



## STAGING COMPOSITE CULTURE: *NAUTANKI* AND PARSİ THEATRE IN RECENT REVIVALS

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**ABSTRACT** Both the rural-based *Nautanki* and its urban counterpart, the Parsi theatre, remain part of the cultural scenario of modern India and continue to contribute to the ongoing negotiation of India's composite culture. Part of the appreciation of these older stylized theatre genres comes from awareness of their hybrid character. As emblems of composite culture, these theatrical traditions remind viewers of a popular secular outlook that is still within reach. This article discusses two performances observed during 2004 in New Delhi, of *Amar Singh Rathor* and *Yahudi ki Larki*, both canonical popular texts. It is argued that the revival of these plays owes much to their ability to serve as allegories within the current polarized cultural and political climate. The discussion suggests the continuing potential of the impulse to counter neo-nationalist ideology by means of popular media such as *Nautanki* and Parsi theatre.

**KEYWORDS:** *composite culture, dance, drama, film, Hindutva, Nautanki, Parsi Theatre, secularism, theatre*

### **Revival of *Nautanki* and Parsi Theatre**

Although once pronounced dead, both the rural-based *Nautanki* theatre of north India and the Parsi theatre, its more widely disseminated urban counterpart, have made a modest comeback of late. These two popular entertainment media originated in the mid-nineteenth century and rapidly developed into commercially successful dramatic styles known for their visual spectacle and preponderance of song and dance. Through the first four decades of the twentieth century, these two theatre forms conveyed stories old and new across a landscape stretching from Calcutta in eastern India to Quetta in what is now western Pakistan (Gupt, 2005; Hansen, 1992). With the advent of sound cinema in 1931, the popularity of *Nautanki* and Parsi theatre waned, and many performing artists, directors and stagehands abandoned these drama companies for

the film industry. Meanwhile, modes of representation within late colonial and post-colonial urban drama shifted towards realism and social critique. The older stylized genres with their melodramatic structure, stilted poetic dialogues, and excessive musicality and eroticism lost favour on aesthetic grounds. Within emerging discourses of gender, the nation and modernity, they were increasingly stigmatized as disreputable. After Indian independence, to be sure, some urban playwrights experimented with *Nautanki*, Parsi theatre, and ‘folk’ forms of theatricality, adopting elements of them into productions for middle-class audiences (Hansen, 1983), but critics of this approach rejected such efforts as superficial window-dressing or evidence of nostalgia for the past. Beyond this debate among intellectuals, the artistic communities linked to these theatres, along with their erstwhile audiences at the interstices of city, town and country, dwindled considerably. Faced with loss of patronage, the *Nautanki* and Parsi theatre became almost invisible.

During the last ten years, however, this neglect has been replaced by a certain resurgence of interest. Plays in *Nautanki* and Parsi theatre style are increasingly produced and enjoyed in cultural festivals, at tourist venues and in college productions. Although audiences in the past were limited to men, often of lower-class background, these days we see women, children and a broader spectrum of classes and castes in attendance. The practice and appreciation of these forgotten art forms are being taught to a new generation, including the children of middle-class parents. Today, Parsi theatre techniques are part of the required syllabus at the National School of Drama in New Delhi, where the veteran Parsi theatre actor, Master Fida Husain (1899–2001), served as a guest faculty member until his death. Student performances in Parsi theatre style are mounted at elite colleges such as the all-female Miranda House in Delhi.<sup>2</sup> *Nautanki* performances often feature at the Surajkund crafts fair held outside Delhi every year, and *Nautanki* instruction and production receive support in regional theatre institutes in Lucknow and Mathura, among other places.

### **Composite Culture and Resistance to Hindutva**

This recent appreciation of *Nautanki* and Parsi theatre, I contend, owes much to the serviceability of these theatrical modes within a reinvigorated public discourse of ‘composite culture’. The concept of composite culture is firmly enshrined in the Indian Constitution of 1950 in Part IVA, wherein the citizens of India are assigned, among their fundamental duties in Article 51-A(f), the responsibility ‘to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture’ (Thirumalai, 2002). As a recurring theme in Indian historical writing, the concept of composite culture can be traced to Tara Chand in 1920 (Alam, 1999). It was further explicated by Jawaharlal Nehru and Humayun Kabir in the 1940s. The construct has been used in a variety of contexts: to signify an attitude of tolerance and mutual respect between Hindus and Muslims; to denote a shared, syncretistic aesthetic, as in architecture and music; and to valorize a history that emphasizes coexistence rather than antagonism across communal lines.

With its stress upon the 'subtle intermixing or synthesis of the world-views and living habits of Muslims and Hindus' (Alam, 1999: 29), composite culture has been treated as a powerful resource for cultural unification.

