Kalidasa’s Sanskrit play, *Sakuntala*, was well-known to Western audiences by the nineteenth century. Written in the early centuries of the Common Era, this ancient drama was translated into English by Sir William Jones in 1789 and then by Sir Monier Monier-Williams in 1872. It was the first Indian drama to be translated into English. The writer and dramatist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was also fascinated by *Sakuntala*, Jones’ version having been translated into German in 1791. Goethe praised the drama’s beauty in his poetry and used it as inspiration for the opening of his play *Faust*. It was the title of an overture by Karl Goldmark, written in 1885, which was performed numerous times in concerts and for radio in Britain, and the subject of an opera written by Franco Alfano in 1921. The romantic story is derived from an incident in the epic Hindu poem *Mahabharata*, focusing on the plight of Sakuntala, a young girl who falls in love with a King named Dushyanta when he is on a hunting trip. They become secretly betrothed and then Dushyanta returns to his kingdom. However, a curse is put on Sakuntala which results in the King losing all memory of her, unless she can present him with a ring which will restore his memory. As Sakuntala sets out to reunite with Dushyanta, she loses the ring and when she presents herself at court the King dismisses her with no recollection of their betrothal. It is only years later that the two are reunited, once the ring having been swallowed by a fish is retrieved by Dushyanta and he chances upon his son and finally recognises both.
This essay will review the British press reception to the staging of *Sakuntala* in British theatres during the imperial era, with particular reference to the Gaiety production of 1885 by the Parsee Victoria Dramatic Company, two productions by the Elizabethan Stage Society in 1899 and 1912, and the 1919 performance at the Winter Garden Theatre produced by Laurence Binyon, among others. How were the various productions of *Sakuntala* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century adapted for evolving British tastes in light of increased exposure to Indian artistic culture in this period?

In December 1885, a troupe from Bombay, known as the Parsee Victoria Dramatic Company, staged *Sakuntala* at the Gaiety Theatre. The Gaiety was opened in 1868 on the Strand in London and could house about 2000 people. *Sakuntala* was one part of a four-part programme that included comedy sketches and *Solomon’s Sword*, an opera in Hindi. Parsee theatre dominated urban India from the late nineteenth century, combining professionalism with cultural fluidity taking on plays in a range of languages as well as other forms of entertainment such as magic and comedy, as evident in this particular programme (Hansen). The production was then moved on to the Opera Comique, also in Aldwych in London. The *Pall Mall Gazette* secured an interview with Mr Nazir, acting manager of the group, on 14 December 1885, who explained that the original Company, of which this was an offshoot, had been created twenty years before. Forty-four men and women had travelled to Britain consisting of actors, dancers, musicians and stage-hands as well as jugglers, snake-charmers and acrobats. They had also travelled with a substantial wardrobe for their performances, as usual for Parsee theatre. The part of Sakuntala, however, was played by a man, C E Polishwalla.
The performance was regarded as much of a ‘novelty’ and even ‘too much novelty’ by *The Times*. Their reviewer doubted the capacity or interest of British audiences to appreciate such an alien programme:

That many of the audience could not repress their laughter during the declamation of the sentimental passages show, if proof were needed, that it is a mistake to invite the playgoing public to an entertainment which they cannot possibly understand (21 December 1885).

John Hollingshead, the manager of the Gaiety, was proud to have brought the Parsee players over, explaining that it showed ‘the catholicity of my taste’ (47). However, he was mocked by the *Standard* who also remarked upon the laughter in the audience during the *Sakuntala* scenes. There were ‘ominous sounds of derision, quite distinct from good-natured laughter’ and the ‘stalls cleared with singular rapidity’ according to a review on 21 December. The evening became an ‘absurd’ success as one of the last scenes with Sakuntala chasing a bee was unintentionally hilarious. The goal to honour the ancient play was not realised. *The Era*, a weekly newspaper that specialised in theatre reviews, whose review was published on Boxing Day, also described the whole tableau as ‘part ethnological study and partly a stupendous joke’. The comedy seemed to arise out of the unfamiliar story and equally from the performances by the unfamiliar actors. Rather than the romantic drama that had inspired classicists, this production was seen in light of the then contemporary attitudes towards Indians – a mixture of interest in the novelty of Indians on a British stage but also derision of their differences from the ‘modern’ West. With audience focus on the costumes, accents and appearance of the performers, attention was not given to the literary worth of the play that delighted scholars, something they could only appreciate on the written page at this time. The reviewer in the *Standard* did praise
the ‘indescribable’ costume of the King in ‘gold and gems and furs and silk all patched together’ and the intentions behind the musical and dramatic performances, but as noted this production did not appear to appeal to British tastes.

