

## Middle- and Near-Eastern Elements in Traditional Indian Theatre: A Historical and Cultural Perspective

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof<sup>1</sup>  
University of Malaya, Malaysia

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### Abstract

Traditional Indian theatre has had a long history from Vedic times to the present with various indigenous and foreign cultures contributing substantially to the development of its many folk, classical and popular manifestations. Notable among these have been elements from the Middle- and Near-East which, in the form of literary content, music as well as impetus towards innovation, enriched existing theatre genres or led to the creation of new ones. This paper examines, through a historical and cultural perspective, the development of several folk and court-based forms and the relatively recent popular genre, Parsi theatre.

### Keywords

Indian folk theatre, Middle Eastern literature, Persian literature, Wajid Ali Shah, Parsi theatre, *Nautanki*

## 1. Introduction and Background

### 1.1. Ancient Connections between South Asian Cultures and Cultures of the West

Historically “India” was recognised over the past two millennia as an idea, a conglomeration of many shifting kingdoms and empires in the vast peninsula, rather than as a nation. As a political entity India came into existence on August 15, 1947. This definition is important as it will provide a more accurate as well as clearer perspective to the history of South Asia, its multiple cultures, the developments of its great monuments and its artistic manifestations.

Connections between peoples in the Middle- and Near-East on the one hand, and those in South Asia on the other, go back to ancient times, with the

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<sup>1</sup> **Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof** is a writer, translator, academician, cultural activist and an expert of traditional Malay and Southeast Asian theatre. His most valuable contribution to Malaysian theatre is his groundwork involvement in the proclamation of *makyong* as an item of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005 under UNESCO. Currently an Adjunct Professor at the University of Malaya Cultural Centre, his research interests include classical and modern Asian literatures, traditional Southeast Asian theatre, mythology, mysticism, epics and aesthetics. Email: gsyousof@hotmail.com.

cities of Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and others possibly involved in this exchange. Although archaeology and geography have given certain pointers, the precise nature of early cultural relationships remains unknown. One highly important phenomenon in this process was the movement of the “Aryans” from the west into the subcontinent, an event which had far-reaching consequences for religion and culture in the northern sections of the subcontinent. What is known of this phase of subcontinental history comes principally from the *Vedas* which became the sacred texts of multiple cults and belief systems, eventually fusing into the complexity of “Hinduism,” a convenient 19<sup>th</sup> century coinage by British writers such as Sir Monier-Williams, compiler of a Sanskrit dictionary and author of *Hinduism* (1877). Additionally, the mythology and the two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, have remained vital sources of materials for the appreciation of the subcontinent’s ancient culture and artistic expressions.

Persian and Greek political dominance extended over parts of today’s India and Pakistan during several centuries from the early Persian Archemenid Empire, (502-486 BC) to several Indo-Greek kingdoms (180 BC to 10BC), reaching from Gandhara in present-day Afghanistan in the west to Pataliputra in the east. They were followed by various “Hindu” and Buddhist kingdoms, as well as those of the Sikhs. Between 1221 and 1327, the Mongols ruled parts of what is modern day Pakistan and the Punjab directly or through proxies. They were succeeded by various Muslim dynasties culminating in the establishment of Mughal control over most of “Hindustan” in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries up until the arrival of the British. Each of these succeeding powers left an indelible mark upon South Asian political and cultural landscapes. This movement of peoples, the shaping and reshaping of societies and their cultural manifestations, must be seen as a fairly normal process. This is reflected in the considerable diversity of the arts, including theatre forms under review in the present place.

## **1.2. Influences from the Middle- and Near-East: Syncretism and Fusion**

When it comes to the development of the arts of north India, in a broader sense, Arab and Persian influences are significant. The former may be seen in terms of secular culture and Islam, which began to arrive in the subcontinent from as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries through Arab traders and mystics. Mystical Islam (Sufism), “the inward or esoteric side of Islam” (Rizvi 18), found its way into Sind and other territories through conversions into Islam in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Rizvi 109), with the eventual establishment of the Chisti or Chistiyya, Naqshbandiyya, Qadiriyya and Suhrawardiyya Orders (*silsila*) throughout the subcontinent.

