ancient and modern, 1921) but here prostitution is conceptualized as a social rather than a moral problem, and the prostitute was deemed a 'victim' of other social evils like capitalism and urban modernity. In one of the relatively minor subplots of the play's third act titled "Aj" (Today), the plot draws attention to the socio-economic conditions that encourage prostitution.

One of the scenes of "Aj" shows a poor family that has been starving for two days, while a young girl collects some leaves and asks her brother to eat them pretending it is food. As the poor mother helplessly watches her children's make-believe play, a woman appears on the doorway, and reading the little girl's palms announces that she will soon strike gold. To the incredulous mother, she explains that in a city where various kinds of things are sold, beautiful girls can also be traded, and that she buys girls from poor families and grooms them into beautiful women for sale. She would be most willing to help out this family if the mother might want to consider her offer to sell her daughter. The mother, exasperated and enraged, throws out the woman after lamenting the lack of *dharma* (righteousness) in modern urban life, and emphasizing her own persistence in following *dharma* despite her poverty.

In *Ankh Ka Nasha*, Hashra once again reconsiders the problem of prostitution and its impact on marriage, family, and community. This time around, the prostitute in the play is neither reformed through devotion nor made extraneous to the central narrative. The play presents the problematic of male desire around the character of not one but three generations of prostitutes, and provides a narrative space for the prostitutes to tell their story on their own terms. With a realistic stage setting invoking Calcutta's red light area, Hashra's play attempts to represent the prostitutes realistically, but not without sensationalizing them within the new medium of commercial theatre. Despite its overall conservative thrust, the play marks an early attempt to surface the contradictory attitudes of the middle class on the question of prostitution and its intersections with the woman's

question. Hashra's fascination with the subject, and sympathetic portrayal of the prostitute, can be said to have paved the way for more sustained engagements of the subject by the progressive writers' movement in 1930s.

Wife, Prostitute and Actress on Stage: Voyeurism and Realism in Brothel Drama

The modern urban prostitute was a rather fascinating subject for both conservative and liberal reformers, as well as literary and popular novelists, playwrights and poets who felt the urgent need to capitalize on her narrative appeal in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Within nationalist discourse, the prostitute was always pitted against the respectable middle class wife (and mother), who was being iconized to represent 'tradition' and 'nation'. Rosalind O'Hanlon in her introduction to Tarabai Shinde's first modern feminist text *Stri Purush Tulana*, has shown how the images of *pativrata* wife and lascivious *veshya* dominated nineteenth century Marathi popular print genres. In these texts, the adulation for the suffering wife, and the vulgarization of the prostitute symbolized a blending of Victorian and Brahminic values that helped shape the new models for respectable Hindu womanhood through Marathi novels, plays and short stories.¹²¹ In Marathi drama, the *pativrata* as a new model of womanhood emerged after Mahadev Balkrishna Chitale's play *Manorama* (1871) that consolidated such stereotypes into becoming a staple fare within the genre of brothel drama.

Sumanta Banerjee has shown a similar preoccupation of the Bhadrakal with the opposing figures of the chaste wife and the vulgar prostitute in Bengali print and popular culture starting with Bhabanicharan's *Naba-bibi-bilash*.¹²² Unlike the proliferation of farces, travelogues, and chapbooks that attempted to capitalize on the sensational life of prostitutes and fallen women, popular theatre in general, found it very hard to incorporate the prostitute as an actress, without turning her into a likeable and sympathetic character. Within theatre, the discursively constructed opposition between the wife and the prostitute began to crumble. Sarkar argues that Bengali drama in later nineteenth century made the boundaries between the two hermetically sealed world of *pativrata* and *veshya* open and porous. In reading the scandal plays in Bengal theatre Sarkar shows that a chaste wife's fall, following her rape and subsequent murder, turned her into a prostitute like figure in popular imagination, thus bridging the ideological and class divide between a middle class wife and a prostitute.

¹²¹ O'Hanlon, 38-39

¹²² Banerjee, 74-75

The Bengal theatre, which staged the first scandal plays, was also the first to employ prostitutes in female roles, replacing earlier conventions where young boys played such parts. It did so in the face of reformist and orthodox opposition, that objected to the entry of bad women into a noble cultural form and the exposure of young men to evil influence. In Girish Ghosh's play, for example, prostitute turned actresses, enacting holy characters, were redeemed in the moral-pedagogical space of theatre.¹²³ No longer contained within the privacy of her brothel, or apartment, the prostitute was now in full public view as a performer, a theatre actress, and even as an author, overstepping the limits of her own class and caste identity.

The majority of theatre actresses who were prostitutes before entering public stage were already imagined as social performers in terms of their feigning of sexual desire. But on stage they finally acquired social and cultural legitimacy as theatre performers and actresses. Partha Chatterjee has shown how the profession of the theatre actress itself was a creation of the new educated middle class culture. Recruitment of theatre actresses from among the city's prostitutes and training them in the techniques of dramatic arts became a remarkable educative project in itself. It produced women schooled in the language and sensibilities of a modernizing literati who learned to think of themselves as professional career artists and yet were excluded from respectable social life by the stigma of immoral living.¹²⁴

In commercial theatre, the social identity of the prostitute always remained subordinated to her identity on stage as an actress, prostitute, or wife, but in playing these characters on stage the prostitute blurred the moral distinction between the wife and prostitute. The actress whether playing the chaste wife or the prostitute relied upon eliciting visual pleasure and desire, and consequently collapsed the distinctions between these two ideologically opposed characters.

Sarkar in her study of prostitutes in early public theatre in colonial Bengal has shown that the introduction of prostitutes as actresses in public theatre brought the well-born woman and the prostitute face to face, and the close encounter between the respectable female and her Other, often gave rise to complicated circuits of desire. The prostitute was both a social outcast and a figure of envy for she occupied the most successful and most public roles then available to women as powerful prostitute and as successful actress. But her representation of a respectable woman on stage also polluted the figure of the well-born woman. The prostitute-actress in flaunting herself as the

¹²³ Sarkar, 88-89, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*

¹²⁴ Chatterjee, 151. For a more detailed discussion, see Chatterjee's reading of Binodini Dasi's autobiography 151-157

object-manipulator of male desires was seen as receiving the male spectator's desire as an actress while also soliciting his attention as a prospective or actual client.¹²⁵

In Hashra's plays *Bilwamangal* as well as *Ankh Ka Nasha*, both the prostitute as well as the wife despite being cast as rivals, broke their respective stereotypes and often overstepped the bounds of their characters. The wife in moments of despair turned loud, vulgar, and melodramatic like a prostitute, whereas the prostitute turned lover often displayed poetic and romantic sensibilities of a *bhadramahila*. Occasionally, the prostitute sympathized with the *pativrata* wife, but she primarily functioned to expose the hypocrisy of middle class respectability, and especially the violence and wickedness of men.

In the moments when the prostitute's radical speech rubbed against the play's conventional nationalist discourse, the plot brought to surface some of the inherent contradictions of the nationalist position on the woman's question. In *Ankh Ka Nasha* (1923), the play's protagonist Jugalkishore is torn between his love for prostitute Kamlata, and commitment toward his *pativrata* wife Sarojini. Characterized as a seasoned prostitute, and a relentless gold digger, Kamlata has her eyes set upon becoming Jugalkishore's mistress in order to extract enough money out of him before either his passion or her youth runs out.

Kamlata's hopes of becoming a middle class concubine are made possible because as a *baiji* (courtesan) she is far superior in status to a common prostitute. As a highly accomplished classical dancer, Kamlata has trained with her own mother Rajkanwar *baiji*, whose mother (also a *baiji*) was known to have received courtly favours from the king of Patna. In other words, Kamlata, born into a family of courtesans or *baijis* is a good match for the protagonist Jugal Kishore. Banerjee has shown that in nineteenth century Calcutta these slightly better-off and richer *baijis* of north Indian origin were reputed for their proficiency in classical and semi-classical music and dance forms that were handed down to them by their mothers and grandmothers. Their clientele came from the old Bengali Hindu aristocratic family or the nouveau riche Hindu community of *banians* and *dewans* employed by the East India Company in Bengal.

Banerjee points out, that even though *baijis* were considered 'disreputable', the Bhadrakalok had an admiration for them as they evoked the ambiance and charm of the feudal aristocracy of the Mughal era. Their aristocratic clients could not only afford to keep them as mistresses but they could also ignore many of the social-religious injunctions that their middle class counterparts had to face. Consequently, many of the upper class prostitutes had a real chance of negotiating the opposing constructions of femininity - domesticity (in marriage), and independence (in prostitution).¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Sarkar, "Performing Power and Troublesome Plays", 172-173

¹²⁶ Banerjee, 10-16

In introducing the *baiji* Kamlata in *Ankh Ka Nasha*, the stage directions specify that Kamlata's kotha is on Chitpore road. The passage that follows attempts to realistically represent the sights, sounds, and smells of this famous red light neighborhood of Calcutta.¹²⁷

- Setting: The famous neighbourhood of prostitutes in Calcutta- Sonagachi. Night time. Both sides of the street are illuminated by homes bathed in electric lights. The decorated paan shops and hotels are open for business. Punjabis, Bhatiyas, Burmese, Yahudis, Marwaris, Bengalis, men from every community, are wandering the streets. On a balcony, prostitutes, with their hands on the rails, stand leaning toward the street and gauging passersby. Somewhere, one can hear the shouts and cries of drunkards, and somewhere else are the sounds of applause of *mujra* performances. Hawkers with floral garlands and kulfis are calling out on the streets. The pimps are running alongside cars and vehicles. Prostitutes' servant boys are walking down the street with soda and ice in one hand, and a bowl of paan in the other, hiding a towel wrapped bottle of whiskey under their arm. At a short distance away, policemen stand around holding batons higher than their heads.
- Rahgeer: Wah Re Calcutta! Bakhtawar babu what kind of a bazaar is this?
- Bakhtawar: This is where the fairies of Bengal live.
The name of this bazaar is Chitpore road
- Beniprasad: What is Bharat's paradise? Calcutta!
And what is Calcutta's paradise? This Chitpore road.

