



## THE TILSM OF DASTAAN BEHIND DASTAAN GOI

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Humans are surrounded by many stories; whatever we do or confront in our lives, we share in story form. Historically, humanity's response to myriad challenges has been deeply informed by the stories they tell – no matter what stood in their way, whether in the form of natural catastrophes or in terms of facing their own fellow beings as opponents in war. The telling and retelling of these unique incidents might have birthed the storytelling tradition. Therefore, storytelling is inextricably tied to history by counteracting the deliberate authoritarian impulse of a Grand History – which has functioned to inform us, top-down, about what is (and has always been) beautiful. Storytelling is also pop, because it is constantly in evolution – it's an ally to everyone because we are also created by the stories we tell and the stories we grow up listening to.

Storytelling pervades each part of the human experience – from meeting a friend at a coffee place or engaging in a class discussion or conversations with an acquaintance on the cusp of a romantic friendship. Storytelling does not necessarily have a fixed timeline; it contains the scope for the immensity of the human experience, which makes storytelling as much about the 'telling' of the story as the story itself. The two are virtually inseparable. And when one is frail and old, looking for their socks under the bed and finding them on their feet after an hour's quest, that is also a storyteller's experience. In their humming while searching, cursing, and bemoaning, and finally rejoicing at the end of the experience, they are telling a story beyond words – the story of a life being lived and lives left behind. They are telling their story. And witnessing their story, the audience's own dismal problems and wonderful stories come to the fore in their mind.

So all the stories we listen to in our daily lives are a way of understanding and connecting to each other. Stories are some kind of celebrating a sense of supremacy over circumstances, situations and challenges. On the other hand, stories are time-traveling machines where people set on a chariot of romantic imagination, leaving logic behind. For example, people used to get together in open spaces in the evenings and listen to these stories, a recreational activity to relish their imaginative journeys. In the Hindustani tradition, storytelling has achieved the form of the Dastaan. We find Dastaans like Panjtantra, Jatak Kathaye, Baital Pachisi, mainly folk legends from palaces to chopaals.

Interestingly, in India, the Dastaan Go (storyteller) was an occupation that was used to tell stories in courts. The ingredients of these Hindustani Dastaans were magic, superpowers, war and love. These Dastaans were told for months as they used to be lengthy and replete with intentional digressions. For example, it is said that Mir Bakir was the last legendary Dastaan Go who modernized the art of storytelling as he used audio-visual aids, i.e., he used to change his voice according to the character's demand. His facial expressions and gestures were so on point that listeners would be left wondering whether or not it was the same person narrating throughout. This was as much a craft as an art – the two categories were contiguous in this discipline. Such a distinction was a later invention of oriental mixes. Once, Mir Bakir had to travel to another city due to an emergency, designating his disciple as his substitute. His instruction to the disciple was, “the bridegroom has just arrived at the gate of the bride's home.” It is told that the disciple told stories and kept the audience captivated for 22 days until Mir Bakir returned to court and resumed the story from where he left off.

Hindustan in Urdu. It is told that Emperor Akbar used to instruct Court painters to capture these Dastaans through visual art. The arrival of the British Imperialists profoundly impacted the tradition of Dastaan as it was stated as an act of vulgarity. This was backed up by local priests, shutting the door of this long-going tradition.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that Fort William College was set up for Britishers to learn Urdu. A form of the Dastaan was also written under Fort William College's instruction from 1801 to 1804. From the period of Fort William College till the end of the 19th century, many titles were written.

The shift became prevalent due to the emergence of Fort William College when Dastaans were being written extensively, not told. Interestingly, with the arrival of British Imperialism, the South Asian folk tradition, which was totally oral, took a sharp shift to written scripts. Many of these Dastaans were published, and many were saved as manuscripts.

The period of Dastaan was not totally finished; a new form of storytelling emerged that added real-life elements instead of fantasy, and preference was given to social and realistic aspects of life in this new genre in the form of novels. It did not totally discard elements of Dastaan; some initial novelists like Abdul Haleem Sharar and Ratan Nath Sarshar continued to practice the tradition of Dastaan. The reader may find the Dastaan's reflection in the heroic element constituting the novels of Sarshar, in the portraiture of bravery, and most importantly, in the length of the books.

In the later period, the novels of Munshi Prem Chand are considered a landmark in the craft of Urdu novel writing – in which he quite profoundly documents the socio-political aspects of life, exposing the problems of individuals and community, depicting their sensitivities and emotional accounts, and most importantly, does this without losing the grip of storytelling which had set a standard for the Urdu Novel. The Novel kept evolving as it started focusing on the crude realities of life. But the spirit of Dastaan was alive in Urdu Novel.