The most noticeable physical presence of Sufism in the subcontinent is in numerous shrines (*dargah*) commemorating particular saints (*wali*) or masters of these orders, while also serving as spiritual and cultural centres. The Chisti, the most liberal of these orders, has been highly influential in the development of a multi-dimensional Indo-Islamic culture. Political Islam arrived in Northern India

from the 12th century with kingdoms being established by Turkish and Afghan rulers belonging to several dynasties, the greatest extent of Islamic rule being reached during the Mughal period (1526-1858).

One of the most notable effects of the contact between Middle- and Near-Eastern cultures and those of the subcontinent is syncretism. This may be seen on two levels – religious and secular. In any attempt to examine the arts, it is important that this distinction be clearly kept in mind. In the former case, the emphasis was significantly upon universal rather than particular values belonging to any one of the religions involved. This is seen in the works of the Punjabi Sufi poets Bulleh Shah (1680-1757) and Waris Shah (1727-98), the latter being the author of the famous Punjabi folk epic *Heer Ranjha*.

In the development of the arts of Hindustan, a great initiative as well as a massive contribution was made by the iconic figure Ab'ul Hasan Yamīn ud-Dīn Khusrau (1253-1325 CE), better known as Amīr Khusraw Dehlawī, a spiritual disciple of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya of the Chisti order, who tried to bring about syncretism between the cultural expressions of both Hindus and Muslims. Mastering many styles of mediaeval Arabic and Persian poetry including *qasida*, *masnavi*, *ghazal* and *rubai*, Khusraw played a pioneering role in the development of early Urdu language, Indo-Muslim poetry and music. His notable efforts to combine poetry and music are best seen in the *qanwali* (from the Arabic word *qawl*, meaning utterance), a form of Sufi devotional music associated with him. Central themes of *qanwali* songs have to do with spiritual love and longing for God, although non-devotional poetry has come to be included in *qanwali* performances in fairly recent times. Following Khusraw, the lyrical *ghazal*, religious as well as romantic, was to gain immense popularity in northern India and Pakistan through great classical poets such as Wali, Mir Taqi Mir, Ghalib, Sauda and Momin, followed by many contemporary Hindu and Muslim poets. The *ghazal*, mystical and romantic, has a prominent place in traditional Indian theatre and in Hindustani films.

## 2. Folk, Classical and Popular Theatre Genres

When it comes to the connection between Middle- and Near-Eastern cultures and Indian theatre, there is a clear indication of, firstly, the mutual sharing of features, and secondly, the development of particular theatre genres within the subcontinent's folk, classical and popular traditions, the most important ones being *nautanki*, *kathak*, *khyal*, *bhavai* and Parsi theatre. Kapila Vatsyayan (1980), sees connections in the aesthetics of ancient Indian theatre, as outlined in *Natyasastra*, and the traditional genres mentioned, with the sole exception of Parsi theatre.

*Nautanki*, which developed from balladic recitals (*sangeet*) of itinerant singers, became popular in the 19th century (Gargi 36). This folk theatre genre gets its name from its original story, *Shehzadi Nautanki* (Princess Nautanki). In its

dramatic repertoire and certain performances, Middle Eastern elements are apparent. These include Persian vocal and instrumental music.

*Kathak*, developed under the patronage of Mughal rulers, is a court rather than a folk dance theatre form, which once again demonstrates a combination of Hindu and Islamic elements. The dramatic content is based on the highly popular lore of Radha, a cowgirl (*gopi*) and Krishna, a reincarnation (*avatara*) of the god Vishnu, and often seen in terms of a mystical relationship between man and God which, as in this case, transcends both popular Hinduism and Islam. The dancers are traditionally dressed in Persian tunics and girdles, resembling those depicted on Rajput miniatures of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Gargi 39). The skirts were influenced by those worn by followers of the influential Mevleviyya Sufi order founded by Maulana Jalal-ud-Din Rumi (1207-73).

*Khyala or khyal*, the Urdu word meaning imagination (Gargi 47), is a lyrical performance usually referred to as a form of folk opera (see also Vatsyayan, 1980). Its dramatic repertoire consists of various Hindu stories, the famous Arab-Persian romance *Laila Majnun* and Indo-Muslim sources, including *Pathan Shehzadi* and *Sultan Nihalde*. The literary or poetic elements in *khyala* performances are also Indo-Muslim in character.