The vivid visual and descriptive writing of the stage directions, embodying a mode of 'realism', accurately portrayed the ambience of Calcutta's red light

¹²⁷ This stage setting is missing in the edition published by National School of Drama, but present in other editions of the play.

neighborhood from the point of view of a curious passerby. The conversation between the anonymous passerby and other characters were meant to emphasize that Kamlata's kotha is not a fictional or imaginary site but very much a part of everyday urban city life. The passage serves to emphasize the influence of cinema on Hashra's playwrighting. The stage directions incorporating techniques of cinema imagine the stage in terms of a screen. It is through the panning shot of a camera lens, rather than a human eye, that one is made to see the wide panorama of the shops, hotels, brothels at the same time, as well as catch the fleeting images of the crowd and cars moving about on the streets.

On the balconies the close-up of the prostitutes as they stand waiting for customers, and the roving eye of the camera that captures the speed, sounds, and smells of traffic, hawkers, and pimps, is also imagined to explore the possibilities of cinematic rendering and viewing. Finally the close-up of the servant boy balancing a bowl of paan in one hand, and a glass of soda and ice in the other, while hiding a towel wrapped bottle of whiskey under his arm, are details that only a close-up shot would capture. It is quite likely that Hashra already engaged in multiple film projects of Madan Theatres by this time, was writing this play with a possibility of its cinematic adaptation. *Ankh Ka Nasha* provides an early example of how popular plays were beginning to incorporate cinematic techniques of realism in anticipation and competition to the rising popularity of cinema.

In the play, the above passage, introduces Beniprasad, a rich, spoiled philanderer, who is also a familiar face on Chitpore road. Beniprasad is a regular client of Kamlata baiji, and a close friend of the protagonist Jugalkishore. However, the protagonist does not know that Beniprasad is also Kamlata's ex-lover, and the father of her infant daughter Kamini. The plot thickens when Jugalkishore, newly introduced to the pleasures of kotha soirees by his friend, falls in love with Kamlata baiji and begins ignoring his dutiful wife at home. In the following scene, Kamlata baiji proposes that Jugalkishore rescue her from her miserable life as a prostitute and take her home as his mistress.

Kamlata: Look sweetheart! I have begun to hate this life of a prostitute. Now I would like to serve at your feet and change my sinful life into a sacred life. Can you not provide me with a few simple clothes and two honest meals a day? Jugal, pull me out of this hell and take me home. Show a lost woman the path of dharma. Look, don't refuse. If you do not offer me protection, I will renounce the world and leave for Brindavan.

Jugal: Kamlata! I can help you in every other way, but I would not dare to take you home in front of my brothers, cousins, wife and relatives.

Kamlata: I am not hungry for jewels, I am hungry for love!

Jugal: Kamlata, think again! To spend one's entire life in the service and devotion of one man is to perform tapasya (severe austerity).

Kamlata: Lord! Trust me. Like a snake that discards its old skin, I too will discard my life of a prostitute in this house and go along with you. You will see, I will so completely transform myself that those who call me a prostitute today will call me a *mahasati* (supremely devoted wife) tomorrow.

This passage surfaces some of the contradictions in Bhadrlok's attitudes towards prostitutes in nineteenth century Bengal. In this view, prostitutes were simultaneously considered 'gold diggers', as well as helpless 'victims' waiting to be rescued by a male patron either in the form of marriage or concubinage. Kamlata is mocking and rejecting this attitude by performing the role of a 'victim' when she is really being a 'golddigger'. Her eagerness to internalize the morality of Bhadrlok and transform herself from a *veshya* (prostitute) into a *mahasati* (supremely devoted wife) is ironic because the audience already knows that she does not really care for marriage at all.

By asking Jugalkishore to rescue her, Kamlata is pretending to play by the rules of the Bhadrlok, while secretly hoping to make a fool out of her Bhadrlok patron. Kamlata's mockery of marriage and concubinage here is a rejection of both nationalist and feminist positions that framed the prostitutes as uniformly pitiable figures waiting to be rescued by a male patron. Staging this rejection of middle class values in a theatre patronized by a largely middle class audience shows Hashra's own resistance to the homogenizing discourse about prostitutes as evil to be abolished and/or victim to be rescued.

The Prostitute Paradox in Nationalist and Feminist Discourse

If the play's Bhadrlok positions are verbalized through the protagonist Jugalkishore and his friend Beniprasad, then the play's nationalist position is advocated through the character of Madho. Madho is the protagonist's first cousin (*chachera bhai*), who is single-mindedly driven to reform Jugalkishore, abolish the evil of prostitution, and rescue the protagonist's wife and home. Madho imagines himself to be a 'mirror' whose purpose in life is to reflect the truth about 'evil' prostitutes and save the lives of young innocent men from the clutches of this 'evil'.

A 'mirror' was a conventional device used by many plays in nineteenth century India that wished to reflect the truth of the society, and especially if they mirrored something that was not obvious to the audience. Sarkar argues that many of the early subversive Bengali plays called themselves *darpan*s (mirror) and this naming troubled colonial authorities. Mirrors reflected back scandals of power and were, therefore, political in intent. Within this category of scandal plays, colonial misrule or European oppression and the tyranny of Indian elites were all narrated through very similar tropes¹²⁸.

In *Ankh Ka Nasha*, while the title of the play does not carry the suffix *darpan* (mirror), Madho becomes the play's ideological center, charged with the goal of reflecting the nationalist position on prostitutes. It is through Madho's point of view that we realize that prostitutes are nothing more than *ankh ka nasha* (an intoxication of the eye), an idea prominently displayed in the title of the play. In the following passage, Madho has arrived at the *kotha* (brothel) to rescue his cousin from the clutches of 'evil'. Facing Kamalata, Madho turns into a 'mirror' to show Kamalata the truth about herself.

Kamalata: Who are you?

Madho: I am a mirror, but not the one -made of glass,
in which you admire the curls of your hair, the kohl of your eyes,
and the powder on your cheeks. I am the mirror in which you will see
your true appearance, the one that you sell in the bazaar to survive,
the one that spreads like a contagion on the face of a prostitute,
and shines like a blessing on the face of a dutiful wife.

Jugal: You are younger than me, and so you don't have the right to lecture me!

Madho: What is young and old? True words and beneficial sermons
must be received even when they are scribbled on a wall.
God has not given you wealth to serve *adharma* and *pap* (sin).
Today in this holy land of *Bharatvarsha* there are thousands of widows
that lack food and clothes, thousands of orphans that lack nourishment
and upbringing, thousands of unemployed men that lack
one honest meal a day, and thousands of cows that lack grass

¹²⁸ For a discussion of these plays including *Neel Darpan* (Indigo Planting Mirror), *Jamidar Darpan* (Landlords' mirror), *Cha Kar Darpan* (Tea Planting Mirror), see Sarkar, "Performing Power and Troublesome Plays", 166-167

for their belly. Instead of offering money to their weeping souls, squandering it on these shameless sculptures of sin is like destroying your dharma and nation.

Kamlata: You insult me.

Madho: O Prostitutes! What is the power that you possess with which you steal intelligence from the intelligent, vision from those with eyes, riches from the wealthy, sons from fathers, and husbands from their wives! Aah! What kind of justice is this! What kind of an extreme oppression is this that harlots who destroy wealth and dharma are today worshipped with flowers, while teary-eyed goddesses who observe the honor of their families and husbands are ignored! O merciful one! Awaken the residents of Bharat; otherwise Bharat will drown in the tears of these chaste women.

Madho's passage here is central to the moralising spirit of the play, and encapsulates the arguments commonly used by nationalists, feminists, as well as missionaries who saw prostitution as 'evil'. Banerjee has shown that the belief that all prostitutes were gold-diggers who made fortunes by exploiting men was fairly widespread at the level of popular thinking. The oral literature of Bengal abounds with complaints about prostitutes acquiring wealth from their male customers, while respectable people and chaste wives are denied their dues.¹²⁹

Tambe has shown that women's organisation framed their position on prostitutes in a language of moral hygiene that advocated the position that eradicating prostitution and social evils such as drinking, and child marriage would purify the nation's body. Unprecedented numbers of women were drawn into nationalist politics in the 1920s, but women's public participation was predicated on their adherence to strict standards of sexual purity. Although women's organization carried out charitable works in rehabilitating prostitutes and although they spoke the language of common womanhood, they did not feature prostitutes as partners in struggle. Prostitutes themselves were not viewed as legitimate nationalist actors.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Banerjee, 98-99

¹³⁰ Tambe, 105

Women's organization in this period took positions that in many ways echoed the nationalist approach to prostitution. The Indian National Congress, the largest Indian nationalist party, had taken an early abolitionist position on the issue when it resolved to support efforts to repeal the Contagious Disease Act in 1882 and 1892. Eradicating prostitution was one of the earliest galvanizing issues in the Indian women's movement. For both middle class feminists and nationalists, the ideal female citizen was an educated wife-mother who served as a guardian of moral polity. Prostitutes were the antithesis of such a construct.¹³¹

The contradictory approach to prostitutes as 'blameworthy' and as 'victims' marked the paradox of nationalist and feminist discourses where "the impulse to save women from falling into evil rested uneasily alongside the preconception that such women were themselves evil".¹³² Hashra's play allowed these contradictory messages to be integrated into the plot, such that even Kamalata's own understanding of her 'fallenness' is riddled with irreconcilable claims.

In the following passage, when Kamalata comes face to face with the virtuous wife Sarojini, notice how little the middle class wife has to say on the question of the prostitute's denigration. Not only is Sarojini entirely unsympathetic, but she is almost too eager to silence Kamalata from speaking at all. Her inability to even listen to Kamalata's confessional story is evidenced by her pleading interjections to Kamalata to 'be quiet' (*chup raho*).

Kamalata: Surely I am a prostitute! Listen, there was a time when I too was religious, high-minded, pure, and wanted to live my life without a touch of disgrace, and in the embrace of virtue. But it was your brothers and sons, the honourable men of your society, who erected a wall of sin between me and my heaven! Despite all my hopes and attempts, I could not become a goddess! What did I become- a prostitute! Do you know why I became a prostitute?

Sarojini: Don't recount for me your story of sins.

Kamalata: Those who, being religious minded and disciplined, blame the prostitute for becoming a prostitute, they will also have to listen to the cries of a prostitute's hurting heart. Listen, no girl is a born prostitute! It is lewd and lustful men who taking advantage of her homelessness, lack of support,

¹³¹ Tambe, 104

¹³² For more on nationalist and feminist paradoxical views on prostitution, and especially Gandhi's contradictory positions on prostitutes, see Tambe 104-107

lack of food and clothes, and her extreme naivete, force her into becoming a prostitute.

Sarojini: Oh! Be quiet!

