

Introduction, Part Four: The dastan of Amīr Ḥamzah in oral narration

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Ḥamzah romance in Urdu reached a peak of popularity all over North India, among people at social levels from the highest to the lowest. Oral dastan-narration became so widespread, in fact, that local styles are said to have developed in different cities. Suhail Bukhārī claims to have identified styles associated with Delhi (simple and short), Lucknow (ornate and lengthy), Rampur (influenced by Lucknow style), and Akbarabad (a hybrid of Delhi and Lucknow styles).¹ In my opinion such claims go considerably beyond the evidence; it seems more probable that each city asserted the uniqueness of its local dastan-narration on principle, as a form of proper civic pride. Most such claims of local oral styles are ultimately founded on the famous Delhi-Lucknow polarization; this great divide has been shown to be largely an artifact of cultural history in the case of poetry,² and I believe it is so in the case of dastan-narration as well, though it is often taken for granted by scholars writing in Urdu.

In any case, local styles had to accommodate considerable movement of the most celebrated dastan-gos from one patronage center to another, especially when the rebellion of 1857 and its aftermath caused many narrators to leave Delhi. Lucknow became, and remained, the single most important center of Urdu dastan cultivation. For ordinary people, there were almost daily public performances by dastan-gos in Chauk, starting “when the lamps were lit.” And for the elite, there were private sessions--even for ladies. Upper-class ladies kept their own female dastan-gos and story-tellers, who were treated with real respect. Story-telling sessions often went on and on in the early evening “until the dining-cloth was spread.”³

The Lakhnāvī cultural historian Abdul Ḥalīm Sharar assigns to dastan-narration, which he defines as an art of “extemporaneous composition,” a preeminent place among the verbal arts of his city. Sharar writes of this period,

The famous dastan-gos of Delhi began to come to Lucknow. The opium-users valued them so much that they made listening to dastans a major part of their social gatherings. Very soon the practice had become so popular in Lucknow that there wasn't a rich man to be found who didn't have a dastan-go in his entourage. Hundreds of dastan-gos appeared....

The dastan consists of four arts: *razm* (war), *bazm* (elegant gatherings), *ḥusn o ishq*, (beauty and love), and *ayyārī* (trickery). The dastan-gos of Lucknow have shown such expertise in all four arts that without seeing and hearing one cannot

¹Suhail Bukhārī, “Urdū dāstān kā fannī tajziyah,” p. 96.

²Carla R. Petievich, in *The Two-School Theory of Urdu Poetry* (University of British Columbia at Vancouver, Dept. of Asian Studies: unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1986), makes this case effectively.

³These female story-tellers tended to be among the well-bred but impoverished ladies who acted as companions, tutors, and general factotums in wealthy households. Such a lady was called a “Muḡhlānī” or an “Ustānī.” Mirzā Ja far Ḥusain, *Qadīm Lakhna ū kī ākhirī bahār* (New Delhi: Taraqqī Urdū Bureau, 1981), pp. 168, 434, 453.

imagine it.⁴

This makes the dastan-gos sound like versatile all-rounders. By contrast, Viqār Azīm maintains that the Lakhnavī dastan-gos “cultivated their own special styles, and each one was known as unique and distinctive in his style.” Their styles sound rather narrow: “One was excellent at portraying battle scenes; another was unequalled in describing elegant gatherings; another made the dastan pleasurable by including many verses; another’s dastan was so humorous that whoever heard it rolled on the floor with laughter.” Yet Azīm also agrees with Buḫārī about the presence of a distinctive Lakhnavī style of narration.⁵ There are obvious gaps in our knowledge here, and we have no way of filling them.

While the art of dastan-narration was cultivated longer and more intensively in Lucknow and Rampur, the dastan-go about whose career we have the most substantial information was a Dihlavī, and remained in Delhi all his life. We know somewhat more about him because his career extended into the twentieth century: born in 1850, he lived until 1928. Mīr Bāqir Alī Dihlavī was the last famous dastan-go, and by all accounts a great one; among his admirers was the “Grand Old Man of Urdu,” Maulvī Abdul Ḥaq himself.⁶ Mīr Bāqir Alī was born into a family of Persian emigrés, and was trained in dastan-narration by his maternal uncle, Mīr Kāzīm Alī, also a professional dastan-go.⁷ Several anecdotal descriptions of Mir Baqir ‘Ali’s performances have survived.

He never *told* dastans--he presented lively, moving pictures; or rather, you could say that he himself became a picture. If he described a battlefield, you felt that you had seen the combat of Rustam and Isfandyār. If he evoked a romantic gathering, an air of intoxication began to pervade the atmosphere.