### 2.1. *Ta'ziyeh* Ritual Theatre

Of Middle-Eastern ritual theatre genres in the subcontinent, the single most outstanding example is *ta'ziyeh*, referred to by westerners as the Persian passion play. The origins of this genre are said to lie in events connected with the legendary Iranian hero, Siavush (Malekpour 43), and the mourning rituals done following his death, said to resemble those done at death and resurrection of the Egyptian god-hero, Osiris. In Iran, *ta'ziyeh* is directly connected to events related to the tragic death of Husayn, son of Islam's fourth caliph, Ali, at the Battle of Kerbala, in October 680; deaths of other members of Ali's family, particularly his other son, Hassan, and that of Ali himself. *Ta'ziyeh* takes place during the first ten days of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim calendar, in commemoration of the tragedy of Kerbala.

This form of ritual theatre spread beyond Iran into lands both to the west and to the Indian subcontinent, with the essential elements of the genre maintained, yet with certain local variations. Malekpour indicates that it is a different kind of presentation in South Asian countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Performances in India include processions in which mourners carry miniature models of shrines or tombs (*tabut*) and certain religious symbols while chanting lamentations. At the end of the journey, the mourners discard the *tabut* in a river. This is something new in the genre (Malekpour 152). The character of *ta'ziyeh* changed considerably in performance as it travelled further away from Iran. One of the outstanding examples of the changed *ta'ziyeh* occurs in

Indonesia, where the genre has been renamed *tabuik* or *tabot*, almost certainly a variant of the word *tabut* (Ibnur 26).

In the new environment, the genre has undergone significant changes, with the emphasis shifting away from the drama to other performance elements, such as the processions or pageants. Iranian performances in the last century as well as in subsequent decades staged a sizeable repertoire of plays, or at least many scripts were available (Ridgeway 77-78; Malekpour 152). Still there is some evidence that a small number of dramatic pieces continue to be occasionally featured. New developments in the presentation of Indian *ta'ziyeh* however, have seen the introduction of supplementary elements, including elegies (*marjiya*). These genres of panegyric became popular with the *nawabs* of Awadh (anglicised as Oudh) under whose patronage several outstanding writers emerged. Among them Mir Anis and Dabir are particularly notable, with Anis producing literally thousands of elegies (Saxena 138-46).

## 2.2. The “Court Theatre” of Wajid Ali Shah

For the sake of historical accuracy and an assessment of possible links between Parsi Theatre and its antecedents, it is necessary to take a glance at certain intriguing and important developments in Lucknow during the rule of the *nawabs* of Awadh (Oudh) and the role, in particular, of the last *nawab*, Wajid Ali Shah (reigned from 13 February 1847 to 11 February 1856). Wajid Ali Shah was a multi-talented personality, a great patron of the arts and a consummate artist personally involved in many art forms including poetry, music, theatre and lyrical dance presentations (*raba*). He was a seminal figure in the introduction of innovations into Indian theatre. Inspired by theatre styles from within and from outside the subcontinent, possibly even as far as Renaissance Europe, his remarkable contributions, grand in every way, resulted in the fusion of Hindu and Islamic elements. In one of his signature productions, *Radha Kanhaiyya Ka Kissa*, presented in the style of *qissa*, based upon the folk romance of Radha, the cow-girl (*gopi*) and the Hindu god Krishna, a reincarnation of Vishnu, Wajid Ali Shah himself played the role of Krishna.

Another great achievement of his court, this time a literary masterpiece, was the play *Inder Sabha* or *Indra's Court* by Syed Agha Hasan (1817-59), better known as Amanat Lakhnawi, staged in the year 1853 as a musical drama. Based on the story of Indra, king of the gods (*deva*), the play is written entirely in verse. Its central theme is a romance between a prince, Gulfam, and Sabz Pari, the youngest and most beautiful of fairies (*pari*) from Indra's heavenly court. Recognised as the first-ever complete play in the Urdu language and a seminal work that influenced several important Urdu plays of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it continues to be popular to this day in its original language as well as in translation. According to Lal, “With the profusion of song and dance sequences strung together by a thin storyline of a fairy's love for a prince, and involving supernatural beings and

magical happenings, *Indra Sabha*, repeatedly imitated by other dramatists, became the prototype for scores of Parsi theatre plays in subsequent decades” (10-11).