Kamlata: Who in the world does not commit a mistake? An ignorant girl also makes a mistake after being seduced by a lustful man! But upon realizing her mistake when she tries to return to a respectable life, those who like to lecture on sympathy suddenly turn deaf and dumb. Rejected by society, family, orphanages and widow-homes, left with no other options, she goes back and falls at the feet of the same man who had disgraced her, and becomes a prostitute. If this is sin, then the responsibility of this sin lies with the society that knows how to vilify sin but does not know how to reform the sinner.

Kamlata's narrative of 'fallenness' recounted in the passage above establishes prostitutes as 'victims' of an entrenched patriarchy. She points out that it is not the prostitutes that encourage *pap* (sin) but the socio-economic conditions of a *samaj* (society) that cannot protect and provide for its fallen women. Kamlata confesses that a 'fallen' woman is a victim who has been deceived by a lustful man, but when she realizes her mistake and wants to negotiate her way back to respectability, she has nowhere to go because there are no establishments to rescue or rehabilitate her. Therefore the victim returns to the same *rakshasa* (demon) who had tricked her in the first place and becomes a prostitute.

The confessional mode of the passage here and the thrust of the argument is resonant with the real life confession of Binodini Dasi, a prostitute turned actress of nineteenth century Bengali theatre. In her autobiography, Binodini, notes that a prostitute's life is certainly tainted and despicable, but she is not this way when she is in the mother's womb. She becomes like this because she is taken in by the artfulness of men. These men are respected and adored in society. They show hatred toward prostitutes when in the company of others, but privately they make the woman surrender in the name of love, and then abandon them after lighting the lamp of poison in her heart. Those unfortunate women who have been deceived turn their own lives into an everlasting cremation ground, a *shamsan*, for only they know how painful is the prostitute's life.¹³³

Kamlata's portrayal of prostitutes as "abject figures in need of rescue" echoes similar sentiments as those expressed by Binodini Dasi in her autobiography. However,

¹³³ Binodini Dasi, 105

this portrayal of a prostitute as a victim of deceitful men is in direct contrast to the play's earlier characterization of a prostitute as a greedy, scheming, and manipulative temptress. Kamlata's character in the play therefore remains inconsistent, vacillating between being a victim and/or victimizer, encapsulating the ideological divide that framed the perceptions towards prostitutes in public sphere.

In 1923, the year when the play *Ankh Ka Nasha* opened up in theatres across the nation, legislation relating to the suppression of prostitution was undertaken on a local basis. In the same year, 1923, the Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act and the Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act were passed. Each of these acts provided for heavy penalties for living on the earnings of a prostitute, for keeping a brothel, for procuration, for importing a female for prostitution and for encouraging or assisting in prostitution.

Unfortunately, the legislations had little effects on discouraging prostitution because the disruptions produced by the colonial economy had left large sections of the rural and urban populations without regular and assured incomes. The substantial increase in the numbers of male migrant workers in the city further widened the sex disparity and constituted an income opportunity for women willing to provide sexual services.¹³⁴ Thus the debates throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century over the definition, reform or suppression of various forms of sexuality within and outside marriage, whether by colonial administrators, nationalist reformers or women's activists, remained within the framework of reform rather than imagining a social transformation on a fundamental level.

Although the play makes no reference to the colonial state's intervention in the sphere of regulation and control of prostitution, it does indicate a failure of legislation to control or protect women by emphasizing the nature of violence that prostitutes and even middle class wives faced in their daily lives. During the course of the play, Kamlata is physically assaulted multiple times by the nationalist spokesman Madho who at one point throws her down at Sarojini's feet so that she may beg her for forgiveness. Kamlata's ex-lover Beniprasad also attempts to strike and strangle her on more than one occasion.

The pativrata wife is also not shown to be entirely safe as she is tricked by Beniprasad into a meeting where he attempts to rape her. In the play, violence towards female characters is always indicated in parentheses, and inserted into the stage directions. Although it remains inconsequential to the plot, its repeated performance on stage, reinforces the image of women as weak, vulnerable, and readily victimized by men provoked to become perpetrators or protectors.

¹³⁴ Nair, *Nationalist Patriarchy and Regulation of Sexuality*, 171-173

There are occasions when such incidents of violence leads to a character's death or murder, and within the play such representations are meant to combine the aesthetic of 'realism' as well as 'sensationalism'. In one such scene, prostitute Kamlata is physically assaulted and then accidentally killed with a misfired gunshot. Kamlata's murder resolves the protagonist's conflict between duty and desire, leading him to reunite with his dutiful wife and return home as a reformed husband. However, since the murder is committed by Kamlata's lover Beniprasad, the plot continues to spin until Beniprasad can also be reformed. The provocation comes from no other than Kamlata's daughter Kamini, who twelve years later, has grown into a young woman, and is forced into prostitution by her mother's allies.

Still a minor, Kamini is shown to be more interested in reading books than singing and dancing, and makes for a profoundly cynical and reluctant prostitute. Unlike her rebellious mother, Kamini internalizes the values of the Bhadrlok and believes that it is only married women who enjoy real respect and happiness in the world (*Jagat ka saccha man aur saccha sukh grihasth striyon ke bhagya mem hai*). Without a family, and unable to support herself, Kamini is forced to become a prostitute in order to pay back the debt she owes to her mother's allies. Waiting for her first new client, Kamini soliloquizes on the nature of sin, and concludes, just like her mother, that as long as there is hunger and poverty, there will always be sin. (*Stri ke sarvanash ka sabse bada karan bhukh aur garibi hai! Jab tak is desh mem bhookh aur garibi rahegi, tab tak pap bhi rahega!*)

In a rather bizarre turn of events, Kamini's first client turns out to be none other than her own father Beniparasad. Having left Calcutta, after committing Kamlata's murder, Beniprasad who has recently returned to town, is brought to the brothel, to meet with the newest young *baiji*. In his inebriated state, he asks Kamini to dance for him, and to be his companion for the night. Kamini, acting like a typical *bhadramahila*, proceeds to lecture him on middle class hypocrisy, while Beniprasad, visibly moved by her charm and strong opinions, asks her marry him. About to plant his first kiss as a client and a husband, when he holds up her hand, he notices a tattoo on her wrist that identifies her as his and Kamlata's daughter. Deeply horrified by the thought of being seduced by his own daughter, Beniprasad confronts the men who had lied to him about his daughter's death, and shoots them, before shooting his daughter Kamini as well, and turning himself over to the police.

With the addition of this last act, *Ankh Ka Nasha* over-sensationalizes the subject of prostitution by layering it with even more taboo subjects like incest, murder, rape, sexual exploitation of minors, and gun violence. The thrills of the plot are also structured to follow the conventions of urban crime genre that proliferated in the printed chapbooks of the period. Banerjee in examining Bhadrlok's attitudes towards criminalization of prostitutes has shown that male customers who kept prostitutes as mistresses expected

fidelity from them, and any departure from the norm invited punishment, as in the case of an adulterous wife.

Bengali chapbooks of the period therefore displayed an admiration for the men who were prostitute murderers by portraying them as heroes rather than villains in these narratives. The theme of prostitute-killing thus became a hook to hang a morality tale, sending out the message that such women had to pay the price for their evil ways, and that they rightly deserved to be punished and even murdered. Such narratives in print as well as in commercial theatre catered to readers and audience that craved sensational stories.¹³⁵

However, the sensationalism of this crime genre, rooted in the social history of colonial urban metropolis was also promoted by the wide circulation of such stories in newspapers and tabloids. Banerjee notes that prostitutes in nineteenth century Calcutta were indeed prime targets for murderers and burglars, and violence against prostitutes was bound up with violence towards women in general that was crucial to the growth and development of prostitution in colonial Bengal.

Direct physical violence and aggression played a major role in driving a large number of women to prostitution. Victims of slavery, trafficking, rape, abduction and abortion (particularly in the case of young widows and unmarried women, who, as a result, were excommunicated by a patriarchal society) drifted into the red-light areas that were coming up in Calcutta and neighbouring towns. Physical violence, which marked their forcible recruitment to the profession, continued to pursue them even after they had joined the profession. As targets of male aggression, they suffered, apart from rapes by customers, assaults and murders, not only for theft, but also for bruising the machismo of jilted lovers.¹³⁶

Ankh Ka Nasha ends with Beniprasad's realization that "a drama of sin always begins with laughter and ends with tears" (*Pap ka natak hamsi se shuru hua aur amsuon par samapt ho gaya!*) Before confessing to committing the three murders, and turning himself over to the police, Beniprasad reminds everyone that "prostitutes and prostitute lovers do deserve to end up like this" (*Veshya aur veshyagamiyon ka anth mem yahi parinam hota hai!*).

The play thus ends by returning to its ideological center, Madho the mirror, who once again reminds everyone of the urgent need for moral reform. In witnessing the reunion of Jugalkishore and his wife, he is jubilant for successfully reforming the protagonist and punishing the prostitute. And in witnessing Beniprasad's confession, he

¹³⁵ Ibid, 64-65

¹³⁶ Banerjee, *Crime & Urbanization*, 62-63

validates the play's punitive ending that sought to eliminate the social evil of prostitution through violence and murder. Nevertheless, it is the three prostitutes who, despite their untimely deaths, haunt the play with their highly nuanced characterization, and arouse more audience sympathy than any of the other middle class characters. Their untimely deaths further attesting to their social victimization and muddling the moral high ground of bourgeois nationalism.

Chapter 5

***Sita Banbas* (1927), *Bhishma Pratigya* (1928): Duty, Desire, and the Emergence of Nationalist Dharma in Mythological plays**

Mythology based literature in late colonial India established gendered role models that reinterpreted and reimagined religious norms in the light of the emergent nationalist movement. Narratives based on popular Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* emphasized masculinity, *Kshatriya* (warrior caste) valour, and asceticism in male heroes, and femininity, devotion, and domesticity in female heroines. Many of the myth-based works of the period invoked the concept of dharma (righteousness) and *dukha* (suffering) to reimagine modern ethical frameworks that were rooted in religion, but deeply aligned with nationalist goals. In this chapter, I look at Hashra's plays, *Sita Banbas* (The Exile of Sita, 1927) and *Bhishma Pratigya* (The Terrible Oath, 1928) to examine the ways in which mythological heroes and their portrayal of suffering and celibacy were dramatized to promote the nationalist ideal of *dharma*.

