

Introduction, Part Five: The dastan of Amīr Ḥamzah in print

As we have seen, a few dastans had begun to appear in print in the first half of the nineteenth century. Only in 1858, however, when Munshī Naval Kishor founded his famous Lucknow press, did the real era of dastan publishing begin. Naval Kishor, born in 1836 in a village near Mathura, was educated in the Aligarh area, where he studied Persian and Arabic in a traditional school (*maktab*); the medium of education was undoubtedly Urdu. Though his family were Hindu landed gentry, his classical and Islamicized education was not at all unusual: it was in fact quite the normal thing in his day, for cultural traditions derived from the Mughal period retained much of their prestige, and Hindi had not yet been sharply divided off from an Urdu which belonged to everybody.¹ The young Naval Kishor did so well in school that he was sent to the English-style Agra College to complete his education--also quite a normal thing, for anyone could see that the times were changing and some concessions to the new order were necessary. During the five years that Naval Kishor spent at Agra College, he began to write articles for the local newspaper; these were well received, and he was awarded a government scholarship. His literary interests ranged so widely that by the age of seventeen he had added not only English but also some Sanskrit to his array of languages.

Naval Kishor learned the newspaper and book publishing business while working for a press called Koh-e Nūr, in Lahore. He then decided to settle in Lucknow and establish his own publishing house. In 1858 he obtained a hand press and set himself up in business, with the strong encouragement of Colonel S. A. Abbot, the Commissioner. At first he published short books that were guaranteed a quick sale: basic religious books, grammars for schoolchildren. But Colonel Abbot gave him Government printing contracts, and soon he was able to expand his operations, though he still did most of the work himself. He then started the *Avadh Akhbār*,² a long-lived and immensely influential newspaper, and began to enlarge his list of books.

One of his early publications in the 1860's was Ashk's *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* (1801). This Fort William College production, the first printed Urdu dastan, had a head start on its few competitors, and Naval Kishor was not the only one to reprint it. In fact, its very popularity prompted the search for a successor. Naval Kishor eventually replaced Ashk's version with a revised and improved *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* (1871), explaining to the public that the Ashk version, although it had been printed "in thousands of copies in Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi" as well as at his own press, was marred by its "archaic idioms and convoluted style."³ In 1871, therefore, he published the *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* in a new version by Abdullāh

¹The process of Hindi-Urdu division, with its related Hindu-Muslim mutual self-consciousness, did not really acquire momentum until the last decade of the nineteenth century. For a close look at this process see Christopher R. King, *The Nagari Pracharini Sabha...of Benares 1893-1914: A Study in the Social and Political History of the Hindi Language* (University of Wisconsin at Madison, Dept. of History: unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1974).

²Amīr Ḥasan Nūrānī, *Munshī Naval Kishor: ḥālāt aur khidmāt* (Delhi: Idārah-e Iḳhvān uṣ-Ṣafā, 1982), pp. 23-29.

³Bilgrāmī, *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* (1871), p. 752.

Bilgrāmī. This version proved extraordinarily successful: Naval Kishor and his heirs have kept it in print, with relatively minor modifications, from 1871 to the present. Although it has always had competitors--and continues to have them today⁴--it has always outsold and outlasted them. The Bilgrāmī version has almost certainly been more often reprinted, and more widely read, than any other in Urdu. Thus it has been selected for translation in the present volume, and will be discussed at length below.

No doubt because of the popularity of the Ashk and Bilgrāmī versions in Urdu, Naval Kishor also brought out in 1879 a counterpart work in Hindi called *Amīr Hamzā kī dāstān*, by Paṇḍits Kālīcharan and Maheshdatt. This work was quite an undertaking in its own right: 520 large pages of typeset Devanāgarī script, in a prose adorned not with elegant Persian expressions but with exactly comparable Sanskritisms, and interspersed not with Persian verse forms but with Indic ones like *kavitt*, *sorathā*, and *chaupā ī*. The text described itself in its frontispiece as telling of “courage and heroism like that of Ālā [=Ālhā] and Ūdal,” the heroes of the widely popular North Indian folk epic *Ālhākhand*.⁵ In view of the great fame of the Ḥamzah story, the text sought to offer “to the enjoyers of Nāgarī [script] and the cravers for qissahs, knowledge of such an unprecedented dastan and conversance with worldly customs.”⁶ At the front of the volume Naval Kishor also included a list of his other Devanāgarī script publications: these were without exception Sanskrit or Sanskrit-based works on astrology, traditional medicine (*vaidya*), and religious topics. The addition of the Ḥamzah story to such a list represented a radical departure indeed, and bears witness to the story’s widespread appeal among Hindus as well as Muslims; the story must in fact have sold well, for Naval Kishor reprinted it in 1883.⁷ The *Amīr Hamzā kī dāstān*, with its assimilation of a highly Islamic content into a self-consciously Sanskritized form, offers a fascinating early glimpse of the the development of Hindi. The heirs of Naval Kishor apparently published a 662-page Hindi version of the dastan as late as 1939, but I have not been able to locate a copy. (Substantial twentieth-century Hindi pamphlet versions, undated, have also been published by presses in Delhi and Mathura.⁸)