The massive and colourful Lucknow productions, in particular those of *Inder Sabha*, broke away from Indian classical and folk conventions, yet made use of them in innovative ways, laying the groundwork in theatre for a synthesis between Hindu and Muslim cultures. This was something already established several centuries earlier in the work of Sufi saints of the Chisti Order<sup>2</sup> and in the writings of Amir Khusraw Dehlavi, who is “remembered for his role in Hindustani classical music, as well as his poetry in Persian and Hindi.”<sup>3</sup>

### 2.3. Western Technical Elements and Aesthetic Principles: The Beginning of Parsi Theatre

Western drama and theatre began appearing in India from the mid-nineteenth century through the introduction of European plays into the Indian education system. These included theatre productions in major cities, particularly Calcutta and Bombay, where the British built their first playhouses. These theatres provided the initial impetus for the introduction of modern elements into stage productions. In Bombay, the acquisition in 1853 of the colonial Bombay Theatre, built in 1776 by a Parsi, Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, and the building of the Grant Road Theatre by another merchant, Jagannath Sunkerset, in 1846 (Lal 338), opened up opportunities for itinerant Indian artists to present folk theatre genres indoors rather than, as hitherto, in make-shift spaces or tents.

More importantly, the adoption of Western production methods gave the cue for the development of what came to be known as Parsi theatre, the first form of urban theatre in the subcontinent, in some ways transitional rather than traditional in the manner in which the various constituent elements were put together to achieve a production. Parsi theatre performances were done in Gujarati, Urdu and Hindustani, the first production taking place in Bombay in 1853 (Lal 103). Productions involved proscenium staging with painted scenery in the form of multiple backdrops, wings and borders. Scenarios were used instead of full scripts, allowing for improvisation of dialogue on the part of actors. Similarly, stereotyped roles required improvised acting. Most productions were in keeping with its highly eclectic dramatic repertoire, with the extensive repertoire of this genre of plays derived from many diverse sources. Vocal and instrumental music as well as dance were incorporated into all productions but not as elements integral to the plays. These elements in fact led to certain scripts

<sup>2</sup> The Chishti Order, began in Chisht, a small town near Herat, Afghanistan, about 930 CE. Primarily followed in Afghanistan and South Asia, it was introduced to India by the scholar and philosopher Moinuddin Chishtii (1141-1236) in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. Its major centres are in Lahore and Ajmer.

<sup>3</sup> From Notes by Shakeel Ahmad on compact disc jacket of *World of Amir Khusrau: Innovations and Contributions* (New Delhi: Agha Khan Trust for Culture, 2014).

becoming musical plays, to the extent that the genre itself came to be referred to, mistakenly, as opera.

#### **2.4. The Use of Music and Dance Elements**

The dances came from the folk rather than the classical tradition, and the music was mostly of the light classical variety. According to Lal, “Light-classical musical vocabulary included ghazal, qawwali, thumri, dadra and hori; the common musical instruments were harmonium or ‘organ,’ clarinet, sarangi, tabla and nakkara drums” (Lal 109). Songs were not written into scripts and this provided flexibility in usage. In production of foreign stories, the dances and music were presented to obtain a proper feel of the cultural milieu and the settings in which the action was located. Based upon the vast dramatic repertoire, plays in fact could literally be set in heaven or on earth; indeed, it could be anywhere at all. The painted scenery had to be prepared in such a manner that it could fulfil all requirements of location or setting. Authenticity was never a serious consideration in these situations.