Parsi theatre playwrights often deployed a 'pan-Indian mythic sensibility'¹³⁷ in an attempt to underscore the 'didacticism' and 'heroism' of epics and to help transition Urdu theatre towards a more Hindi-Hindu idiom.¹³⁸ Various scholars, of colonial Hindi theatre (Dalmia 1997, Hansen 2003, Lothspeich 2009), have shown that the development of Hindi drama, construction of Hindu identity, and consolidation of Hindu traditions were parallel processes during this period. Hashra's plays *Sita Banbas* and *Bhishma Pratigya* were preceded by mythological plays by Narayan Prasad 'Betab' (*Mahabharat*, 1913), and Radhesyam Kathavachak (*Vir Abhimanyu*, 1916) that had been equally popular. Betab and Kathavachak quite successfully pioneered the transition from Hindustani to Hindi, and in their autobiographies they announce their preference for Hindi in terms of a sacrifice and service to Hindi literature and nation, reflecting the growing perception that Urdu was associated with a feudal culture of decadence and self-indulgence, as opposed to the stringent, puritanical norms of nationalism symbolized by Hindi.¹³⁹

In Hashra's mythological plays the adoption and assimilation of Hindi-Hindu sensibilities reached its ideological and melodramatic peak. Hashra's epic heroes,

¹³⁷ See Lothspeich, *Epic Nation* (16, 17) on the flowering of the 'mythic sensibility' that accompanied the spread of religious nationalism in nineteenth and early twentieth century

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 19

¹³⁹ Hansen, "Theatrical Memoirs and the Archives of Autobiography", 38-39

entangled with the rise of Hinduism and nationalism, allegorized anti-colonial sentiment through their commitment to suffering, celibacy, and *dharma*. The blurring of the boundaries between devotional and nationalist fervour turned epic heroes on stage into nationalists, while enabling real-life nationalists to assume god-like or heroic personas. This chapter examines the process by which Rama and Bhishma's ideological conflict between *dharma* (righteousness) and *dukha* (suffering) is recast in terms of a nationalist dilemma between 'desire' (for marriage, sexuality, love) and 'duty' (toward family, community and nation).

The incorporation of Hindu concepts of *dharma* and *dukha*, as central themes in modern Indian drama began earlier with playwrights like Narayan Prasad 'Betab' and Radhesyam Kathavachak who, introduced plays that predominantly, captured the sensibility of a north Indian Hindu milieu. These plays frequently displayed influences of emergent Hindu revivalist movements in north India by incorporating issues that were of importance to the Aryasamaj and Hindu Mahasabha.¹⁴⁰ Betab's *Mahabharat* (1913) and Kathavachak's *Vir Abhimanyu* (1916) attempted to frame issues of women, caste, and national reform by incorporating the rhetoric of Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha. Both organizations were instrumental in consolidation of Hindu community and identity and adopted selective agendas of religion, caste, and women's reform. Kathavachak's plays of *virta* (valour) and *dharmikta* (religiosity) were motivated by his desire to move audience beyond the pleasures of love and *shringar* (erotic) that had been dominant in Parsi theatre of the time. Betab's mythological plays, touching upon caste and women's reform issues, were motivated by the potential of *bhakti* (devotion) as a way to morally uplift audience towards an integrated nationalist consciousness.

Hashra's plays in adapting these epics almost a decade after Betab and Kathavachak show a realignment of nationalist agenda and a shift in moral and ethical values such that adherence to one's duty (*dharma*) becomes the most important available tool to save the nation. Although the Congress and Arya Samaj had shared common forms of nationalist rhetoric in the past, in the post 1920s period both shared the spirit of Gandhian mobilisation that emphasized the politics of self-sacrifice through repeated invocations of celibacy, asceticism, suffering, and truth. Unlike Betab's and Kathavachak's plays that played upon their heroes' divinity, Hashra's mythological plays blurred the boundaries between the human and divine world, and attempted to humanise the gods.

Hashra's heroes as gods or kings found their capacity to undergo *dukha* and pursue *dharma* without any recourse to divinity or devotion. Either as fallen men or gods, they were driven towards *dharma* as a way to end their own cycle of desire led *suffering*

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 84-91

and to help others achieve similar goals. Conceived in this way, the suffering, of Hashra's mythological heroes, was not a way out of eternal or karmic *dukha*, but a humanist remedy for colonial angst and modern apathy. The choice of active suffering was a way to assert and represent political agency on popular stage, and to teach theatre audience the value of placing duty toward family/community/nation, ahead of one's own private desire.

***Sita Banbas* (1927): Ram and Sita's Suffering, and the *dharma* of a Nation and its Public**

Scholars of Ramayana have shown that Rama's conduct in a few cases, like the unchivalrous killing of Valin in the *Kishkindhakanda* of the *Ramayana*, the repudiation of Sita in *Yuddhakanda*, and the banishment of Sita in *Uttarakanda*, problematized his image of an exemplary ethical deity and dharmic king. Although Sita's exile has been omitted or modified in many later versions of the *Ramayana* including Kampan's Tamil *Ramayana*, and Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*, in late colonial India there seemed to have been a renewed attention on this particular episode. Beginning with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's prose piece titled *Sitar Vanvas* (1860) and followed by Girish Chandra Ghosh's Bengali play *Sitar Vanavas* (1881), also based on Vidyasagar's work, the question of Ram's unfair banishment of Sita was found in wide circulation across print as well as performance culture. Outside Bengal, Vidyasagar's *Sitar Vanavas* was translated in Hindi by various authors, including Narayan Hemchandra (*Sita Vanvas*, 1888), Hariwansa Lala (*Sita Vanvas*, 1874), and Devadatta Tiwari (*Sita Vanvas*, 1878), who explicitly cited Vidyasagar's text as their primary source. Later twentieth century adaptations with the same title included Narayan Keshav Behere's Marathi novel titled *Sita Vanavas* (1914), and finally Hashra's Urdu adaptation *Sita Banbas* (1927) for the Parsi theatre.

Vidyasagar's text 'The Exile of Sita'¹⁴¹ like Bhavabhuti's 8th century Sanskrit play *Uttar Ramcharita* (Rama's Last Act), attempted "to tackle the most critical problem of the story, the abandonment of Sita, the moral valence of the act, and the precise degree of Rama's personal responsibility."¹⁴² Although Vidyasagar's narrative, following Bhavabhuti's play, began with Rama and Sita at a painting exhibition, it did not follow Bhavabhuti's storyline that ended with recognition of Sita's virtue and her reunion with

¹⁴¹ I refer to Jane Harding's English translation of Vidyasagar's text published in 1904, titled *The Exile of Sita*: translated from the elegant Bengali of the learned Pundit, Iswarchundra Vidyasagar, that "was approved by Vidyasagar himself"

¹⁴² Pollock, *Rama's Last Act*, Introduction, 46

Rama. Instead, following Valmiki, Vidyasagar's text ended with Sita's despair at having to prove her innocence all over again to the people of Ayodhya. Vidyasagar's narrative ends, when Sita "as if struck by a thunderbolt, falls to the ground, like a creeper broken by a fearful tempest" and Valmiki "realizes that Sita had finished playing her part in the drama of life."¹⁴³

Since Vidyasagar's text was the most circulated and translated version of *Sita Banbas* in the nineteenth century, I compare Hashra's play to this text in order to point out how Hashra's play deviated from Vidyasagar's sympathetic portrayal of Rama's dilemma. Vidyasagar's text, like Bhavabhuti's, is preoccupied with Rama's psychological conflict about balancing his roles as a husband and king. As readers, we see that although Rama makes a decision to exile Sita, as a husband he is fully convinced of Sita's innocence and is consequently plunged in grief for having to make this choice.

Vidyasagar's Rama as a gentle, guilt-ridden, and indecisive husband, weeps excessively and is frequently plunged in grief and shame. On the other hand, Hashra's Rama does not feel, talk, or weep too much, in the play he is a man of few words, and even fewer emotions, clearly seeing himself firstly as a king, and only then as a husband. What emerges in Hashra then is a process of remasculinization by which Vidyasagar's romantic and sentimental protagonist is transformed into a more restrained and self-controlled version of Rama. The play manages to do that by privileging the point of view of Ayodhya's public over that of the protagonists whose private suffering occupies less stage time, and seems too insignificant compared to Ayodhya's public's anxiety about their king and his moral failure.

In Hashra's play, it is the public of Ayodhya that possesses a sense of *dharma* that is far more upright, rigid, and relentless than that of their king. This privileging of the public morality over that of its protagonist is intended to lead the theatre spectator away from sympathizing with the private consciousness of protagonists, towards identifying with a public consciousness. The symbolic act of asserting the political and cultural identity of the public as a moral and political agent (rather than a passive audience), makes Hashra's play less invested in the ethical question surrounding Rama's unfair treatment of Sita, and more invested in constructing Ayodhya's community or public as a stage worthy character.

Unlike a classical melodrama, where victory of good over evil is designed to morally validate the good protagonists over evil villains, Hashra's play devoid of evil villains constructs the image of the 'public' itself as a primal brutal mob that solicits and coerces the theatre audience to align with its collective will. Ayodhya's public sees itself

¹⁴³ Vidyasagar, *The Exile of Sita*, 96

as righteous and erect, and the objects of its pursuits are both Rama and Sita, who must suffer for challenging the public's moral order. The aesthetic of melodrama as well as the viability of commercial theatre had always relied upon the complicity of public sympathy, but in Hashra's play, this community of sympathetic spectators transforms from being an audience into becoming the play's most pivotal and decisive character.

Hashra's play begins with Rama's spy walking the streets of Ayodhya and chatting with the 'common man' of Ayodhya to get a sense of his satisfaction with the king. This is in stark contrast to Bhavabhuti's and Vidyasagar's texts that begin with the scene of 'painting exhibition' that is intended to align audience/reader sympathies with Rama and Sita, who grieve for their memories as they view the paintings. In Hashra's play, the omission of this scene denies the possibility of sympathizing with Sita's psychological anxiety, and Rama's shame upon seeing the painting of Sita's fire ordeal. Hashra's opening scene compels the audience to acknowledge the common man's anxiety about kingship, as a far more pressing issue than its protagonists' emotional conflicts about the past. The following scene emphasizes the public's doubts about Sita's fire ordeal, and its disapproval of Rama's decision to bring Sita back to Ayodhya.