Fourteen years later, in July 1899, Sakuntala was to return to the British stage. This time it was performed by a British dramatic company, the Elizabethan Stage Society, under the direction of William Poel, who produced an open-air performance in the Conservatory of the Botanical Gardens in London. Proclaiming to be the first English performance of the play, it used a revised version of William Jones’ translation, aided by Romesh Chunder Dutt. The company were advised by a number of other Indians resident in London, including G Singh Giyani, a law student at Gray’s Inn, who coached them in ‘Indian pose and gesture’ (Poel 321). Once again, unintentional mirth was drawn from the performance, this time from a stuffed tiger and antelope used in the production. The Times reviewer on 4 July decided that the ‘imperfect English’ of the Indians ‘hardly added to the dignity of the production.’ On 9 July, the Referee noticed the ‘real Indians’ taking part in the performance, although commented that the English actors were more impressive as were the songs written by Arnold Dolmetsch, rather than some of the Sanskrit songs in the production. Dolmetsch’s music was set to lyrics written by Arthur Symons, a poet, editor and critic. Symons had a keen interest in Indian poets and verse, as he made clear in his introduction to Indian poetess Sarojini Naidu’s book of poems The Golden Threshold, printed by Heinemann in 1905, in which he explained that after meeting Naidu in London in 1896 he had persuaded and helped her to get published.

The Era, however, complimented Poel’s production in its review of 8 July, appreciative of the involvement of Indians such as Dutt and noting Indian and Chinese members of the
audience, but did remark upon the ‘great amusement’ at the pronunciation of one of the Indian players. Consider the review in the Tory-leaning *Morning Post* on 4 July:

The charming idyll was last night placed in a beautiful and highly effective frame – the Conservatory of the Botanical Gardens in Regent’s Park. In the midst of tropical vegetation the illusion of the Indian forest was complete and sumptuous, dresses served to enhance the effect. The eye was perfectly satisfied, every one of the characters being represented by actors, many of them natives of India, whose appearance was thoroughly Oriental.

What did the newspaper mean by a thoroughly ‘Oriental’ appearance? Was it referring merely to the stage costumes, or alluding to different physical characteristics and skin colour? The use of the outdoor setting to create the Indian forest allowed the performance to feel more ‘authentically’ Indian. Yet it is in the comments from reviewers that appreciate the ‘authenticity’ while emphasising the ‘exotic’ that reveal the contradictions within British attitudes more generally to India and Indians at this time. Despite the *Morning Post*’s laudation of the appearance of Indian natives within the cast, the reviewer went on to criticise their involvement because their ‘broken English’ only served to move the ‘spectators to laughter’. Would every performance by Indian actors always cause amusement for British audiences because of their lack of fluency in English? These performers had been educated in a country where English was not their first language, although it was the official language of government. The contradictory responses to these Indians was indicative of the inconsistencies of official attitudes in India which on the one hand wished to create ‘brown Englishmen’, after Macaulay’s infamous Minute of Education (1835), and criticised them when they were not up to colonial standards, but also reviled ‘Babus’ for their Anglicisation and attempts to challenge the racial hierarchy inherent in the imperial enterprise. Although this was produced by a British dramatic company, focus on the
Indian collaborators in the production perpetuated a sense of British superiority by emphasising their difference.