As if two versions of the Ḥamzah story were not enough, during this same period Naval Kishor added a third. He began to publish a verse rendering of the romance: a new *maṣnavī* by Ṭoṭā Rām Shāyān called *Ṭilism-e shāyān ma rūf bah dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah*. This version, which Naval Kishor published (probably for the first time) in 1862, was almost 30,000

⁴The most recent that I’ve seen are: Ḥamīd BukḌḥīpo, *Aṣlī mukammal dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah urdū bataṣvīr*; Mubīn ur-Raḥmān, *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah*; and Jahāngīr Buk Ḍīpo, *Mukammal o bataṣvīr dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah*. All three are divided into eighty-eight dastans, use modern (though minimal) paragraph breaks, and in plot are fairly close to the Ashk version, though they all differ from each other.

⁵On the background of this most important modern North Indian folk epic see William Waterfield, *The Lay of Alha: A Saga of Rajput Chivalry as Sung by Minstrels of Northern India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923). See also Karine Schomer, “Paradigms for the Kali Yuga: The Heroes of the Ālhā Epic and their Fate,” in Blackburn et al., *Oral Epics in India*, pp. 140-154; and Laxmi G. Tewari, “An Elementary Reading of the Ālhākhand,” in *South Asia Research* 9,1 (May 1989), pp. 3-20.

⁶Kālīcharan and Maheshdatt, *Amīr Hamzā kī dāstān*. This edition is in the collection of the British Library.

⁷This second edition is in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

⁸One example: Munshī Badrīprasād Jain, anuvādak, *Amīr Hamzī chāroñ bhāg* (Mathura: Shyāmkāshī Press, n.d.), 248, 222, 136, 207 p.

lines long--making it the longest Urdu *maṣnavī* ever written in North India, with the exception of versions of the *Arabian Nights*. Yet Shāyān, the “most prolific” writer in the genre, is said to have composed it in only six months.⁹ This version too apparently found a good sale, for by 1893 Naval Kishor was printing it for the sixth time.¹⁰

All these were one-volume works; but most dastan-gos of the later nineteenth century would have scorned to confine their genius to the narrow space of a single volume. Dastans, now increasingly popular, were growing ever longer and more elaborate; professional rivalry among narrators was surely a contributing factor. Sharar describes the *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* as the “dastan-narrators’ real and essential arena,”¹¹ and most written dastans of the period, like most oral ones, indeed consisted of direct expansions and adaptations of parts of the Ḥamzah cycle.

Two extreme cases give an idea of the amazing written output of the dastan-gos of the period. Mirzā Alīm ud-Dīn of Rampur (1854-1927) had to his credit nine dastans. Six of these dastans consisted of five, one, two, eight, four, and five volumes respectively, for a total of twenty-five volumes; the other three consisted of at least one volume each, and probably more, for a lifetime total of at least thirty or so manuscript volumes. He was the most productive dastan-writer at Rampur, but even he was outdone by a Lucknow rival, Sayyid Mīran Ābrū Rizvī Lakhnāvī, who produced eight dastans of two, four, four, three, two, two, ten, and four volumes respectively, and three dastans of at least two volumes each, for a total of at least thirty-seven volumes. Both these industrious dastan-gos used as their stock-in-trade plots involving enchanted worlds created by magicians, giving their works titles beginning *Ṭilism-e...*, “The Enchantment of...” Sayyid Mīran Ābrū Rizvī in particular gave to the world *The Ṭilism of the Land of the Jinn* (2 vols.), *The Deadly Ṭilism* (4 vols.), *The Ṭilism of Jamshed’s Pleasure-house* (4 vols.), *The Ṭilism of the Underworld* (3 vols.), *Sāmīrī’s Elegant Ṭilism* (2 vols.), *Jamshed’s Splendid Ṭilism* (2 vols.), *The Ṭilism of Nine Kingdoms* (10 vols.), *The Ṭilism of the Valley of Islam* (2 vols.), etc. The crucial concept of the “*ṭilism*,” or magic world, will be discussed below. Most of these *ṭilism*-filled dastans existed only as bound manuscripts in court libraries, conferring status upon their owners. Sayyid Mīran Ābrū Rizvī did in fact show his manuscripts to the Naval Kishor Press, but none were ever published.¹²