This scene takes place inside the home of a washer-man (Rajak) and his wife (Rajaki), where Rajak is indignant that his wife has spent two nights outside his home without his prior permission. Although Rajaki explains that she had to leave instantly because her mother had fallen ill, Rajak cannot forgive a woman who has stained her character by failing to follow her *stridharma* (code of conduct for women). When Rajaki pleads with her husband to forgive her, for she has nowhere to go, Rajak tells her how much suffering an evil woman can bring upon a man. Finally, he declares to her that he is not "like king Rama to take a fallen woman back into his home" (*mat samajh yun hi mujhe moh lenge tere mantar, chal gaya hai jis tarah, Sita ka jadu Ram par.*¹⁴⁴)

Rajak: Like a sword that pretends to be a flowering creeper
 How to forgive a woman who violates her husband's commands?
 Neither the gallows, nor the fatal sword
 Can inflict such pain as only an evil woman can
 To accept death, is to value deception
 And to forgive you is to sharpen a poisoned sword.
 To love you even when your action is disgraced
 To take you back when your name is stained
 Think not that your words will cast any spell or charm,
 The way Sita's magic has worked on Ram.

¹⁴⁴ Hashra, *Sita Banbas*, 596-598

In explicitly comparing his domestic situation to that of the king, Rajak suggests that he and Rama share equal moral responsibilities as husbands to protect a good wife (*pativrata*), and to abandon or punish an evil one. By showing that the king is unable to resist Sita's 'magic', Rajak asserts his own moral superiority over that of Rama. These scenes in the beginning of the play not only verbalize public disapproval of Rama's kingship, but more importantly, show that Rama as a husband, and as a man has no control over his desires. Hashra's characterisation of the washer man (Rajak) as well as the public of Ayodhya (called *Nagarjan*), is an attempt to emphasize the common man's or public's suspicions over their king's conduct. The play therefore not only justifies the public's challenge to Rama's authority, but also elevates the common man to a position of equal or moral superiority.

In Hashra's earlier play *Bilwa Mangal*, the gods had attempted to reform the humans, while in *Sita Banbas*, it is the public that seeks to reform and punish their divine king and queen for their fallen-ness. Hashra's play in constructing the public as a unified, homogenous, morally upright, and erect entity, anticipated theatre's public audience to identify with their highly cultivated sense of moral, masculine, and political will. The play thus mobilises the spectator to remain outside of the protagonists' consciousness, and to ideologically align himself with the Ayodhya's public's desire to see the protagonists suffer for the sake of upholding *dharma*.

It is not only through the characters of Rajak, or Ayodhya's public (*Nagarjan*) that the play verbalizes public disapproval of Ram and Sita. Rama's spy, Durmukh who overhears Rajak and Rajaki's squabble, also mirrors similar concerns about Rama's moral weakness. (*Ram could gain victory over Ravana, but could not gain victory over his desire for a woman*). Durmukh (Rama's spy) first threatens Rajak for slandering the king's name, but then admits that although Rama could conquer Ravana, he could not overcome the charms of a woman (*nari-moha*). In other words, speaking as Rama's spy, he forbids Rajak from disapproving of the king, but speaking as a common man, he affirms Rajak's doubt about Rama's moral failure. Such repeated affirmations of the common man's point of view are absent in Vidyasagar's text that completely glosses over problematic characters like Rajak, Rajaki, and Ayodhya's public.

In Vidyasagar's text, it is not the common man who verbalizes his dissatisfaction with Rama, but Rama and Laxmana who incessantly question the validity of public dissatisfaction. Thus, Vidyasagar's Laxmana asks Rama for his justification for putting a common man's *dharma* ahead of his own. He tells Rama, "It is not fit that great persons like you should be moved by the words of the common people, who have no grounds for their discontent, the common people cannot understand what is proper or improper, their understanding is poor, they say whatever comes to their minds, and believe whatever they

hear without considering whether it is probable or not; if one went by their words there would be no going through this world.”

Rama agrees that, “the common people exercising no judgement believe all they hear, and say whatever comes uppermost, but in this matter the fault does not lie with my people. Had we returned to Ayodhya, and Sita gone through the ordeal before the citizens and villagers, their doubts would have been completely removed. I cannot blame my subjects in this matter; this unknown calamity has happened through my fate; had I not taken the weight of the kingdom on me, and sworn to please my subjects, I might have scorned this reproach of the common people, and gone through the world carelessly; being a sovereign, if I do not please my subjects, what is my life worth to me?”¹⁴⁵

In setting up the opposition between common man’s morality and king’s *dharma*, Vidyasagar’s text suggests that it is only the protagonists who have the social privilege and the moral right to question king Rama’s decision. But in Hashra’s play the public being given the right to question and judge the king encourages the audience to maintain emotional distance from the protagonists’ suffering. Within the representational code of melodrama, Sita’s psychological distress in Vidyasagar’s narrative becomes a pathetic spectacle in Hashra’s play. Sita is not just anxious, sad, or weepy, but hysterical, hallucinatory, and on the verge of madness. The production of emotional excess and redundancy through repetitious lamentations and tearful outbursts renders Sita emotionally and psychologically hollow, and thus an object of curiosity and pity rather than public sympathy.

When Sita first learns about her banishment, she appears reasonably shocked in Vidyasagar’s text, at first fainting but soon recovering to question Laxmana about what might have prompted Rama to take such a decision. But in Hashra’s play, Sita begins to hallucinate as soon as the chariot leaves Ayodhya, and has a strong premonition about her upcoming suffering even before Laxman has had a chance to tell her anything. In the following passage, Sita’s character appears delusional because she is imagining Ayodhya to ‘mirror’ her emotional state but the audience knows that Ayodhya and its people are incapable of any sympathy for Sita.

Sita: The wheels of the chariot are crying out,
 The ground of Ayodhya is desperate clinging to the chariot
 The waves of Sarayu are raising their arms to stop me from leaving
 Wherever one looks, one sees eyes shedding silent tears.
 Breeze, water, flowers, birds, are all crying out,

¹⁴⁵ Vidyasagar, *The Exile of Sita*, 34-36

The sounds that trail this chariot are like the wails
Of infants separated from their mothers¹⁴⁶.

In Vidyasagar's text, such scenes of complex emotional intensity remain private and are accessed as the character's thoughts or emotions. For example, when Sita and Laxmana leave for the retreat, Laxmana feeling a veritable storm of emotions attempts to act cheerful in order to repress his guilt and hide his grief in front of an unsuspecting Sita. Along the way, tormented by the thought of having to give this news to Sita, he is burdened by the weight of Ram's unfair decision. Finally, upon reaching the retreat, he pours out his heart to Sita, and afterwards sinks down upon the earth and becomes senseless. In Hashra's play, it is not Laxmana's psychological conflict, but Sita's unmotivated anxiety that drives the plot until they reach the retreat. When she finally hears about Rama's decision to forsake her, Sita is hysterical, inconsolable, and eager to end her life.

Sita: Life, go away. When peace, hope, love have gone,
you too must go away.
Oh Sita's shattered fate, when you have snatched away
a husband like Rama,
Then why not take away this life bereft of Ram
Yamdut (messenger of death), fall upon me,
like flowers and leaves fall down from the forest trees,
Clouds, burdened with the weight of water and lightening,
Burst upon my forehead with catastrophic thunder.
I don't ask for riches, or power, or even a happy home
Either strike me dead, or give me back my dear Rama¹⁴⁷.

Like the public of Ayodhya, the public audience of Hashra's plays, having prior knowledge of Sita's banishment, feels a sense of mastery over Sita's trauma that forces them to see Sita's suffering as inevitable. The above scene ends with Sita's realisation that Rama was indeed justified in banishing her, and just like Rama endured *banbas* to follow his dharma, she too will endure a similar *banbas* to follow her own *dharma* as a *pativrata*. She reminds herself that Rama renounced the world to protect his father's life; Sita will renounce the world to protect her husband's duty.¹⁴⁸ The play then follows

¹⁴⁶ Hashra, *Sita Banbas*, 616

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 620

¹⁴⁸ Hashra, *Sita Banbas*, 619

Sita's life in Valmiki's ashram where she raises her sons Lava and Kusha for twelve years, and finally tells them that their father is Rama, the king of Ayodhya. With sage Valmiki's interventions, Rama decides to welcome back Sita and reunite with his children.

When Valmiki enters the royal court with the children, followed by Sita and Laxmana, the public of Ayodhya seem to welcome Sita with shouts of '*Sita Ji Ki Jai*' (victory to Sita). Sita tells Rama that she is fortunate that the dark night of separation has passed and that she can finally see the morning sun. Rama reciprocates by acknowledging that her love is unchanged despite her suffering and that she is indeed an ideal pativrata. Sage Vasishtha announces to the public that Rama being an ideal king would always uphold public desire over his own desire. Therefore the time has come for Ayodhya's public to ask their king to receive his wife Sita and children and give everyone a chance to celebrate their reunion, and for Valmiki to conclude his Ramayana.

The residents of Ayodhya, not to be dissuaded from their high moral ground, now once again show their disapproval.

NagarJan: Lord, your joy, like your fame is indestructible, but Lord

Vasishtha: Continue speaking! Why do you stop?

NagarJan: O king, in this world, everyone does not have the same kind of sense

Valmiki: Therefore...

Nagarjan: Therefore, you should understand that for us to be free of suspicion a *Sati* must prove her *satya* (truth) in a *pariksha* (trial)

Rama: Pariksha (trial)? She had a trial in Lanka, and another trial in Ayodhya! Will you not believe the truth of women, until the sun and moon shatter upon the earth and rain down in fiery embers? What should I do? O Sage, what should I do? Such cruelty! Such ruthlessness! This is fire of suffering that my father has left for me, this throne of Ayodhya is like a funeral pyre for me O Sita, lets return to the forest, once again, as beggars in disguise, Where there is no public, lets live in that place.

Sita: Master! An Aryan woman can stay without food and water, with bare threads for clothes, and a fist full of lentils,

but she cannot bear the insult to her *pativrata* dharma.
Mother earth! If my eyes have never seen a shadow of sin,
if chastity has always stayed by my side throughout life,
then come and be a witness to your daughter Sita's truth.
Take me from this *samsara*, do me this favor
I am drowning in the ocean of life,
deliver me now from this suffering.

Prithvi: Come my daughter! Grace the lap of your mother!

Sita: Good bye! Goodbye my Lord!
You are my life, and you know it all
Everytime I am born a woman,
let only Rama be my master.
(Earth rips open and swallows Sita ! People are left spellbound!)