There is no indication that Sakuntala was performed in Britain again after 1899 until 1912, but the themes of India and the ‘Orient’ were popular on British stages during this period. Titles of plays in the 1880s and 1890s included The Nabob’s Fortune, The Nabob’s Pickle, The Begum’s Diamonds, The Stars of India, The Great Mogul and The Saucy Nabob (Mackenzie 49). Although, it was British actors who tended to take up the roles of Indian parts, audiences were particularly keen on stories about Indian princes, as either benevolent mystics or figures of ridicule. The grand imperial settings, which allowed for lavish sets and costumes, also appealed to the aesthetic impressions of the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, perhaps part of the success of the stage performances of Sakuntala lay in its story of an Indian king, which relied upon scenes in multiple settings and characters that could allow for ‘dressing up’ and the ‘Oriental’ costumes described in the 1899 Morning Post review.

William Poel revived Sakuntala in the summer of 1912. This time the performance took place indoors in Cambridge using an innovative multiple stage. The programme thanks Mrs P K Ray and Mrs P L Roy for their assistance, and to the ‘Indian students’ who took part in the performance. The named parts were all taken up by British actors, and the incidental role of Gautami was played by a young Edith Evans on her professional debut. Evans was to go on to become a leading British theatre actress, was awarded a DBE in 1946, and also nominated for three Oscars including one for her performance in Tom Jones (1963). The literary magazine, the Athenaeum (10 August 1912) was particularly appreciative of this new production.

Something different from the dead-level of stage production to-day may always be expected from the artistry of Mr Poel, and the employment of the multiple “stage” was decidedly effective,
affording a panorama of four separate scenes. [...] It is instinct with passion and grace, and might well be added to that store of wisdom in art which is being increasingly discovered in the East.

The *Manchester Guardian* equally praised the multiple stage effect for its originality and was also impressed with the play itself and its ‘most exquisite Oriental love passages’ (2 August 1912). The romance, particularly the separation and eventual reunion between Dushyanta and Sakuntala, appealed to audiences through the ages. Their story was as universally accessible as other classic romantic couples such as Romeo and Juliet or Orpheus and Eurydice. Arthur W Ryder, Professor of Sanskrit at the University of California, Berkeley, who also published a translation known as *The Recognition of Sakuntala*, which was used to improve the script of this particular production, provided notes for the programme in 1912.

No other poet has sung of happy love between man and woman as Kalidasa sang. Every one of his works is a love-poem, however much more it may be. Yet the theme is so infinitely varied that the reader never wearies. If one were to doubt from a study of European literature, comparing the ancient classics to modern works, whether romantic love be the expression of a natural instinct, be not rather a morbid survival of a decaying chivalry, he has only to turn to India’s independently growing literature to find the question settled. Kalidasa’s love-poetry rings as true in our ears as it did in his countrymen’s ears fifteen hundred years ago.²

Ryder sensed that Kalidasa’s classic work could be appreciated by modern audiences in India and the West. Although the themes of love and romance in *Sakuntala* were perhaps rather simple in consideration of the contemporary European literary trend towards modernism, Ryder emphasises the thematic and literary merits of the play which allowed it to be compared favourably to western works.
Critical and public opinion appeared now to take the Indian drama more seriously and seek out beauty in the performances and the text. It is in the early years of this decade that British art circles were engaging more widely with Indian art and literature. The India Society, founded in London in 1910 by E B Havell and William Rothenstein, sought to bring greater attention to Indian art. With a mixture of British, European and South Asian members, the Society held meetings, organised exhibitions and produced books and the journal *Indian Art and Letters*, featuring art and literature from the Indian subcontinent. The India Society first published Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali* in 1912, with W B Yeats’ introduction. Tagore went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, largely because of this collection. Therefore when Poel put on the 1912 production, as opposed to the 1899 version, there was a more receptive audience, as evident in the *Athenaeum* review, now ready to appreciate the text and not harp on about costumes and accents.