Munshī Naval Kishor, whose business continued to thrive, steadily enlarged his list of publications. In dealing with dastans, he could afford to pick and choose. When in 1881 he finally began publishing his own elaborate multi-volume Ḥamzah series, he did not accept haphazard manuscripts, but maintained control over every stage of the production process. He hired Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh, Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar, and Taṣadduq Ḥusain, who were among the most famous Lucknow dastan-narrators; one account has it that they simply “used to come [to the Press] every day and recite the stories, and the scribes would write them down.”¹³

⁹Gyān Chand, *Urdū maṣnavī shumālī Hind meñ* (Aligarh: Anjuman Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1969), p. 653. Gyān Chand says it was composed “after 1862,” but the British Library has a copy published in 1862.

¹⁰M. A. R. Barker, *A List of Books on Urdu Literature in the Collection of Dr. M. A. R. Barker* (McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 1964), item no. 664.

¹¹Sharar, *Gūzashtah Lakhna ū*, p. 188.

¹²Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneñ*, pp. 505-506, 518-520.

Another account adds that the dastan-gos worked together in relays, each picking up the story in turn as his predecessor tired, so that every volume was a collective effort.¹⁴ Internal evidence suggests, however, that at least part of the time the dastan-narrators wrote down their texts themselves. Jāh, for example, says of his own working methods,

I write on oath that I left the manuscript alone and didn't even make a clean copy. Whatever emerged from the pen the first time, I retained. I made the style of every volume different. Battles, magic, *razm o bazm*, descriptions of beloveds and gardens and deserts, etc.--although they are all the same, this humble one has described them all in different ways. Still it won't be surprising if envious ones say that I have lengthened the story. [Although] everyone knows that even when children tell stories, as far as they are able they say [not merely "a garden" but] things like "a garden of flowers, with lovers' bowers, with nightingales singing, with all kinds of fruit on the trees." Truly, 'the only pleasure of a short story is in prolonging it.'¹⁵

By whatever hybrid methods they were produced, the forty-six volumes of this *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* were an extraordinary achievement: not only the crowning glory of the Urdu dastan tradition, but also surely the longest single romance cycle in world literature, since the forty-six volumes average 900 pages each. Publication of the cycle began with the first four volumes of *Ṭīlism-e hošhrubā* (The Stunning Tilism) by Muḥammad Ḥusain Jāh; these volumes were published between 1883 and 1890, after which Jāh had differences with Naval Kishor and left the Press. These four volumes by Jāh proved immensely popular, and are still considered the heart of the cycle. After Jāh, the two main architects of the cycle, Aḥmad Ḥusain Qamar (nineteen volumes) and Taṣadduq Ḥusain (nineteen volumes) took over the work from 1892 to its completion around 1905.

The final arrangement of the cycle was into eight *daftars* or sections. The first four *daftars*--the two-volume *Naushervān nāmāh* (The Book of Naushervan); the one-volume *Kochak bākhtar* (The Lesser West); the one-volume *Bālā bākhtar* (The Upper West); and the two-volume *Īraj nāmāh* (The Book of Iraj)--were closer to the Persian romance, and were linked more directly to Ḥamzah's own adventures, especially those of the earlier part of his life. Then came the fifth *daftar*, the *Ṭīlism-e hošhrubā* itself, begun by Jāh (four volumes) and completed by Qamar (three volumes). The remaining three *daftars*, though they make up the bulk of the cycle in quantity, emphasize the adventures of Ḥamzah's sons and grandsons, and are generally of less literary excellence. A list of all the forty-six volumes, along with much additional information about them, is provided in Gyān Chand's invaluable study¹⁶; a revised version of this list, incorporating new research, appears as Part C of the Bibliography. Though no library in the world has a full set of the forty-six volumes, a microfilm set at the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago is on the verge of completion.

What does this immense cycle claim about its own origins? \ It sees itself as a translation of a (mythical) Persian original written by Faiẓī, one of the great literary figures of

¹³Ralph Russell, "The Development of the Modern Novel in Urdu" pp. 102-141. Russell discusses this account on p. 108; its source is a letter from Naval Kishor's heirs quoted in Rāz Yazdānī, "Urdū dāstānoñ par," p. 34.

¹⁴Amīr Ḥasan Nūrānī, *Munshī Naval Kishor: ḥālāt aur khidmāt*, pp. 77-79.