Sita's anguish over the continuing suspicion over her *pativrata* dharma, and the public's relentless cruelty leads to the play's tragic ending with Rama's distress and Ayodhya public's bewilderment at Sita's disappearance. From the public's point of view, it is Rama and Sita's decision to follow *dharma* and face suffering, and ultimately Sita's self-willed death that finally turns the epic protagonists into desirable role models for the nation. Arti Dhand, who has examined the issues of ethics and *dharma* in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* has shown that if there is one ethic informing all of Rama's actions in the *Ramayana*, it is stoic courage, a willingness to bear all hardship for an uncompromising commitment to *dharma*. She has noted that, doing one's duty, as interpreted by Rama, means holding one's own interests in the lowest regard, and exerting oneself for the wellbeing of others with an attitude of ascetic equanimity.¹⁴⁹

Rama's (as well as Sita's) idealization in Hashra is premised upon precisely these ideals of 'stoic courage' but it is through the public of Ayodhya that such ideals are realized in the course of the play. Ayodhya's public ensures that their king is reformed and recuperated by repeatedly forcing him to choose public duty over private desire. In the play, nationalist desire duly projected and articulated through the point of view of Ayodhya's public represents the heft of collective will and the motivation to mobilize this will towards the consolidation of a more disciplined and controlled nationalist ethics. The play shows how the twin projects of nation building and the building of a nationalist self-identity were not predicated upon blindly following the Hindu epics or Hindu gods, but that the appropriation of the epics as well as the canonization of the gods was subjected to

¹⁴⁹ Dhand, *The Dharma of Ethics*, 365

the power of a collective will that was most conspicuously staged in the sphere of public theatre.

***Bhishma Pratigya* (1928): Sublimation of Desire and the Moral Power of Celibacy and Asceticism**

In examining the role of Hindu epics and the rise of nationalist consciousness in late colonial India, Lothspeich has shown that for many modern authors it was the *Mahabharata* rather than the *Ramayana* that offered greater allegorical potential for reimagining the story of a nation. Although war was central to both epics, the *Ramayana* was about recovering a queen from a villain in a foreign land, while the *Mahabharata* was about reclaiming land that had been unfairly lost and cruelly occupied, making the latter epic more analogous to the colonial condition.¹⁵⁰ *Bhishma Pratigya* written one year after *Sita Banbas* consolidated the idea of ‘suffering’ and ‘dharma’ as political tools for personal, familial, and national regeneration. Here the protagonist (Bhishma) did not have to learn from his own moral failure (as in the case of Rama), but from the moral failure of his father (Shantanu). In both cases it is the suffering of the fallen man that leads up to the play’s didactic goals of warning the spectator and instructing him on the importance of pursuing *dharma* over desire.

In exploring the relationship between ethics, aesthetics, and religion in the *Mahabharata*, Emily Hudson argues that the epic operates as a literary text through an ‘aesthetics of suffering’ in which the epic’s literary devices, or narrative strategies, critically inquire into the nature of the vexed relationship between suffering and *dharma*. The central characters in the epic, torn by conflict and confused by reality, are often led into situations where characters must make difficult decisions, the consequences of which entail potential for enormous suffering.¹⁵¹ For Parsi theatre’s public audience, this ‘aesthetics of suffering’ realized through the codes of modern melodrama distilled the moral idea in terms of a simplistic conflict between duty and desire where suffering in the pursuit of personal desire is deemed undeserving of public sympathy, but suffering in the pursuit of duty is understood to be a worthy and respectable ideal.

In the play *Bhishma Pratigya* (1928) Bhishma’s former life as a Vasu (attendant deity of gods Indra and Vishnu) ends when one of his brother’s wives sets her eyes on sage Vashishtha’s *Kamdhenu* cow, and dares her husband to take it. Afraid that fulfilling his wife’s desire would lead to the sage’s wrath, Vasu hesitates but is eventually led into

¹⁵⁰ Lothspeich, *Epic Nation*, 4

¹⁵¹ Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*, 6-7

stealing the cow. All Vasu brothers, duly cursed to endure human birth, seek goddess Ganga's help to release the sage's curse. Ganga agrees to help them and marries king Shantanu, giving birth to seven of them, and then drowning them so that they may return to *devlok* (heaven) without having to endure earthly human suffering. But the last-born Vasu is required to live his entire life on earth and suffer the curse on behalf of his brothers. Ganga brings up her last-born Vasu son as Devavrata until he is groomed into becoming an ideal son and warrior, before returning him to his father king Shantanu.

When Devavrata meets with his father for the first time he is struck by his father's lack of self-restraint and self-control that causes him so much suffering. King Shantanu who has fallen in his own eyes because he cannot control his desire feels trapped by his senses. Bemoaning his eyes, Shantanu asks, why they gazed desirously at the charming Satyavati, and why they still behold her image so fondly. He reminds his eyes that Satyavati's vision was just an illusion (*maya*), a figment of his imagination, but is anguished by the fact that his eyes would not listen to him. Shantanu is afraid that his suffering has no end because his pleasure seeking body has desires (*lalasa*) that he cannot control.

Shantanu: The body wants comfort; lips want joy
 Nose wants fragrance; tongue wants deliciousness
 Ears want sweet music; eyes want beautiful views.
 This wanting is called desire; wherever there is desire,
 there will certainly be suffering.

Seeing his father's distress, Devavrata, resolves to liberate himself from his desires (*lalasa*), and decides to renounce his kingdom, future marriage, wife, and children. Devavrata's moral self, produced through his will and courage to sacrifice and control his own pleasure-seeking body, helps him realize the possibility of an ascetic masculinity as a way to redeem his father's moral failure.

Devavrata: Let me be free from worldly desires and be victorious
 Gods be my witness, today I renounce kingdom, rights,
 I give up my desire for wife, children,
 other than *dharma* and devotion to father
 I give up everything in this world.
 From this day, whoever shall take this royal throne
 I, like an ordinary citizen, will serve him
 with all my devotion, strength and weapons.

And will consider every woman in this world
to be like my daughter and mother.

Devavrata by taking his 'terrible oath' (*Bhishma pratigya*) of celibacy turns into Bhishma (the terrible one), and by forsaking his rights to his father's kingdom, he allows his father to remarry. Goldman has noted that, in the epic, this vow on Bhishma's part represents the 'prevailing type of oedipal myth in traditional India', in which a son adopts an attitude of 'total passivity and perfect, unhesitating obedience' toward his father. Goldman points out that forceful examples of filial subservience in the Indian epics frequently involve either the formal abdication of sexuality on the part of the son, often explicitly in the favour of the father, and/or an illustration of the wrath of the angry father unleashed upon elder brothers who are insufficiently subservient.¹⁵²

In Hashra's play, Bhishma's celibacy is not intended to represent 'passive obedience', but rather 'active resistance' to sexuality and desire that have made his father spiritually weak and emasculated. In the play, Bhishma, in displaying greater will and courage than his father, asserts a model of Brahminical masculinity that combined certain Kshatriya masculine traits with ascetic ideals of celibacy and suffering.

Scholars have shown that gods and heroes in most mythologies conceived and born miraculously, signal the hero's innate difference from other mortals, signifying that they belong not to one family alone but to the whole society.¹⁵³ Bhishma's former birth as a Vasu, and then as Devavrata who is born to goddess Ganga, the divine river, the very source of all life on earth, signifies Bhishma's difference from other mythological heroes. In Hashra's play, his divine origins, his 'vow of celibacy', and his role as a patriarch serves to emphasize many of the *Mahabharata's* conflicts between father-son, sexuality-celibacy, filial piety-Kshatriya courage, and gender-sexuality. First as Vasu, then as Devavrata, and finally as a patriarch, Bhishma is forced to continuously confront the problematic of desire that produces suffering.

In Hashra's play, Bhishma suffers not only for his father but also for *Amba* whose marriage to king Salva is spoiled by his abduction of the princess. Amba spurned by Bhishma as well as Salva, returns to extract revenge upon Bhishma for ruining her life. Bhishma realizes that his own suffering is not isolated from the suffering that he had mistakenly brought upon Amba (also meaning mother) and *Bharat Mata* (Mother India).

¹⁵² Goldman, "Fathers, sons and gurus", 337-338. For a detailed discussion on Goldman's and other psychoanalytic approaches to Bhishma's relationship with 'fathers' and 'mothers' see, Fitzgerald's 'Bhishma beyond Freud'.

¹⁵³ Vanita, Gandhi's Tiger, 229-230

The third act of the play shifts the setting to an ashram where the five Pandava brothers are discussing the impending kurukshetra war. Arjuna reminds his brothers that they had asked the kaurvas for their rightful inheritance of five villages, but Duryodhana threatened to not give them anything bigger than the tip of a needle. Yudhishtira asks Arjuna to leave for Dwarika immediately and to seek Krishna's help after telling him that Kaurava's strength is their army, but the strength of the Pandavas comes from having Sri Krishna on their side.

Both Duryodhana and Arjuna request Krishna's aid, and Krishna promising not to lift a single weapon asks them to choose between him and his army. Duryodhana is pleased to have Krishna's entire army join him, while Arjuna chooses to have Krishna's presence on his side. Duryodhana approaches Bhishma asking him to be the commander of Kaurava army. Bhishma, who is against the war, pleads with Duryodhana to stop the war of Kurukshetra because he fears that the future of Bharat's history (*Bharat ke bhavishya ka itihās*) will drown in the tears of *Bharat-Mata*. Bhishma, like Gandhi, is mortified with the reality of communal violence (*bhai-bhai ka yuddha*) and its impact on India's ancient glory and future.

Bhishma: Duryodhana, stop this fratricidal war
Or else the history of India's future
will be written with the tears of Mother-India
The land of India will drown
in the blood of Kauravas and the Pandavas
And India's ancient glory will also drown.

Bhishma, the patriarch, is not only concerned about the casualties of the Mahabharata war, but also about the formation and destruction of modern nations and communities (*jatis*) that first appear like small waves and then rise into a storm before disappearing into the ocean of time.

Bhishma: Nations and communities
go through four stages
Every community (*jati*) first rises like a small wave
Then it moves forward by foaming over
Then it takes the form of a big storm
And in the end, it disappears
in the ocean of time.
One can see so clearly that
the time has come for Bharat Mata

to cry out and beat her chest
Because today her children
are busy sharpening their blades
to slit each other's throats.

