

Revolution

Part III covers the period from 1874 to 1893, the halfway point in the Parsi theatre's eighty-year history. It traces the beginnings of a political revolution incubated in the complex interplay between the familiar and unfamiliar, chance and intention, fantasy and partial truths in the now pan-Asian Parsi performance world. From the 1870s onwards, the Parsi theatre was the most significant arena for the conceptualization of the politics of religion in colonial India, profoundly affecting the course of history through its detailed imaginative renderings of a singular, culturally homogeneous past. Illegible to some but eminently legible to most others, Parsi plays—which depicted Hindu visual iconography, popular myths, and social themes such as the evils of modernity—propagated the twofold historical process noted by Sumit Sarkar, blurring differences internal to 'Hinduism' and sharpening boundaries between 'Hindus' and other religious groups.¹ As has often been noted, the symbolic correlation between Indian and Hindu nationalism (or Hindutva) and the parallel formulation of 'foreign' Islamic, Christian, and Parsi minoritarian identities are relatively recent, fundamentally modern colonial inheritances.² The drama played an instrumental role in not only the agglomeration of hitherto unheard voices within a more 'inclusive' public domain, but also, paradoxically, the hardening of intergroup boundaries and the rise of nationalist and sectarian sentiment. The sequential, derivative grammar of 'our' history, 'our' bloodlines, 'our' futures—the most influential legacy of the nineteenth century—was ultimately the hermeneutic work of the cultural imagination, involving the downward percolation and

subsequent internalization of racial theory in popular form, the horizontal dissemination of a reconstituted historical consciousness, and the phenomenological shift from reverse-orientalist imaginings to revealed mythopoetic truths. Chapters 7 and 8 delineate this evolution of racialized group identities, the discursive formation of *Hindutva*, and the shared cultural vision within which nationalist thought first appeared on the stages of empire, a process that troubles Benedict Anderson's canonical formulation of the newspaper's enabling of nationhood. While print capitalism allowed literate bourgeois publics to conceive of themselves as members of a nation in empty, homogenous time, the wider circulation and more persuasive visual renderings of religion, ethnicity, and kinship through 'performative capitalism' provided a popular base in South Asia where subaltern subjects wholly disconnected from the state apparatus visualized themselves as interconnected in kairoitic, messianic time.

Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee and Tanika Sarkar have shown how the origins of South Asian nationalism lay not in the 'outer' political sphere but in ideas of conjugality within the 'inner' home.³ As demonstrated in Part I, the reformist elite—who interiorized colonial theories of the barbarity of contemporary Indian customs due to their irreparable decline from a pure, ancient golden age—attempted to reconfigure all the fundamental elements of Indian legal, social, and political life. This reconfiguring was achieved through the women's question, the most important site for the cultural encounter between colonizer and colonized and a crucial tool in colonialism's assertion of its moral superiority. Beginning in the 1870s, however, a surfeit of gendered imagery that would eventually be associated with communalism, Hindu militancy, and Gandhian pacifist nationalism pervaded the vernacular public sphere—of goddesses who were devoted, selfless, and who willingly suffering monumental adversity for the wellbeing of their husbands, families, and all mankind. These visual representations, which melded female sacrifice and submissiveness with martyrdom and victorious power, lay at the heart of the self-introspection, religious revivalism, and totalitarian conservatism that characterized the beginnings of a radicalized nationalism in the late nineteenth century. If, previously, colonial officials and reformists posited women as symptoms of the deterioration of Indian civilization, they were now signs of the ultimate sanctity, durability, and virtue of a pre-existing culture, the last bastion of freedom for the colonized.