The birth of the Afsana took place when the Urdu novel started combining philosophy, rationality and psychology. The period of Amra-o-Jan Ada and Khawab-e-Hasti was the time of origination of Urdu Afsana. Interestingly, the spirit of Dastaan can also be found in Urdu Afsana, as the reflections of Dastaan were present in the short story. It is claimed that Prem Chand was a pioneer of Urdu Afsana. Apart from him his contemporaries like Sajjad Haider Yaldrum, Sultan Haider Josh, and Niaz Fateh Puri, also published their collections of Urdu Afsana. The tradition of Dastaan stayed alive in the works of primary Urdu Afsana writers as they borrowed imagination from Dastaan. The Afsanas of 1929 and 1930 show that this form began, around this time, focusing more closely on life and its elements. The socio-political upheaval of that time touched every sensitive person of Hindustan, and Afsana writers took an active part in the leadership of Prem Chand to prompt increasing numbers of people to read about humanity. Later, the period of 1930-35 took Afsana writing to its height in understanding the struggles of human life. The works of Prem Chand, Ali Abbas Hussaini, Azam Krevi, Majnu



Figure 2. Dastaan is told on Takht, A Paandaan and a Bowl of Water is kept Infront of Dastaan Go. NCA 2014

The most influential Dastaan of South Asia that received worldwide recognition was Dastaan Amir Hamza. This single Dastaan consists of 46 volumes that make 44 thousand pages and more than 20 million words. This Dastaan demonstrates travels, expeditions, and other accounts of the bravery of Hazrat Amir Hamza, Hazrat Muhammad's (PBUH) uncle. This legend originated from Arabic, voyaging to Persian and was later translated to

Ghorakhpuri, Sudarshan, Ahmad Akbar Abadi, and Rashid-ul-Khairi are dominated by human sensitivity and a closer observation of life.

The years 1936–47 are considered the best in the craftsmanship of Urdu Afsana, and with the demise of Mir Bakir the last chapter of Dastaan Goi was closed. But as is dustoor, other people became light-bearers: keeping this flame of old tradition alive. Munshi Naval Chand of Lucknow collected all the Daastan Gos, listened to and compiled the Dastaans and later published several volumes: a treasure of its own kind. A Hindi version called Chitarkatha is also available. Shamasur Rahman Farooqi was one of the excellent Urdu critics who felt the need to revive the old tradition of Dastaan Goi, and he spent around 25 years finding these Dastaans.

It is claimed that he is the only person on earth who has thoroughly read all 46 volumes of this gigantic collection of Dastaan Amir Hamza. He later published a series of four books titled Sahari Shahi Sahib Qirani, in which he discussed Dastaan Amir Hamza in detail. He had a project on his mind, so he engaged Mahmood Farooqi to organize Dastaan Goi events in India. Mahmood spent 3 to 4 years researching the history of Dastaan Gos and their presentation style, and Dastaan Amir Hamza's first show took place in 2006 in Delhi. He kept working on its craft, making changes, finding traditional actors, and now they have a group of Dastaan Gos who have spread all over India. The group also adapted some Dastaans seeking help from the craft of the old tradition, of which Chouboli is a part. These Dastaan Goi Shows received attention worldwide, and some students from NAPA showed interest in extending the revival movement. They started conducting shows in Pakistan. The Pakistani group also recently started writing Dastaans, adapting the traditional style.

Musharraf Ali Farooqi is a contemporary novelist, storyteller, translator and publisher who has published a translated version of Tilism-e-Hoshrubu. He recently started a new project that will publish Classical Urdu Qissas and aims to publish 5 to 6 Qissas in 1 year: which will be made available in book form, English and Urdu. A couple of months ago, he and some other literature lovers published the first volume of Tilism-e-Hoshrubu; one part out of the 46 volumes of Dastaan Amir Hamza – and the group envisions publishing Tilism-e-Hoshrubu in 24 volumes.



Figure 3. Nazrul Hassan and Fawad Khan telling Tilism-e-Hoshrubu at NCA, Oct 2014

So the tradition of Dastaan Goi that started with the emergence of language took many turns in one way or another, but it is still happening with humans as life always has stories to tell. Why is this tradition so important? Because all of us are storytellers. From the West to the East, from the Dastaans to Dylan and the Noha to the Dirge.

There is a story about Bob Dylan, who visited Woody Guthrie and would play songs to him while the latter was lying in a hospital bed in the final days of his earthly convalescence. There was a dialogue in his songs that told a much deeper story than can ever be imparted through a written account of the interaction. On paper, it is a story of an aspiring musician singing to his mentor. But the density of the page does not capture the pauses and the embrace of the music that Dylan played to Guthrie – in the same way that a story about a song's creation cannot capture the essence of the music itself.

Words cannot represent the real situation because they are a record of where one was. Where one is, is evoked by the oral. The images become much more expressive in gesture and speech. And that exchange is never satiated by a written account. The Dastaan is unique in this because we come to the Dastaans and their performance in a way books (that are always available to us) generally fail to do so. The vibrancy of the human mind and body makes storytelling much more analogous to direct experience. Undoubtedly, with the arrival of technology, its forms have changed, but the spirit is the same – to tell stories. To conclude with Saaqi Nama that is recited before Dastaan:

مشتاق میرا بزم اے جاہ  
سب دیکھ رہے ہیں دیر سے راہ  
آغازِ بیاں کرو یہاں سے  
رونقِ دو سخن کو داستاں سے

The author is a photographer and visual/performing artist – and his works may be accessed at <https://visura.co/waqasmanzoor/about>.