In his desire to stop the Kurukshetra war, Bhishma begins to truly embody nationalist concerns for *Bharat Mata's* suffering, reminding everyone to place their 'duty to nation' ahead of their 'individual, familial, or communal desires'. In his veneration of duty and vilification of desire, Bhishma comes very close to espousing a Gandhian version of nationalist dharma. Here Hashra's conflation of Bhishma and Gandhi begins to echo later writers such as Rajarao who also perceived similar parallels between Gandhi and Bhishma during the nationalist period.

Rajarao wrote: "The people in India always live a *Mahabharata* war.....Remember Bhishma on the field of battle, on his bed of arrows, speaking of Truth as eternal dharma. Such, too, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who, on his field of battle, lying on his bed of arrows while his adversaries and kinsmen brought him lime and water to drink, talked of love, and was finally killed by an un-understanding man. Wave after wave of history had passed by..... But his movement was like a cosmic wave. Once started, like Sri Krishna had started, with the whirl of his disc, or Bhishma by his vow of celibacy, history seemed repetitious with it, dissolving time. *Dharma* won, because Bhishma fought on the side of Truth, thus wheresoever Truth is, said Bhishma, is Victory as well".¹⁵⁴

Rajarao's Bhishma here turns Gandhian by chanting 'wherever there is truth, there is victory' having forgotten that in the *Mahabharata* he had concluded, "Wherever there is Krishna, there is victory". More recently, Howard, in comparing Gandhi's 'vow of brahmacharya' to Bhishma's 'vow of celibacy', has also suggested that Gandhi struggled with the consequences of his vow just like Bhishma. In quoting Gandhi's letter to his son Ramdas Gandhi, Howard shows that Bhishma was in fact Gandhi's role model of a 'perfect brahmachari'.¹⁵⁵ In other words, this representation of the nationalist Bhishma that appears in Hashra's play, as the perfect mythological embodiment of Gandhi's modern ideals of ascetic masculinity, has been long sustained in the modern public imagination.

Prior to the rise of Gandhian nationalism, it was the other *Mahabharata* characters, like Abhimanyu, Arjuna, Bhima, and Draupadi, who had fired the imagination

¹⁵⁴ Rajarao, *The Great Indian Way*, 220

¹⁵⁵ Howard, *Gandhi's Ascetic Activism*, 191

of modern authors. Abhimanyu reimagined as a young, heroic revolutionary, while Arjuna and Bhima as exemplars of the warrior ideal of Kshatriya dharma were recast as modern heroes. Literature about the entrapment and killing of Abhimanyu, and the disrobing of Draupadi at the hands of the Kaurava villains alluded to the moral vacuity of the British, the unrighteousness of their civilizing mission, and their political and economic exploitation of the subcontinent.¹⁵⁶

Abhimanyu and Draupadi as popular subjects of multiple adaptations specifically came to embody a narrative of colonial victimization, and the nationalist desire to avenge such victimization. Khadilkar's *Kichak Vadh* (1907) was one of the most popular militant anti-colonial sensational melodramas banned by the British (Dramatic Performances Control Act, 1876)¹⁵⁷ that turned Draupadi into a symbol of Indian womanhood and mother India.¹⁵⁸ Popular adaptations of Abhimanyu included Radheshyam Kathavachak's Parsi theatre play *Vir Abhimanyu* (1916) that was inspired by Maithilisharan Gupt's poem *Jayadrath Vadh* (1910).¹⁵⁹ Mahavirprasad Dwivedi's prose adaptation *Sachitra Mahabharata* (1908) and Shalagram Vaishya's play *Abhimanyu* (1896)

Although the mythological heroes of Parsi theatre plays were not stand-ins for real political figures, the on-stage rhetoric of Betab and Kathavachka's plays was resoundingly similar to the political imperatives of the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha. Betab's play *Mahabharat* (1913) highlighted the issues of caste and suggested the social emancipation of lower castes through the rhetoric of bhakti.¹⁶⁰ Kathavachak's play *Vir Abhimanyu* (1916) allegorized Abhimanyu as a young idealized freedom fighter battling against the British (Kauravas). Kathavachak's play opened with a prologue in which a *sutradhar* (narrator), *nat* (male artist) and *nati* (female artist) discuss the need to awaken theatre's passive audience with *vira rasa* (heroic emotion) in order to inspire them to fight against Bharat's enemies. In the play, Abhimanyu's

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 214

¹⁵⁷ See Lothspeich, 186-187, on how Khadilkar equated Kichak with Viceroy Curzon, Draupadi with India abused, Bhima with Tilak, leader of the radical nationalist wing of Indian National Congress, and Yudhishtira with Gokhale, leader of the liberal wing. Bhima's victory over Kichak, thus promoted the position of nationalists over liberals.

¹⁵⁸ Other well known works on Draupadi included Prabhulal Kayasth's *Draupadi Vastraharan* (1896) and Badrinath Bhatt's *Kuru Van Dahan* (1912).

¹⁵⁹ Other well known works on Abhimanyu included Mahavirprasad Dwivedi's prose adaptation *Sachitra Mahabharata* (1908), and Shalagram Vaishya's play *Abhimanyu* (1896). Abhimanyu was the hero of at least eleven works titled *Vir Abhimanyu*, and five titled *Abhimanyu Vadh* that were published following the publication of Maithilisharan Gupt's poem *Jayadrath Vadh* (1910).

¹⁶⁰ For a detailed analysis of Betab's play *Mahabharat*, see Lothspeich 84-90

willingness to sacrifice his life and love, for upholding his *dharma* and duty to nation, made him an ideal role model to lead such a fight against Bharat's enemies.¹⁶¹

If Abhimanyu, Bhima and Arjuna signified hot-headed Kshatriya valour with a desire to seek revenge upon one's enemies, then Bhishma in the post 1920s period signified a turning away from such externalized violence towards conquering one's own inner desires and passions. It is during this period that Gandhi's discourse on gender and sexuality explicitly attempted to disavow desire as a symptom of modernity, and to follow a non-aggressive, non-assertive politics that included public performances of celibacy, prayer, and fasting. In examining the intersections of Gandhi's celibacy and politics, Howard has shown that for Gandhi, *brahmacharya* (celibacy) was not merely mechanical celibacy but complete control over the senses and freedom from lust in thought, word, and deed, and such masculine practices were essential for his non-violent political activism. Although, Gandhi claimed that only a perfect *brahmcharin* (celibate) could truly serve women, the ambiguities of his discourse led many nationalists to assume that management of male sexuality was only possible through control of female sexuality.¹⁶²

Hashra's play is an example of the ways in which these new paradigms of male and female sexuality were negotiated and represented in popular theatre. Female heroines like Sita, Draupadi, and Amba were shown to exercise far greater control and agency over their sexuality and marriage, but it was their 'suffering' and 'self-sacrifice' that interested the nationalists. Similarly, representations of Bhishma's celibacy and suffering were not intended to 'feminize' or 'androgenize' him, but to assert a new kind of 'ascetic masculinity'.

In Hashra's play, Amba represents the antithesis of the *pativrata* ideology because she is critical of marriage and considers it to be the primary cause of a woman's suffering. While waiting for her wedding *swayamvara* (ceremony where bride chooses the groom) Amba tells her attendant that marriage does not signify a beginning, but an end, of a woman's life.

Amba: Marriage, for a woman, is a battle between duty and life
It is a hard *tapasya* (austerity), a kind of self-sacrifice,
She has to offer her body, beauty, smile,
attention, duty, desire, hope,

¹⁶¹ For a detailed analysis of Kathavachak's play *Vir Abhimanyu*, see Lothspeich 151-159

¹⁶² For a more detailed discussion on Gandhi's celibacy and politics, see Howard, "Rethinking Gandhi's Celibacy", 1-12

Her present, future, earth, heaven, everything
in the love and service of her husband.
Just like the monsoon cloud that disappears
after pouring all of its water on the feet of mother earth
Similarly, a woman, after her marriage, ceases to exist
Now say, do you call this deathlike life, joyful?

Amba's diatribe against marriage is not unusual for Hashra's plays, where a heroine's friend or attendant or another minor character will openly express her dissatisfaction and discontent with the institution of marriage. Although the lead heroine is almost always a *pativrata*, her nemesis in the form of a prostitute or female ascetic or female devotee is allowed to undercut the dominant ideology of the *pativrata*. In the passage, Amba shows marriage to be a process of annihilation wherein a woman (*stri*) loses everything in the process of becoming a dutiful wife (*pativrata*), and the life of a *pativrata* is no better than death.

As the play unfolds, Princess Amba, first abducted by Bhishma and then abandoned and rejected by both prince Shalva and Bhishma, is deemed unfit for marriage. Shalva rejects her because having been abducted by Bhishma she belongs to Bhishma who cannot marry her because of his vow of celibacy. Amba, denied the chance to be a wife or a mother, and fulfil her *stri-dharma*, chooses to be an ascetic, practicing spiritual austerities, and immolating herself, in order to be reborn as androgynous Shikhandin who will eventually kill Bhishma.¹⁶³

A character like Amba that cannot be accommodated into becoming either a wife or a mother simultaneously threatens the ideological bounds of gender as she challenges a *pativrata's* femininity as well as Bhishma's masculinity. Custodi has shown that in the *Mahabharata*, Amba's challenge to Bhishma's masculinity and Bhishma's death at the hands of androgynous Shikhandin brings to surface "the contradictions of *dharma* in the epic – a seemingly staunch patriarchal order, firm laws, all the answers eternal and unchanging; yet also a tension of contradictions....*dharma* in the *Mahabharata* is simultaneously over determined and continually receding; it must be so, it must be so, yet in the final analysis it is not necessarily so".¹⁶⁴

Within Hashra's corpus, characters like, Amba represented Hashra's own liberal attempts to undermine the dominant patriarchal ideology of his plays. Nevertheless, the play's original impetus remains to propagate the Gandhian model of national

¹⁶³ For a discussion on Amba's ambiguous sexuality, see Custodi, 'Show you are a man', 216-222

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*, 222

regeneration through individual self-discipline. The active disavowal and sublimation of one's sexuality for the sake of fulfilling one's duty towards father, family, nation at times allows for the breakdown of gender based hierarchies even within a conservative plot.

Bhishma Pratigya ends when Shikhandi comes face to face with Bhishma and Bhishma throws his weapons down because he had taken the vow to never lift a weapon against a woman. Shikhandi shoots an arrow at Bhishma who falls down wounded. Krishna reminds Arjuna to immediately shoot another arrow to shut his eyes. Shikhandi is happy to have achieved revenge (*'meri pratihimsa puri hui'*), while Arjuna despite his guilt follows Krishna's orders and forces Bhishma's eyes shut. As Bhishma lying on a bed of arrows, awaits his death, Krishna tells him that gods (*devatas*) with floral garlands are standing by the gates of heaven. Before the curtain drops, the setting changes to *swargalok* (heaven) where gods shower Bhishma with flowers and welcome him home.