Parsi Theatre was enormously successful all over South Asia between 1860 and 1930, and regional variations soon began to be developed, with presentations done in regional languages instead of Urdu. The key element in the immense success that Parsi theatre enjoyed was that, conceptually, it was an art form designed for lower- and middle-class urban communities rather than for rural or sophisticated palace audiences. Like the Japanese kabuki theatre, then, it marked the beginnings of popular theatre in the subcontinent, while it also spawned many offsprings in Southeast Asia, beginning with the Malay-Indonesian *bangsawan*. It also had a great and continuing impact upon the overall aesthetics of films in the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

#### **3. Dramatic Content**

As already mentioned, folk theatre genres traditionally performed a limited repertoire of designated stories derived from fixed sources such as the Hindu epics, *Ramayana*, which deals with the adventures of Rama, an *avatara* of the god Vishnu, and the *Mahabharata*, which has as its central theme the conflict between the Pandava and the Kaurava. Other sources of repertoire include folk tales, legends or history. Replete with such stories, Indian folk and classical forms of theatre are, apart from their aesthetic appeal, valued for their religious or spiritual appeal, no less than as means of worshipping the deities or honouring them on appropriate occasions, and at suitable locations. Indian folk theatre genres discussed above demonstrate simplistic, possibly even crude, attempts to make use of interesting “dramatic material” from diverse sources. The range of plays used is quite extensive, and several popular stories are used in more than one theatre genre, with the stories given local-colouring or interpretations. One of the most interesting manifestations is the combining of stories across religions and

cultures, and the sharing of identical materials in different genres across several centuries of theatre development since the arrival of Islam and the Parsi community into the subcontinent. Evident in folk, classical and popular theatre genres, this phenomenon is best manifested in productions done in the Lucknow court. Such “sharing” of literary materials is also common in folk genres as well as in the highly eclectic Parsi theatre.

*Indra Sabha* was outstanding in particular, in the manner in which it used the myth of the ancient Vedic god, Indra, considerably expanded, in an elegant setting representing the heavenly palace of the god, and devoted particular attention to the court scenes involving numerous fairy (*apsara* or *pari*) figures. Through its unique script and the indigenous music, dance and costuming, the royal production of this play represents high synthesis of Indian and Middle-Eastern cultures even though the whole story is entirely secular in character.

The script, with its altogether novel approach to an ancient and well-loved myth, and the production with the personal involvement of Wajid Ali Shah himself playing the god Indra, all these being unique and well ahead of their times, were to become landmarks in the history of Indian theatre as it moved away from folk art forms and classical Sanskrit drama and theatre, into something approaching the modern.

Wajid Ali Shah’s productions, with their grandeur of scale, technical achievements as well as colour, almost parallel certain productions of European courts during the Renaissance. Historically their significance can be seen when, not long after his time, an important new genre, Parsi Theatre came into existence. Wajid Ali Shah was thus, in some ways, the precursor of Parsi Theatre, even though the direct influences of his royal productions in Lucknow upon the development of Indian popular theatre remain to be clearly established.

### 3.1. Early Parsi Theatre Plays

The early plays in Parsi theatre presented Indianised versions of Shakespeare’s plays, taken over from British playhouses, western plays and Victorian melodrama (Lal 105). These plays were turned into folk performances, with the addition of music and songs. As Parsi theatre companies started travelling across north India, local writers in the various provinces wrote new scripts in a mixture of Urdu and Hindi. Soon Indian legends, epic and mythological tales made an appearance as source material, in addition to material borrowed from traditional genres, especially from the extensive *nautanki* repertoire which included plays based on Arab, Persian and Indo-Muslim and Western literatures.

### 3.2. The Persian Contribution

Overall, the Persian contribution to the subcontinent’s cultural heritage has been substantial due to the extended or long historical connections of Persians with north India and Pakistan. Bombay’s Parsi community of later arrivals played a



major role in the development of Parsi theatre as patrons as well in various other capacities. One highly important area in which Persian influence is particularly evident is the dramatic repertoire. It is interesting that in many instances, the stories are not seen as Islamic but as Persian, and thus altogether secular. They are thus quite distinct from the older stories, connected with the family of the Prophet, which served as the repertoire of *ta'ziyeh*. This approach has certainly facilitated their use in traditional theatre genres within Iran and in areas beyond, where Iranian influences reached. Perhaps one of the most outstanding features in this respect is the development of the Urdu language and its literary heritage. Iran has also been the transmitter of Middle-Eastern cultural elements into India and Pakistan. The second wave of cultural influence came through the modern day Parsis. When it comes to theatre, the best evidence of this connection is seen in the patronage and support accorded to Parsi theatre, support that, in fact, literally led to the coming into being of this new genre, with its first footing in Bombay. Due to staunch support for the new genre from the Parsi trading community, it was only natural that elements of their rich literary heritage should find their way into Parsi Theatre. Among the principal contributions were selections from their literature, which will be presently discussed.