¹⁵Jāh, *Ṭīlism-e hošhrubā*, vol. 3, p. 920.

¹⁶Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneñ*, pp. 470-490.

Akbar's court; this claim is made repeatedly on frontispieces, and here and there within the text. Like this purported Persian original, the Urdu version thus contains exactly eight *daftar*s--even though as the Urdu cycle grew, the eighth *daftar* had to become longer and longer until it contained twenty-seven volumes. That the dastan claims to have a prestigious Persian source which was merely "translated" into Urdu should come as no surprise; in this case such claims have been decisively disproved.¹⁷ The dastan-gos frequently speak of themselves as translators--but frequently boast of their authorship as well. Once in a while they make distinct claims of original invention, as for example Qamar does for the "*Haft balā*" section in volumes six and seven of *ʿailism-e hošhrubā*. Occasionally they mention senior and contemporary dastan-gos whose versions are being incorporated or improved upon, or cite classical dastan-gos whose work has served as a model. Occasionally they refer to volumes not yet written at the time--or to volumes that never actually were written at all, but that they plan to write or could write if Naval Kishor should so wish. Occasionally they slip in snide remarks about each other--Qamar boasts of his superiority over Jāh, and Taṣadduq Ḥusain indirectly sneers at Qamar. All of them occasionally refer to "the dastan-go" who will embellish their written descriptions in the telling.¹⁸

And after all, what is their work like? An evaluation by Shams ur-Raḥmān Fārūqī, who has so far read forty-one of the forty-six volumes, suggests the following conspicuous qualities of this version as against the short one-volume versions: a much larger vocabulary of both Persian and indigenous words, many of them technical; an unimaginably more sumptuous verbal texture, with far more elaborate and prolonged wordplay, and more detailed and colorful descriptions; far more colorful and resonant names; a faster movement of events, and a larger, more complex variety of incidents, outcomes, and whole subplots; a tone much more amoral; a more erotic, less scatological interest in the body; much more humor; frequent use of long letters; a greater development of the concepts of kingship and *ṣāhib qirānī*; a new notion of rivalry between the "right-handers" and the "left-handers," champions who sit on either side of Ḥamzah's throne. Fārūqī also notices much less reliance on Devs and Parīs, and much more inventiveness in the kinds of characters who appear: for example, human magicians who aspire to replace God, and who have magic artifacts such as submarines, flying spheres, etc.; immensely powerful but almost subhuman creatures called *dīvānahs*, "madmen"; a category of *qazzāqs*, "robbers," who are occasionally led by members of Ḥamzah's own family.¹⁹

This astonishing treasure-house of romance, which at its best contains some of the finest narrative prose ever written in Urdu, was the delight of its age; many of its volumes were reprinted again and again, well into the twentieth century. But by the time of Mīr Bāqir Alī's death in 1928, dastan volumes were being rejected by the educated elite in favor of Urdu and Hindi novels--many of which were in fact very dastan-like.²⁰ In our century, dastans have been

¹⁷See for example Rāz Yazdānī, "Urdū dāstānoñ par," pp. 32-34. The general question of sources is also discussed, and Persian sources disproved, in Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneñ*, pp. 476-490.

¹⁸Many of these points were made to me by Shams ur-Raḥmān Fārūqī, to whom I am indebted for so much of my knowledge about the forty-six-volume version.

¹⁹Shams ur-Raḥmān Fārūqī, personal communication; August 28, 1986.

²⁰On early Urdu novels see Russell, "The Development of the Modern Novel in Urdu." On early Hindi novels, which were also heavily indebted to the dastan tradition, see Krishnā Majīthiyā, *Hindī ke tilasmī va jāsūsī*

much neglected; though popular retellings and even reprints of parts of the cycle have kept appearing. Now there are signs of a welcome change: the whole *Ṭilism-e hoshrubā* in facsimile has just been reprinted in Pakistan, and is currently being reprinted in India.²¹ While the forty-six volumes cannot be discussed in more detail in the present limited space, the best of them deserve a kind of serious literary attention which they have not yet been given even in Urdu, much less in English.