Significantly, this symbol of the inviolate, unreformed woman untainted by the prison house of reason—a representative of a hoary

Indian utopia—was gestated primarily in Indian playhouses, the most popular and accessible public realm for the development of mass literacy in a standardized visual grammar. These female icons eventually escaped from the theatre into the wider public arena of politics, embodying the antidote to and critique of an extrinsic, forcibly imposed moral order. As early as the 1870s and 1880s, the Parsi theatre—which performed a homogenous repertoire of high-brow and low-brow mythological plays, melodramas, pulp farces, and topical satire for a composite public of clerks, millworkers, soldiers, landowners, and housewives across the subcontinent and beyond—began to celebrate the pure, devoted, ritual-observing indigenous woman through narratives of romantic, ‘traditional’, precolonial pastoral life, forms of congregational devotion, and a new ideology of sacred domesticity. For example, in the new genre of the social play, the chaste, faithful, spiritual wife—the germ cell of the future nation—was juxtaposed against the self-indulgent, degenerate, evil, bourgeois man or woman who preferred entertainment over familial duty, this latter figure being symbolic of the ideological influence of market values as disseminated through foreign rule.⁴

The Parsi drama thus assumed the influential, transformative, epistemological purpose of disputing the overriding narrative of native barbarity and despotism through elaborate dramatizations of feminine difference, a manifestation of the irreconcilably differentiated colonized self. Fundamental to this mission were popular, cyclical, and implicitly critical conceptions of history and time. Kalyug, the most dissolute of the four Hindu ages marked by the inversion of gender and caste hierarchies, replaced linear, chronotic time in histrionic expositions of ‘truth’. Myth, history, and the present were indistinguishable in the new theatre, merging into a common dystopic temporal frame in plays that portrayed real knowledge as a return to an intuitive wisdom distinct from colonial law and moral doctrine. Women as passive signs of spectacle were thus demarcated as sites where an authentic, non-textual understanding of reality that penetrated the illusions of the modern world was revealed in messianic time. Every gesture, movement, and phrase in the Parsi theatre thus steadily and cautiously composed conceptions of the past that were subsequently accepted as revealed truths, providing an aesthetic currency for the future legitimization of indigenous leadership and putting disparate communities across the subcontinent into contact with the cultural tradition of the putative burgeoning nation.

Plays offered Indian audiences a hitherto unknown, unmediated interconnectivity, making Parsi theatre an equivocal yet formidable site for the broadcasting of anticolonial nativist thought, and shaping an impression of ‘India’ that, though illusory, generated and primed the future nationalist public. Consequently, despite never directly referring to colonialism, Parsi plays were implicitly anticolonial, gradually but deliberately seeing the nation into being.

While this new nativist revivalism that was disseminated through the transcontinental powerhouse of the Parsi theatre steadily eroded colonial power, tensions grew between the ethnic and religious communities that lived in uneasy propinquity in Bombay. Racial thinking, which spilled into the playhouse to legitimize forms of ethnonationalism, worked concurrently as a crucible for growing hostilities among Hindus, Muslims, and Parsis. This section shows how the colonial public was progressively fissured not merely along linguistic lines but also according to religion, caste, and ethnicity, due to the expressive economy, myths, and ethnonational moral universe that the Parsi theatre propagated. Parsi plays functioned as a living archive generated by innumerable authors, determining what occurred when and where and accordingly what had salience in the organization of collective discourse. By methodically compiling, curating, and circulating an authoritative ethnic, religious, and historical narrative of the future nation, the Parsi theatre simultaneously generated and further segmented the South Asian public. The following pages seek to portray this indistinct complex of the parallel development of South Asian proto-nationalism and -fascism, requiring the reader to intermittently gaze from afar and look up close.

NOTES

1. Sumit Sarkar, “‘Kaliyuga’, ‘Chakri’ and ‘Bhakti’: Ramakrishna and His Times,’ *Economic and Political Weekly* 27, no. 29 (1992): 1553.
2. Partha Chatterjee, ‘History and the Nationalization of Hinduism’, in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, eds. Veena Dalmia and Heinrich Von Stietencron (New Delhi: Sage, 1995), 126.
3. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6; and Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* Reprint (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2017, first published 2001), 37, 191.

4. Sumit Sarkar, 'Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth, and History in Colonial Bengal', in *Between History and Histories: The Making of Silences and Commemorations*, eds. Gerald M. Sider and Gavin A. Smith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 113.