His memory was so extraordinary that everything was at the tip of his tongue. If food was the topic, he described every sort of delicacy; if the subject of clothing came up, then how could any sort of dress escape mention? He not only knew the name of every kind of jewelry, but was thoroughly acquainted with its form and style. If anyone interrupted to challenge him, then what rivers of knowledge began to flow! His style was so fluent that once he had begun the dastan, he never paused for breath till it was finished.

He was a thin, slightly built man, but while he was reciting the dastan, if a king appeared in the story, the listeners felt themselves standing before an imperious monarch. Sometimes, if he spoke the words of some old woman, he adopted the very style of speech of respectable elderly ladies, and even (despite his teeth) became quite toothless!

....In his old age, he settled in Bhojlā Pahārī [in Delhi]. He kept up the tradition of dastan-narration to his last breath. Every Saturday evening, listeners came from miles away, placed two pennies in a niche in the wall, and sat respectfully

⁴Sharar, *Guzashtah Lakhna ū*, pp. 188-189.

⁵Viqār Azīm, *Hamārī dāstāneñ*, p. 22.

⁶Taḥsīn Sarvarī, “Mīr Bāqir Alī dāstān go,” pp. 74, 54.

⁷Ashraf Ṣubūhī says of him, “Mīr Kāzīm Alī went beyond qissah-khvani and began dastan-go’i” (*qiṣṣah khvānī se barḥ kar dāstān go ī shurū kī*); he thus seems to treat these as two separate narrative arts, of which the latter was superior. Ṣubūhī, “Mīr Bāqir Alī,” pp. 43-44.

down in a corner. Till the last watch of the night, held enchanted by his magic of speech, they sat breathless and still as if turned to stone.

...Mīr Ṣāhib was a regular user of opium, and unless he was intoxicated he could never recite a dastan.⁸

He knew thousands of verses by heart. He also had the knack of using them appropriately. He had such a command of language that poets and writers accepted Mīr Ṣāhib as an authority....

People used to say that some of Mīr Ṣāhib's dastans went on for ten or twelve years and still weren't finished. From this one can guess what a great master of his art and language he was.⁹

He never told even a small episode of the dastan of Amīr Ḥamzah in less than three hours....If he began to enumerate the names of weapons, then he named thousands....the same with ornaments and jewelry, in fact with everything. In short, he was an encyclopedia of knowledge. When he described *ayyārs*, people would laugh till their sides split....Before beginning the dastan, he would wrap a pellet of opium in cloth, and dissolve it in a silver cup. With great refinement, he would slide into a state of intoxication.¹⁰

From the above and similar accounts, a few basic devices of oral dastan recitation can be pieced together: mimicry and gestures, to imitate each dastan character; insertion of verses into the narrative; recitation of catalogues, to enumerate and evoke all items of a certain class as exhaustively as possible¹¹; maximum prolongation of the dastan as an ideal goal. Moreover, the association of dastan-narration with opium is mentioned in so many contemporary accounts that it should not be overlooked. If both dastan-go and audience were slightly under the influence of opium, they might well enjoy the long catalogues and other stylized descriptive devices, which slowed down the narrative so that it could expand into the realms of personal fantasy.

Except for such fragmentary material as the above, however, dastan-narration as an oral art is essentially beyond our reach. We are several generations removed from the last expert practitioner, and the secrets of his art died with him. No folklorist ever made a transcript--much less, of course, a tape recording--of an oral dastan performance. Nor would it normally occur to any listener to make such a transcript; and even if it did occur, he would find it almost prohibitively difficult under actual performance conditions.

Therefore we must be cautious about accepting what purport to be tantalizing fragments of just such a transcript. In his memoir *Dillī kī chand ajīb hastiyāñ* (Some Remarkable People of Delhi), Ashraf Ṣubūhī includes long excerpts from what he declares to be

⁸Sayyid Zamīr Ḥasan Dihlavī, in his introduction to Mīr Bāqir Alī's *Khalīl Khān fakhtah* (Delhi: Sang-e Mīl Publications, 1966), pp. 7-10. This work, one of a number of potboilers written in Mīr Bāqir Alī's old age, is a broad farce rather than a dastan. On these late works see Yūsuf Buḫhārī Dihlavī, "Mīr Bāqir Alī dāstān go," pp. 51-58.

⁹ Sarvarī, "Mīr Bāqir Alī," p. 74.

¹⁰Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneñ*, pp. 108-109.