### 3.3. Sources of Literary Materials

The vast range of literary materials used in traditional theatre performances includes a good representation of plots which had either been influenced by Middle- or Near-Eastern elements or were entirely based upon such sources. Overall, for the convenience of discussion, these dramatic materials will be discussed in terms of several categories: (i) Locally written stories with Islamic Colouring; (ii) Stories from Indo-Muslim Literature; (iii) Arab Stories; (iv) Persian religious Literature; and (v) Romances from Arabic and Persian Literature.

Two other highly important plays were from *Shah Nama* by the poet Firdausi (935-1020), regarded as the National Poet of Iran, and *Shirin Farhad*, a popular romance (*qissa*).

#### 3.3 (i) Locally Written Stories with Islamic Colouring

Local stories with Middle- and Near-East colouring include *nautanki*'s "origin story" (Gargi 37-40). *Shehzadi Nautanki* (Princess Nautanki) tells of Princess Nautanki, a famous beauty of Multan. In the neighbouring state live two brothers, Bhup Singh and Phool Singh. One day, the handsome and adventurous younger brother, Phool Singh, returns from hunting and asks his brother's wife to serve him food quickly. She taunts him, saying that he is behaving as if he is the husband of the famous Nautanki. Insulted, he leaves home, saying he will not return until he has married Nautanki. After many adventures, Phool Singh succeeds in his mission (Gargi 39-40). Gargi indicates that "the romance of Nautanki has entered the vocabulary of folk speech, and hundreds of plays have been written on it"

(Gargi 40). It has thus gained an important place in Indian theatre alongside legends such as *Raja Harischandra*. *Siyah Posh* is another popular tale, written, like *Shehzadi Nautanki*, with Middle-Eastern elements, combined with local setting.

The use of such local non-religious stories in the court productions of Wajid Ali Shah was thus unusual. In the two highly significant productions discussed above, he made interesting and innovative use of the myths of the god Krishna and his romance with the cowgirl (*gopi*) Radha, the story connected with the god Indra, and those of semi mythological characters reinvented and reinterpreted by a Muslim author. Seen in the light of the attempts by various Sufi masters to bring about syncretism as well as mutual understanding between peoples belonging to two supposedly incompatible religions, his productions were reasonable, while also being aesthetically remarkable.

### 3.3 (ii) Stories from Indo-Muslim Literature

Indo-Muslim literature contributed *Sabz Pari wa Guljam* also known as *Inder Sabha*, *Gul Bakawali*, *Farrukh Saba* and *Hava-i-Majlis*, (Gupt 175). Among these, *Inder Sabha*, by Agha Hassan Amanat, as already noted, developed for palace performances during the reign of Wajid Ali Shah, was the most outstanding masterpiece of Urdu literature. Like several others, this piece fused traditional Indian myths and Muslim characters, becoming the greatest of all Parsi theatre plays, its influence extending beyond the immediacy of the Lucknow palace into the rest of the subcontinent and beyond. It was to prove immensely popular in theatre and, eventually, in Indian films. Beyond that, *Inder Sabha* gained considerable popularity in Malaysia and Indonesia through a translation into Malay as well as through *bangsawan*, an offshoot of the Parsi theatre which developed in the region during the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3.3 (iii) Arab Stories

Arab literature has spread throughout the Muslim world through the movement of the Arabs themselves, trade and religion. In the case of India, there have been several channels for its transmission, oral and written. It was thus inevitable that several of these tales would find a place in Indian traditional theatre, especially in the older theatre genres such as *nautanki*. The most important of these are the oral and literary romances which, in all likelihood, entered the repertoire through Persian translations. The principal sources are *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* and the *The Arabian Nights or One Thousand and One Nights (alf laylah wa laylah)*.