In the last decade or so, the notion of composite culture has been reclaimed and tirelessly advocated by proponents of secularism, even as supporters of the opposing ideological formation, *Hindutva*, refute the evidence for composite culture and reject its vision for the future. *Hindutva* (literally 'Hindu-ness') also originated in the 1920s as a form of ethno-religious nationalism.<sup>3</sup> In brief, it asserts the primacy of Hindu civilization and seeks to establish a Hindu nation based upon a conservative interpretation of Hindu religious values. Since the 1980s, advocates of militant *Hindutva* have been somewhat successful in mobilizing mass support for the Sangh Parivar, a constellation of intertwined political parties and cultural organizations. These include the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which led India's national government between 1998 and 2004; the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps), a paramilitary brotherhood; and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council), an association of temple organizations that is powerful internationally. BJP leaders spearheaded the campaign to destroy the Babri Masjid in 1992, a symbol of Indian Islam allegedly located at the birth-site of Lord Ram in Ayodhya. Their open antagonism to Muslims created an atmosphere of communal tension and directly contributed to a succession of pogroms, such as the massacres in Gujarat in 2002.

The rise of the BJP and the continuing struggle to define the Indian nation have renewed debates about secularism and the nature and extent of the influence of Hinduism in public life. Against *Hindutva* supporters' claims that Muslims are outsiders and second-class citizens, the notion of composite culture has provided a historical rationale for espousing pluralism. In this ongoing contestation, composite culture often appears as a concern mainly of intellectuals and politicians. The polemics related to secular values and pluralism are frequently assumed to be too abstract or theoretical to figure in everyday life among the population at large. However, this assumption requires serious interrogation.<sup>4</sup> Focusing specifically on cultural debates rather than electoral politics, might composite culture not serve as a resource for the refashioning of popular media and public culture on a wider scale?

We already know a great deal about the ways in which *Hindutva* has been propagated through the popular media in the last decade or two. A number of studies have demonstrated the significant ideological work performed by popular images and stories, recast of late for mass dissemination in the subcontinent. For instance, the everyday image of the deity Ram in calendar art and religious posters has changed from a calm, pacific object of devotion towards a more muscular, warrior-like figure, with consequences for the acceptability of religious violence in public life (Kapur, 1993). The mediatized refiguring of the epic *Ramayana* in the Doordarshan serial has generated analysis of the effects of television on the mobilization of Hindu nationalist organizations (Lutgendorf, 1990; Rajagopal, 2001). Other projects focus on the use

of public speeches and songs on audiocassettes to instigate pro-*Hindutva* activism (Manuel, 2007), on the production and exhibition of videos in *Hindutva* movement public rallies (Brosius, 2005), and on the construction of nationalist narratives in the popular comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha* (Chandra, 2008; McLain, 2009b).

The capacity of performative media and popular storytelling to persuasively present counterpositions such as those invoked by the discourse of composite culture has, however, largely been overlooked until recently. At the 2007 Conference on South Asia at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, I organized a group of scholars to reflect on how opposition to *Hindutva* has begun to shape India's cultural life. The participants on the panel 'Resistance to *Hindutva* in Popular Media: The Re-Making of Composite Culture' gathered evidence of innovations in popular music, poetry, theatre, and visual culture. We were particularly interested in exploring sites of cultural production beyond the control of the state and elite institutions, for example the flourishing new Sufi-inspired genres of music and dance (Manuel, 2008), and the impetus towards alternative comic books (McLain, 2009a). The present article results from this joint inquiry. It investigates specifically how opposition to *Hindutva* may frame cultural production in the realm of popular theatrical activity and places such developments in a wider cultural context.

### **Performance Venues, Political Allegories**

During February and March 2004, I attended two memorable theatre performances in New Delhi. The first was a *Nautanki* presentation of *Amar Singh Rathor*, performed by the Krishna Mathur Company of Mathura at the Triveni Kala Sangam Auditorium. Located near Connaught Place, Triveni is an art gallery and venue for cultural productions, generally of a cosmopolitan character. The *Nautanki* program was sponsored by the Hindi Academy, with funding from the Delhi Municipal Corporation as part of a week-long festival, most of which focused on canonical Hindi poets. Held in the afternoon, the *Nautanki* performance was attended by a number of schoolchildren and women as well as men. Historically, women and children were forbidden to attend *Nautanki* because of its risqué reputation. The performance closely followed the text of the play allegedly by Natharam Sharma Gaur, one among dozens of published chapbooks that I collected during fieldwork in the early 1980s (Gaur, 1979). This version, associated with the more 'classical' Hathras style of *Nautanki* (as opposed to the later Kanpur style), has been utilized in broadcasts commissioned by All-India Radio and for audiocassette recordings.