In both *Sita Banbas* as well as in *Bhishma Pratigya*, the ending is brought about by circumstances that are beyond characters' control. Shikhandi and Krishna in *Bhishma Pratigya* like Ayodhya's public in *Sita Banbas*, bring their sense of moral justice to prevail upon the narrative. In both the plays, protagonists' agency is sacrificed to uphold the will of outside characters that appear to be the true moral guardians of dharma. On the one hand, the protagonists are forced to surrender their desire for the sake of dharma. On the other hand, as idealized heroes (and heroines) they are made to willfully choose such self surrendering in order to prove their commitment towards *dharma* and duty.

Conclusion

In analyzing Hashra's plays between 1910 and 1928, this study has shown how the representational world of his plays exists in relation to the social, cultural, and theatrical events of the period. The three contextual frameworks of melodrama, mythology, and moral reform clarify some of the unifying threads that run across the plays, and also account for its significance within the history of modern Indian theatre. It has been my endeavor to show that these plays are not only shaped by the dominant discourses of the period, but that in turn they have also had an influence upon them. The plays remain in tension with regional Marathi, Bengali theatre, as well as classical Sanskrit, and folk theatre. As adaptations of English and French melodramas, they also exist in a formally binding relationship with plays from different periods, geographies, and artistic movements.

Despite the focus on 'social' and 'mythological' plays written between 1910 and 1928, a study of this nature has multiple limitations. Firstly, the plays are a part of a Parsi theatre history beginning with the *Indar Sabha* tradition (1854) that is far too large in scope in terms of its linguistic, performance, and artistic heritage to be fully accounted for by examining the immediate social, political and cultural context of two decades in the early twentieth century. Although in my introduction, I offer an overview of the *Indar Sabha* tradition leading up to Hashra's 'courtly' plays, I do not fully explain how Hashra's later plays remain haunted by this early history of Parsi theater. In other words, many of Hashra's structuring strategies like song and dance performances, comic interludes, invocation rituals, fantasy and mythic elements, as well as the grand happy ending, are conventions that persevere and remain preserved as a debt to their own Parsi theatre heritage.

Secondly, Parsi theatre's reception history is deeply implicated in the plot, characterization, and thematic strategies that emerge in Hashra's 'social' and 'mythological' plays. One has to be reminded of the deep disdain expressed by elitist intellectuals and progressives alike towards Parsi theater and its petit-bourgeois playwrights to understand Hashra's anxieties about regaining respectability for theater. The idealization of high minded 'moral reform', 'mythological narratives', and even the co-opting of 'melodrama' plots from Shakespeare, Jones and Scribe have to be seen as conscious attempts towards correcting the low-browed image of Parsi theatre. In other words, the addressing of individual 'moral reform', and the staging of protagonists modeling their story of moral reform, is driven by Hashra's goals of making Parsi theatre commercially viable, socially purposeful, and respectable enough for the middle class.

Although some plays appear outright didactic, they frequently undermine their own moralizing drives and even occasionally subvert their reformist agendas. In *Silver King*, for example, the play ends up sabotaging its own position on temperance by prominently staging alcohol, in the closing scene, as a socially acceptable component of communal feasting. Similarly, in *Yahudi Ki Ladki*, the play's critique of religious bigotry is undermined when the protagonists saved from religious persecution celebrate their new found freedom by renewing their commitment towards their religion. Thus Rahil who knows that she was born a Christian, and was rescued by a Yahudi, declares that she will always honor and serve her Jewish father because he has rescued her from idolatory and showed her the path of *tawhid* (indivisible oneness in Islam). The play then quite unconsciously ends up in the same place where it first began, with an active assertion of one's religious identity and a fierce desire to show one's commitment to one's own religious faith.

Some of Hashra's characters including the prostitute, the *pativrata*, and the nationalist reformer, are over determined because of the heavy handed naming conventions that once again turn the plays didactic. So the prostitutes in *Ankh Ka Nasha* are called Kamlata or Kamini, while the ruthless religious reformer in *Yahudi Ki Ladki* is called Brutus. But the overdetermination sometimes becomes necessary to control the plot and the characters that would otherwise slide into a world of complex big feelings that are nevertheless incoherent and incompatible with the linear logic of the plot. The prostitute becomes a classic conundrum for Hashra who on the one hand seems deeply sympathetic to her social victimization, and yet on the other hand, thinks nothing about subjecting her to the same kind of victimization within the play. But in the end it is the prostitute who also gets some of the best lines, those that would win her quite a few rounds of applause.

On the other hand, the *pativrata* seems more one-dimensional and without much of a voice or agency. When she is not mute she is singing, when not crying, she is pleading, always suffering, and occasionally turning mad with distress, the *pativrata* remains idealized and therefore victimized. If the prostitute is real and made even more real in Hashra's plays, the *pativrata* is rendered melodramatic to the point that she has minimal effect on the plot's action. She appears and disappears like a stage setting, functioning more or less like an emotional prop for sustaining the protagonist's journey towards moral reform and recuperation of marriage. Although in early plays like the *Silver King*, one gets a rare glimpse of a fiery and fierce *pativrata* in the character of Afzal's wife Parvin, the dutiful wife becomes mellow in subsequent plays as a consequence of her idealization in nationalist discourse.

A lot of what seems incoherent or inconsistent, in Hashra's plot and characterization, can perhaps be elucidated by examining his own development as a

playwright, before as well as during his theatrical career. As a largely self-taught poet, playwright, and impresario, Hashra's imagination was shaped by the poetic, melodramatic, and didactic literature that he read and imbibed in Urdu and Urdu translations. His characterization of the fallen protagonist, for example, in many ways reflects his own penchant for 'vices'. Many of his critics emphasize his own addiction to *aiyashi* (pleasure), alcohol, and prostitutes, indulgences that continued to sustain him throughout his life. In theatre, Hashra had found a legitimate space to confront the question of 'desire' as a moral issue, and turn it into a socially purposeful drama. The biographical detail here is not the whole picture, but it is nevertheless a step towards comprehending the puzzle of representational art.

The plays show Hashra's own transformation from a humanist into a nationalist. Hashra is said to have joined the Congress party in 1921 and at that point of time he was known to have given up his former 'vices' of drinking, western lifestyle, fashionable clothing etc. The nationalist Hashra was a khadi-clad, Gandhi-cap wearing, traditionalist. *Ankh Ka Nasha* (1923), *Sita Banbas* (1927), and *Bhishma Pratigya* (1928) are plays that were written during the peak of his involvement with the Gandhian nationalist movement. The play *Aj* (1921) discussed in the 'Introduction' shows Hashra's endorsement and support for Gandhian non-cooperation movement. *Dil Ki Pyas* (1923) also written during this period staged the pitfalls of imperialism, English education, and western civilization. The play's flawed protagonist Madan is eventually transformed by his traditional *pativrata* (dutiful) wife Manorama into relinquishing his western values and accepting the superiority of Bharat's tradition and old-fashioned culture.

The world contained within Hashra's plays is neither outside of the social reality of twentieth century colonial India, nor is it totally constituted by it. In terms of their narrative and performance conventions, the plays are in fact as much indebted to the dramatic conventions of melodrama in English theatre, as to the French melodramatic tradition of Eugene Scribe. But this artistic debt is outside of the immediate social-political context of nationalist consciousness, wherein moral reform is being redefined in terms of one's commitment to tradition in the name of dharma. In all of the plays mentioned above, it is this sense of an integrated and shared dharma led tradition that constitutes the soul (*atma*) of a nation (Hindustan). The turn toward mythological marks the culmination of this process of imagining a future nation in terms of its own indestructible 'tradition' that in the plays invariably leads one back to the domain of religion (*Yahudi Ki Ladki*), devotion (*Bilwamangal*), dharma (*Sita Banbas*, *Bhishma Pratigya*)

Silver King shows how the problem of intemperance resulting from lack of self-control turns the fallen protagonist's alcohol and alcohol consumption into attacks on the domain of tradition, home, and family. In *Yahudi Ki Ladki*, the protagonist's duty

towards faith, family, and community (*qaum*) is pitted against the quotidian pleasures of romantic desire. The play advocates a rejection of romantic passion and its replacement with religious passion as a way for individuals to constitute themselves into a *qaum* (community). *Bilwamangal* and *Ankh ka Nasha* reconsider the problematic of desire that threatens to upset the moral order of a home, community, and nation. In the plays, desire and *adharma* become externalized in the character of the prostitute so that her reform or erasure can be successfully undertaken.

But both the plays draw attention to questions of caste (Brahmin privilege) and class (Bhadralok hypocrisy) to show how 'moral reform' is incumbent upon the reform of socio-economic-cultural conditions. The corrective in *Bilwamangal* necessitates a fierce commitment toward devotion (*bhakti*), while in *Ankh Ka Nasha* a renewed faith in the power of the state (via law) is required to bring the offenders to justice and preserve *dharma*. The mythologicals (*Sita Banbas* and *Bhishma Pratigya*) conclude the process of normalizing *dharma* by showing gods faltering before summoning moral courage to overcome desire and surrender individual will for the sake of *dharma*.

If we are convinced that drama and society are related to one another and historical changes in one correspond to the other, then the contextual analysis of the plays undertaken in this study, offers a first comprehensive overview of Hashra's dramatic universe that marked the culmination of Parsi theatre tradition. Given the fact that most of these plays (*Yahudi ki Ladki*, *Bilwa Mangal*, *Ankh Ka Nasha*, *Bhishma Pratigya*) have also been adapted into popular Hindi films during 1930s -1950s, the study also offers a starting point to understand the theatrical beginnings of Indian melodrama that film scholars claim began only in 1930s. This theatre shows that Indian melodrama that was consolidated within the sub-genres of social and mythological in early cinema was in fact first constituted in Hashra's plays in Parsi theatre.

Despite the attacks on Parsi theatre for its high commercialism, low literary value, and antagonism to national traditions, Hashra's plays examined here show that Parsi theater enabled a hybrid, pan-Indian aesthetic of representation that captured the imagination of an entire nation. The immense popularity of Hashra's plays examined here contributed to Parsi theatre's transformation from being itinerant 'company theatre' into becoming colonial India's first modern national theatre.

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