### 3.3 (iv) Persian Religious Literature

One of the greatest and most extensive bodies of dramatic literature in the Muslim world consists of the repertoire of the Iranian *ta'ziyeh* made up of stories connected with the martyrdom of members of the family of Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam. A substantial collection was made by Lewis Pelly, as indicated by

Ridgeway (1964). Among the plays collected by Pelly are the following: *The Death of Fatima*, *The Martyrdom of Ali*, *The Martyrdom of Hassan, the son of Ali*, *the Martyrdom of Hussein*, *The Lamentation of Hussein and his Family for the Loss of the Martyrs at Kerbala*, *The Field of Kerbala after the Death of Hussein* and others. It is evident that with the changing nature of both performances and rites surrounding *ta'ziyeh*, many of these plays have remained inactive. The changing character of *ta'ziyeh* in the subcontinent, as mentioned earlier, has also made most of these plays redundant.

### 3.3 (v) Romances from Arabic and Persian Literature

There are important stories obviously derived from Islamic-coloured literatures written in both Arabic and Persian and at times used in versions done in local Indian languages, the principal one being Urdu.

Due to staunch support for Parsi theatre from the Parsi trading community, it was only natural that elements of their rich literary heritage should find their way into this genre. The first Parsi Theatre company, Pārsi Natak Mandali, performed their first play *Roostum Zabooli and Sobrab* in 1853, followed by *King Afrasiab* and *Rustom Pehlva*, both based on the Persian national epic, *Shah Nama* by Firdausi. Another play based on the epic was *Rustam and Sobrab*, while among plays from popular romances (*qissa*), *Shirin Farhad* was significant. Arab stories, possibly also entering Parsi Theatre through Persia, included *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *Sinbad the Sailor* from the *Arabian Nights*, the famous folk romances *Laila Majnun* and *Mirza Sabiban*.

### 3.4. Fusion of Middle- or Near-Eastern and Local Elements

Although traditional sources were used in theatre performances, there also occurred certain original developments, representing what may be called fusion of original or local elements with those introduced by Islam from the Middle- or Near-East. A major manifestation was the development of certain literary genres such as folk tales containing strong Sufi elements or mystical colouring. While the stories mentioned above were adopted from outside, equally strong local traditions of folk literature with Islamic colouring came into being locally. By far, the best examples are Waris Shah's (1722-98) highly important Punjabi romance, the mystical *Heer Ranjha*, and *Sassui Punnun* by the Balochi poet Hashim Shah (1735-1843). These existed independently, without any connection with performances. This tradition of the Islamic folk romance continues to this day in various languages, with translations of Persian works as well as the development of new ones in provincial languages including Punjabi, Sindhi and Balochi.

## 4. Conclusion

In the extensive range of traditional theatre genres active in the Indian subcontinent from ancient times, the "drama" dealing with a wide range of

subject matter, depending upon its purpose, has an important place both in the folk and classical traditions. There is also continuity in terms of aesthetics which unites all genres and links them ultimately through principles for performing arts first codified in the highly important *Natyasastra*, even if the connections are not always apparent.

With changing political and cultural environments, which brought in new worldviews and new ways of expressing them in the performing and allied arts, change in the content, style and in the manner of performance was inevitable. Given the geographical setting, the historical developments and other factors, the biggest change that came into South Asian traditional theatre was from the Middle- and Near-East through both secular and religious manifestations.

The greatest borrowing, sharing of sources as well as syncretism is seen in the use of stories belonging to diverse literary genres. It is, in fact, very rare to have purely Hindu stories from the epics or other sources in most traditional theatre genres, apart from those, that, like *Ramlila* and *Raslila*, focus squarely on religious characters, and events associated with religious festivals.

An examination of relevant genres has revealed that a substantial presence of Arabic, Persian and Urdu literature in the form of stories from sources such as the *One Thousand and One Nights* or the *Shah Nama* has served both to enrich and enliven certain South Asian traditional theatre genres. Meanwhile, developments that took place in the Lucknow court theatricals as well as in the more recently developed Parsi theatre paved the way for a shift from the traditional into the modern.

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