In 1913, *Sakuntala* was performed five times at the Royal Albert Hall and three times at the Cosmopolis Theatre by the Indian Art and Dramatic Society. This Society had been founded in 1912 by Kedar Nath Das Gupta, a Bengali living in London, and had a mixture of Indian and British patrons, including Thomas Arnold from the India Office, the art critic E B Havell, the suffragist Charlotte Despard, and the Indian nationalist Bhupendranath Basu. In February 1912, William Poel produced the Society’s production of ‘Buddha’ at the Royal Court Theatre. This was a dramatic version of Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, which had a young student, Niranjan Pal, who was to go on to found the film studio ‘Bombay Talkies’ with actors Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani, playing one of the main parts. Initially set up to perform Indian plays to British audiences, by 1914 the Society had broadened its aims to also organise meetings, lectures, musical evenings and recitals. Accordingly, it changed its name to the Union of East and West to
reflect its new outlook, but continued to be chaired by Das Gupta from his home in North London. The *Pall Mall Gazette* explained that the Royal Albert Hall performance of *Sakuntala* was a ‘service to culture’ and that ‘these treasures of India’s inheritance should be made more widely known’. As explained above, by 1912 there was increasing British appreciation for Indian artistic outputs, including drama, and so audiences entered into theatres ready to seek out the beauty from these performances rather than to criticise or pass aspersions on an alien culture.

The Union also produced modern plays. In 1916, they put on performances of ‘Caliph for a Day’ for wounded Indian soldiers from the Western Front convalescing at Barton-on-Sea, and the ‘Maharani of Arakan’ at the Coliseum in London, both adapted from Rabindranath Tagore stories. The Indian Art and Dramatic Society had first put on a production of ‘Maharani of Arakan’ at the Albert Hall in London in July 1912, and staged a number of other Tagore stories such as ‘The Farewell Curse’ and ‘Trial by Luck’ in 1921, the latter at Wigmore Hall. Other companies also put on Tagore plays in this period, such as the Abbey Group who staged ‘The Post Office’ at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in May 1913 and then at the Royal Court Theatre in July of the same year (Kundu, Bhattacharya, and Sircar, 627). Unlike the popular plays with Indian themes in the late nineteenth century which drew upon stories involving Indian princes and classical settings, by the second decade of the twentieth century Indian dramas were more thoughtful and nuanced productions that allowed for more thoughtful and nuanced receptions.

William Poel’s company had relied upon a revised version of William Jones’ translation of *Sakuntala* for their productions. Kedar Nath Das Gupta, in preparation to put on the play again in 1919, looked to Laurence Binyon for a more accessible translation. A member of the India Society, Laurence Binyon, then working at the British Museum as head of the Oriental Prints and Drawing department, had a keen interest in Asian art and literature. As a
pupil at St Paul’s School, London, in the 1880s, he had struck up a friendship with a Bengali class-mate, Manmohun Ghose. As students at Oxford University, they had worked together on a collection of poems, *Primavera*, with Stephen Phillips and Arthur Cripps, which was published by Blackwells in 1890.

Das Gupta and Binyon collaborated on the production of *Sakuntala*, with Binyon taking charge to correspond with William Rothenstein, then working as war artist, to see if he would design the scenery. On 24 February 1919, Binyon first broached the subject candidly: ‘K N Das Gupta who gets up performances of Indian plays, asked me to revise his version; and it was so bad I had to rewrite it entirely.’

Binyon suggested that Rothenstein could design a simple scenery and supervise the colour of the dresses. When he wrote again on 5 April, Binyon’s idea had evolved to creating three sets of the forest, palace and the mountain top/heaven by way of painted curtains. By 9 May, Binyon believed Rothenstein would be back in time to paint these curtains and was suggesting inspiration from the Rajput paintings that he knew well. Rothenstein was ultimately unable to return to England in time, and also appeared to be concerned about artistic control over the scenery. The curtains were painted by Bruce Winston instead, who often collaborated on sets and as an actor with Lewis Casson, the producer of this play. A *Stage* review on 20 November 1919 described them as ‘beautiful curtains indeed, adorned with symbolic imagery’.