But whatever the fate of dastan literature in the twentieth century, toward the end of the nineteenth century dastans reached an extraordinary peak of popularity. Although the *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* and its extravagant *ṭilism*-filled offshoots dominated the scene, there was ample room left for the cultivation of *Bostān-e kḥiyāl*. Not merely one, but actually *two* notable Urdu translations of this huge Indo-Persian dastan were prepared and published: one in Delhi, and one in Lucknow. The Delhi version, its first half by Ḳhvājah Amān and its second half (after his death in 1879) by other translators, was published in ten massive volumes (1866-1887) by various firms in Delhi and Meerut; judging by its survival rate in old book stores, it seems to have been the more popular of the two. The situation in Lucknow was more complex, for Naval Kishor and his competitors engaged in intrigues over the publishing rights, but finally a set of nine volumes (1882-1891) emerged, translated by various people and published by different firms. There were still other manuscript translations that were never actually published.²²

The great poet Ġhālib himself, whose strong interest in dastans we have already noted, wrote a preface for the first volume of Ḳhvājah Amān's translation of *Bostān-e kḥiyāl*; in it he praised dastans for allowing one to hear "what no one had ever seen or heard." Even the learned, who make a point of preferring histories, are susceptible to the appealing and charming power of romances--and furthermore, "aren't there impossible events in histories too?"²³ Ġhālib was equally enthusiastic about still another translation, this one by his "nephew" Farzand Aḥmad Ṣafīr Bilgrāmī, whom he congratulated on translating *Bostān-e kḥiyāl* and getting "two volumes" published in Patna.²⁴ Ġhālib wrote, "This is a great kindness on your part--in particular, to me, and in general, to all those in India with mature taste (*bāligh nazarān*)." Later he helped to publicize the translation among his friends.²⁵

To Ġhālib, dastan-reading was an exquisite, escapist pleasure. In his old age, he wrote to a friend that he was "in clover": as we have seen, he reported receiving one massive

upanyās (Jaipur: Panchshīl Prakāshan, 1978), especially pp. 32-75 on the ever-popular Devakīnandan Khatrī, whose *Chandrakāntā* (1888) and its successors were full of *aiyārs* and *tilisms*.

²¹The Pakistani edition, seven volumes, is a handsome one by Sang-i Mīl Publications, Lahore; the Indian edition, by the Ḳhudābaḳsh Library, Patna, will include the two volumes of the related *Baqiyah-e Ṭilism-e hoshrubā* and a volume of critical articles.

²²The whole complex situation is discussed in detail, with lists of volumes, in Gyān Chand, *Naṣrī dāstāneñ*, pp. 598-613.

²³Mirzā Ġhālib, "Dībāchah," in Ḳhvājah Amān, *Ḥadā iq-e anṣār*, p. 2. Ġhālib's examples show that he was treating the *Shāh nāmāh* as a history; this naturally made it easy for him to prove his case about impossible (*mumtani ul-vaqū*) events.

²⁴These were the first of a total of ten. Ibn-e Kanval, *Hindūstānī tahzīb*, p. 29.

²⁵Ġhālib, *Ḳhuṭūt*, ed. by Ġhulām Rasūl Mihr, vol. 2, p. 795. See also Russell and Islam, *Ghalib*, pp. 314-315, 334-335.

volume of the dastan of Amīr Ḥamzah, and one of *Bostān-e k̄hiyāl*. “And there are seventeen bottles of good wine in the pantry. So I read all day and drink all night. ‘The man who wins such bliss can only wonder / What more had Jamshed? What more Alexander?’”²⁶ The distracting pleasures of the romances were equally evident to the great reformer Ḥālī, who remarked acidly in 1880, “As long as our fellow-countrymen’s ears are full of the sounds of the *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* and *Bostān-e k̄hiyāl*, nobody can possibly hear any unfamiliar voices.”²⁷

And dastans *were* seductive; everybody knew it. Virtuous women were strictly enjoined not to read them.²⁸ Dastans were some of the hottest literary properties of their day: combining the extravagant fantasy of Tolkien with the fast action of James Bond, they virtually cornered the market in sophisticated popular literature. They had everything--*razm o bazm*, adventure and romance, trickery and magic, and a lively sense of humor as well.

²⁶Russell and Islam, *Ghalib*, p. 255.

²⁷Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, *Kulliyāt-e naṣr-e Ḥālī*, ed. by Shaiḫ Muḥammad Ismāʿīl Pānīpātī (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqī-e Adab, 1968), p. 179.

²⁸As for example by Ashraf Alī Thānavī, who includes the *Dāstān-e amīr Ḥamzah* among “Books which it is Harmful to Look Into,” in his famous turn-of-the-century handbook for women, *Bihishtī zavar* (Lahore: Maktabah ul- Azīziyān, n.d.), p. 819. On this attitude see Barbara D. Metcalf, “Maulānā Ashraf Alī Thānavī and Urdu Literature” in Christopher Shackle, ed., *Urdu and Muslim South Asia: Studies in Honour of Ralph Russell* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1989), pp. 93-100.