¹¹The dastan-go thus needed a wide technical knowledge in a number of fields. According to Ḥakīm Abdul Ḥamīd of the Hamdard Davakhana, Mīr Bāqir Alī would often come and consult his (the Ḥakīm's) father, about the names and properties of herbs and medicines. S. R. Fārūqī, personal communication, November 1989.

one of Mīr Bāqir Alī's narrations. The performance probably took place in 1911¹²--but the book was not published until 1943. About his transcript Şubūhī says candidly, "How could I remember the whole dastan--I am not such a memorizer, and it wasn't just yesterday. But some fragments have remained in my memory."¹³ Judging from his book, Şubūhī does have a vivid memory for detail, and Gyān Chand accepts the accuracy of his account without hesitation.¹⁴

The performance takes place in Mīr Bāqir Alī's house. Some visiting gentlemen from Lucknow, where dastan-narration is still popular, have come to hear "a Delhi-style dastan"; there is an air of patronizing antiquarianism in their interest, since in Delhi dastan-narration has fallen on hard times. Mīr Bāqir Alī takes a cup of a marijuana preparation and a cup of tea, then sits back on his heels and prepares to recite. After two introductory verses in Persian, he begins:

The most humble one presents this delightful dastan from the point at which the *daftars Kochak bākhtar* (The Lesser West) and *Bālā bākhtar* (The Upper West) have ended, and the luckless Laqā, expelled from the court of Zumurrud Shāh of Bākhtar, has fled from combat with his Worship the Wealth-winning, World-illuminating Sun, the Planet-brightening Moon of the Sultanate of Bāhirah, the Chastiser of the Arrogant of the World, the Highly-respected Ruler, the Revered and Auspicious Lord of Arabia and Persia [i.e., Amīr Ḥamzah]; and many arrogant ones have already bent their proud heads at his fortunate door.

In this time of joyful outcome, it happens one day that in the midst of the Palace of Solomon, the World-sustaining Court is being held. One or two hundred dancers, producers of pleasure, are in attendance. The *tablah* is being played. The trill of the *sārangī* and the deep tones of the drum reach to the skies. Various kinds of musical instruments--[here twenty-five kinds are named]--are being played. The rosy cup-bearers, bringing wine-flasks and cups, are stealing away men's senses...¹⁵

At this point occurs the first of a number of breaks in Şubūhī's transcription. Of the whole amount of text which he does provide, almost half consists of elaborate descriptive material like that quoted above. There are catalogues: champions' names; wild animals; boats; wrestling equipment (nineteen kinds named); wrestling holds (forty-three kinds named); Amar Ayyār's appearance and equipment. There are lengthy, sensuous, set-piece descriptions: a country scene in the monsoon season, a group of lovely Parī maidens, the Parī princess herself. There is ornamental verse, inserted freely and supplemented by many sets of doubled descriptive phrases sharing rhythm and end-rhyme. The effect is rich, ornate, self-consciously poetic.

These more dense and static passages occur like islands within a narrative stream that otherwise tends to be plain, colloquial, direct, and fast-flowing. As a sample of the simple narrative style, here is Amar Ayyār cleverly winning the confidence of a lovesick young prince, one of Amīr Ḥamzah's sons, who has fallen in love with a Parī princess and has just been reproached by his father for his distracted condition:

¹²Since Şubūhī refers to the "Delhi Darbar" as a contemporary event, the other possible date would be 1903, the date of an earlier Darbar, or royal visit from England.

¹³Şubūhī, *Ajīb hastiyāñ*, p. 49.

¹⁴Gyān Chand, *Naşrī dāstāneñ*, p. 524.

¹⁵Şubūhī, *Ajīb hastiyāñ*, pp. 42, 49-50.

“Son, I’m quitting right now! What reward can you expect from somebody who’s so stony-hearted toward his son? He’s forgotten his own youth--how he used to wander around babbling with love for Princess Mihr Nigār! He was ready to comb the dust of Mount Qāf itself for Princess Raushan-tan. And even now, if he sees a pretty face--I can’t even describe the state he gets in. But not a thought for his son! He tells me to cool the fire of love by reasoning with you. So, my dear boy, understand: throw dust on the flames of love. But I’ve seen something of life myself. ‘There’s no more patience in a lover’s heart, than water in a sieve.’¹⁶ If your life were a burden to me, *then* I’d talk to you about patience and endurance!” At this he pretended to weep.

The prince, finding ‘Amar sympathetic, said, “Uncle, if you care about me, get me the address of that devastating beauty!”