Binyon and Das Gupta published an edition of their version of the stage play in 1920, with an introductory essay written by Rabindranath Tagore. Binyon explained the changes he made to the style of Kalidasa’s play:

This version of *Sakuntala* was made solely for the purpose of presenting the play on the stage to an English audience. This necessitated considerable abridgement. The original play is in seven
acts, and the work of adaptation for our theatre has been done by Mr. Kedar Nath Das Gupta. The original, as is well known, is in prose, frequently varied by stanzas of verse, written in different metres. Here, blank verse has for the most part been employed, as adherence to the sudden transitions of the original makes it difficult for European actors to preserve due continuity of mood and atmosphere; the audience also unprepared for this convention of literary tradition. Fidelity to what is universal in Kalidasa has been sought for, rather than the reproduction of exotic beauties. (Binyon and Dasgupta vii-viii)

Thus Binyon was keen to downplay the exotic Indian elements of the play to ensure a wider British audience could find the play accessible, seeing as it did rely upon universal themes of romance, betrayal and power. He was also keen to draw out what he saw as the literary appeal of Kalidasa’s text and hoped to translate this to stage through words rather than visual distractions or emphasis on costume. However, there were critics of Binyon’s alterations to the play’s style, as he revealed to Rothenstein on 15 November 1919:

I find I am less fault-finding about the performance than most people, who seem to expect impossibilities, in fact I enjoyed the play very much. The audience was singularly inert & unappreciative, it seemed to me: but it was almost entirely ‘dead-heads’: I think hardly any seats were sold. One critic says that I have wrapped Kalidasa’s native ruggedness in literary tissue paper: another that my austere style has robbed him of his luxuriousness.5

Although Binyon despaired at the low attendance, the audience did include the Aga Khan and the Maharaja Gaekwar of Baroda. It also had more critical appreciation than previous productions, as we shall see below, despite Binyon’s concerns.

William Rothenstein was not the only prominent person from the British art and drama scene connected to the production. The play was produced by Lewis Casson, the music composed by John H Foulds, and Sakuntala was played by Sybil Thorndike, wife of Casson.
Foulds, Casson and Thorndike all later collaborated on Bernard Shaw’s *St Joan* at the National Theatre in 1924, which was written with Thorndike in mind. Casson was knighted in 1945 and Thorndike was awarded a DBE in 1931. As with Edith Evans, *Sakuntala* provided a platform for Thorndike; it was an early opportunity for an actress to tread the boards who was to go on to become highly successful in a long and diverse career. Duskyanta was played by Arthur Wontner, who would achieve great fame in the 1930s playing Sherlock Holmes on film. It was this continuing interest of British dramatists in Kalidasa’s play that allowed *Sakuntala* to be revived again and again on the English stage. As performers and producers took the play seriously as a credible literary production, with more emphasis on the script itself rather than on the Oriental novelty, so did audiences and critics.

Binyon and Das Gupta’s version of *Sakuntala* was performed in two matinees on 14 and 21 November 1919 at the Winter Garden Theatre on Drury Lane. *The Times* described it as a ‘worthy production of a great play’ and lauded the ‘lyrical quality’ of Binyon’s verse (15 November 1919). A review for the *Era* published on 19 November was concerned about some of the cuts made to the play for length, worried that some of the narrative sense had been lost, but praised the simplicity and grace of the production. The *Stage* (20 November) remarked upon the ‘resounding lines’ and the ‘wise saws of ancient, or modern philosophy’ that had given Kalidasa the title of India’s Shakespeare. The *Observer* appreciated the ‘spring-time sweetness’ and compared the play favourably to Shakespeare’s mature works. Further, the reviewer for the *Observer* remarked that ‘there is nothing remotely or strangely Oriental about “Sakuntala” to repel or confuse the Western mind’, explaining that ‘great poets’ such as Kalidasa ‘are for all times and climes’ (16 November). Binyon’s translation and the simpler setting allowed critics to
concentrate on the play and to appreciate the meanings behind the text rather than to be distracted by emphasising the ‘exotic’ evident in previous productions.

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*Sakuntala* had now become a worthy literary product for continued analysis. A review article on Binyon’s translation of *Sakuntala* appeared in the *Athenaeum* on 14 May 1920, written by an “E M F”, perhaps Edward Morgan Forster who often contributed to the journal. A lengthy review article on Kalidasa and Indian drama also appeared in *The Times* on 17 November 1921 by an anonymous correspondent. The Union of East and West were to put on a smaller production of *Sakuntala* alongside Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘Farewell Curse’ for two performances in Lord Leverhulme’s garden in Hampstead in July 1924. Again the open air appeared to be a favourable setting for the play. That the classical drama had stood the test of time appealed. The script itself, in its various translations, relied upon vivid images of different scenes from the forest to the Golden Peak. The characters were well liked too, with an identifiable heroine in the form of Sakuntala. Arthur Ryder explained, in 1912, that Sakuntala is the perfect heroine who grows in character through the play:

> When we first meet her, she is a simple maiden, knowing no greater sorrow than the death of a favourite deer; when we bid her farewell, she has passed through happy love, the mother’s joys and pains, most cruel humiliation and suspicion, and the reunion with her husband, proved at last not to have been unworthy. And each of these great experiences has been met with a courage and a sweetness to which no words can render justice.

Kalidasa is constantly compared to Shakespeare by reviewers of the stage performances and by William Poel, director of the Elizabethan Stage Society. The combination of romance, comedy, tragic misunderstandings and the rhythm of the verses could easily be compared between the
two. With growing appreciation of Indian art and drama, Kalidasa’s *Sakuntala* stood up as a creditable play to hold up and compare to the canons of European literature.

The variety of performances of *Sakuntala* on British stages between 1885 and 1919 differed in terms of script, staging, length and calibre of actors. Despite the disparity, we can also see similarities in the productions and in their reception by British audiences. The ancient and mythical setting appealed to British audiences as did the fact that Kalidasa was a medieval playwright. This played into ideas of the greatness of a classical era, the Golden Vedic Age, before India was beset and degenerated by a string of colonisers. William Jones, who translated *Sakuntala* in 1789, had used Orientalist imagery, inspired by Hindu mythology, in his other literary outputs, creating an audience for such themes. Critics and readers enjoyed allusions to Aryan spirituality and philosophy, and with the formalisation of imperial ties with India, there was a ready audience for *Sakuntala* in the late nineteenth century.

Despite admiration for some of the themes and the story of *Sakuntala*, when it was performed on the stage, audiences became aware of accentuated differences. Costumes and accents, in particular, were felt keenly by eyes and ears. As I have shown elsewhere (Mukherjee), certain tropes about South Asian dress and costume reoccurred among British commentary during this period, particularly drawing attention to the bright colours evident in clothes using dyes from the Indian subcontinent and to the prevalence of jewels that were indicative of the wealth of the princely regions. With stage productions, costumes were necessarily distinct and used to add flavour to the productions, and reviewers often commented upon them using similar tropes. The emphasis on the ‘exotic’ allowed British commentators to highlight such differences in taste and depict the Indian subcontinent as a pre-modern civilisation. Further, by relying on these familiar stereotypes, reviewers did not need to engage
with the literary merits of Kalidasa’s play. The attention that was drawn to the accents by Indian performers, or the mimicry of Indian accents used by British actors, was more problematic, however, as they emphasised difference in a negative manner.

We can see, though, that attitudes towards the Indians involved in these productions were generally positive, appreciative of the help that resident Indians in Britain gave. All of these performances had Indian and British people contributing and working together in various aspects of production; these collaborations were common in artistic networks in the period. With each subsequent production of *Sakuntala* more high profile Britons and Indians were becoming involved and so as each became more professional so reviews became more positive. The collaboration of influential British and Indian men and women in these artistic endeavours highlighted the aesthetic merits and importance of Indian literature and provided an introduction to these narratives for wide British audiences, who may not have had much other contact with the subcontinent, thus allowing them access to a limited sample of Indian culture, specifically of a classical mythical past, during the high imperial raj.

**Notes**

1. R. C. Dutt (1848-1909) was an author and administrator. He had studied in London 1868-71 and joined the Indian Civil Service, but returned to London in 1897 to take up a non-stipendiary lectureship in History at University College, London. He continued to share his time between Britain and India until his death.
2. Victoria and Albert Theatre Museum, Earls Court. Poel Collection: Sakuntala Programme, 1 August 1912.


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