‘Amar pretends to demur, but allows himself to be persuaded by a gift of ten thousand rupees; extracting even more money from Ḥamzah himself, he prepares to set out in search of the Parī. And Amar setting out in his “real form” is an unforgettable sight: “Head like a coconut, face like a bread-bun, nose like a pine-cone, eyes like cumin seeds, chin like a sponge-cake, with a few hairs on it like a goat’s beard only straight, shoulder blades like betel trees, chest like a basket, hands and feet like string, stomach like an earthenware pot, navel like a cup inverted over the pot, and adorned with *ayyārī*-weapons.” The inventory of his *ayyārī* equipment which follows runs to twenty-three items; at this piquant point, Mīr Bāqir Alī’s narration ends.¹⁷

In early Persian dastans Hanaway finds a similarly alternating diction, one which moves back and forth between complexity and simplicity of syntax and rhetoric. He identifies it as a characteristic “romance style,” in which “simple narrative passages are combined with elaborate descriptive passages.”¹⁸ It seems highly probable that such an alternation of styles was a common feature of dastan recitation, in both Persian and Urdu, with the formal set-pieces used to embellish the more colloquial narrative prose. But we cannot quite prove it. Hanaway is working from written texts. And since Ṣubūḥī’s transcript was done from memory after a considerable lapse of time, we cannot be quite sure whether the exact choice of words originates in Mīr Bāqir Alī’s oral narrative, or Ashraf Ṣubūḥī’s writing style.

One other conspicuous feature of Ṣubūḥī’s transcript is its thorough grounding in a larger narrative framework well known to the audience. Unless Ṣubūḥī has completely falsified the transcript, which seems unlikely, we can reasonably ascribe this major structural pattern to the dastan-go himself. Mīr Bāqir Alī names two well-established *daftars* (large sections) of the dastan, refers casually to the most recent previous events, and takes up the action without further ado. Moreover, the narration itself is by no means a self-contained, complete episode. Rather, it is a bundle of introductory material, the beginnings of several adventures which are unashamedly left dangling at interesting and inconclusive points. The whole dastan itself was the narrative context presupposed by the dastan-go: it was relied upon to integrate and make meaningful the extremely minute, fragmentary threads of narrative which were embroidered into any individual performance. If Mīr Bāqir Alī presented such a narration even before a temporary audience of

¹⁶This Persian saying is from the *Gulistān* of Sa ādī.

¹⁷Ṣubūḥī, *Ajīb hastiyāñ*, pp. 60-62.

¹⁸Hanaway, *Love and War*, pp. 4, 18-19.

guests from another city, it seems safe to assume that narrations presented to the usual relatively stable audiences were similarly constructed.

Mīr Bāqir Alī enjoyed, as we have seen, a reputation as a dastan-go whose stories went on “for ten or twelve years and still weren’t finished”; this reputation is adduced as evidence of “what a great master of his art and language he was.” The interminable dastan, suggested both by Ashk in his grandiose vision of “15 or 20 large Volumes” and by Ḳhiyāl in his 7,500 pages, is a concept which lies at the very heart of oral dastan-narration. The dastan-go could flaunt his power precisely by invoking and controlling this interminability: by a display of prowess called “arresting the dastan” (*dāstān roknā*). The assertive power of this display was so well understood and admired that it could form the basis for a legendary battle royal of dastan-narration.

Once in Lucknow there was a contest between two master dastan-gos, as to how long each could arrest the dastan. One dastan-go brought his story to a high point: the lover has drawn near to his beloved. Between two frustrated hearts, between the lovers’ thirsty eyes, only a curtain intervenes. When the curtain is lifted, the separated ones will meet. At this point, the spell-binding story-teller arrested the dastan. The listeners were eager for the curtain to be lifted, and the meeting to be described. But the dastan-go, through his capability, knowledge, and command of language, kept sagely describing the emotions of both parties, and the hanging curtain. This took some days. Every day the listeners came believing that on that day the curtain would surely be lifted, for there was nothing left to be explained. But they went home at night, and the curtain had still not quite opened. In this way the master kept the dastan arrested for more than a week.¹⁹

The reason length was so greatly valued in oral dastan-narration is not far to seek: length provided the direct and ultimate measure of a dastan-go’s skill. For the prolonging of his narration depended on his audience’s active interest and consent. The rapt attention of his listeners was both his supreme achievement, and the medium in which he worked. As Viqār Aẓīm puts it, it “follows from a dastan-go’s situation that his object and goal is simply to cause the listener to ask in his heart every moment, ‘What happened next?’”²⁰ To command this degree of audience attention grows more difficult over time; thus a longer dastan-narration, like a longer tight-rope walk, is inherently superior to a shorter one.

This vision of the interminable dastan, so central to the oral narrative tradition, was extended during the latter half of the nineteenth century to printed dastans as well. The combination of a new technology with an old narrative art produced, as we will see, extraordinary results.

¹⁹Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneñ*, pp. 56-57. Another such performance is described in Ibn-e Kanval, *Hindūstānī tahẓīb*, p. 18.

²⁰Viqār Aẓīm, *Hamārī dāstāneñ*, p. 361.