The second event was a Parsi theatre production of *Yahudi ki Larki* or 'The Jew's Daughter', written by the well-known Urdu playwright Agha Hashr Kashmiri. The lead actor and troupe manager was Ahmed Anjum Dehlavi, son of Rashid Ahmed of Old Delhi. Dehlavi started his acting career with Babu Roshan Lal and the Minerva Theatre in the 1940s. Now in his seventies, Dehlavi operates from the Khureji area

of old Delhi (Kalita, 2004). The production was part of the annual festival organized by the National School of Drama and held on their campus on a proscenium stage. Many National School of Drama students and their college-aged friends were in attendance. They seemed familiar with the text and boisterously participated by interjecting humorous remarks and shouting out the end-rhymes as the actors recited. The play's text, edited and transliterated into Hindi, is readily available from Rajkamal Paperbacks (Hashr, 2001). A more authoritative Hindi version that includes the drama's anachronistic, comic sub-plot was recently published by the National School of Drama as part of a two-volume anthology of Hashr's oeuvre (Azmi, 2004). The Delhi performance was covered by the Hindi news channel *Aaj Tak*, which also taped a brief exit interview with me.

I maintain that the revival of these plays can be attributed to two interrelated sets of understandings or perceptions that spectators hold in regard to these theatrical genres. At one level, the renewed appreciation of *Nautanki* and Parsi theatre results to a great extent from receptivity to their hybrid character among advocates of composite culture. In both *Nautanki* and Parsi theatre, performances utilize a mixture of literary Hindi and Urdu, the sister languages crudely identified with the Hindu and Muslim populations of north India. In their stylized modes of oral performance, they intermingle the metres and song genres generally associated with otherwise quite distinct repertoires, namely Urdu *shairi* (*ghazal* poetry), Hindi *pingal* (traditional poetry), and *filmi git* (film songs). Just as the linguistic texture and poetic metres found in *Nautanki* and Parsi theatre bring together traditions often associated, however fallaciously, with Hindus and Muslims, so, too, is the story corpus inclusive and eclectic. The narratives found in these theatres come from a wide range of Indic, Perso-Arabic and European sources. With regard to performers and audiences as well, both theatres have historically drawn from all communities. The composite character of the theatres is thus evident in relation to their formal structure and the sociological markers of performance.

At another level, the two stories examined here are indicative of the plasticity of certain narratives as allegories that can be reinterpreted at different moments to comment upon political conditions. It may not be incidental that both performances occurred just a few months before the 2004 general elections, which unexpectedly resulted in the resounding defeat of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies. I do not intend to argue that these performances contributed to that political outcome. Rather, my purpose is to show that as retellings of historical episodes in which two religious communities are pitted against each other, these stories have a perennial appeal that may serve in diverse contexts to defuse communal antagonism, accentuate amity and espouse religious pluralism. *Amar Singh Rathor* is the heroic tale of a Rajput warrior who befriends a Pathan and is treacherously slain while serving the Mughal emperor Shahjahan. *Yahudi ki Larki* is a cross-cultural romance between a Roman and a Jew set in pre-Christian times.

To allude to the present in 2004, both of the productions that I observed used asides, innuendoes, improvisation, costuming and sets to project contemporary political and communal tensions into the narratives. Of course, the practice of ad-libbing and impromptu elaboration is not something new at all. In South Asian performance traditions, texts are frequently taken as malleable and used to satirize contemporary personages and events. What is significant here is the shift from earlier allegorical readings to current concerns. *Yabudi ki Larki* was written originally with the intention of encoding critique of British colonial rule. Now the drama counters *Hindutva* through the implicit equation of the oppressed Jews with present-day minority Muslims. The *Nautanki* version of *Amar Singh Rathor* similarly works against the nationalist glorification of Rajputs and demonization of Muslims to suggest that Hindu majoritarian politics has undermined larger allegiances, such as those that bound Rajputs and Muslims during the reign of the Mughals.

### ***Amar Singh Rathor: Mainstay of Kathputli, Khyal and Nautanki***

The legendary status of Amar Singh Rathor as a folk hero is perpetuated through celebratory tales and performances that go back centuries. The longevity of these traditions and their territorial extent make *Amar Singh Rathor* a particularly able instrument in the crafting of composite culture. The narrative is first of all the life-blood of the Rajasthani wooden puppet (*kathputli*) tradition. Puppetry has nowadays spread beyond Rajasthan via cultural tourism, crafts fairs and markets and has become a common amusement for middle-class children. *Kathputli* performers belong to a migratory community who call themselves Bhats. They trace their homes to Nagaur and Kuchaman districts. Since Amar Singh was the feudal lord of Nagaur, he is the puppeteers' local hero and the object of their bardic commemoration. They preserve his full story in oral tradition, although in performance, they provide only a truncated version of it as a frame for numerous skits, dances and entertaining scenes based on a quite different cast of characters (Bharucha, 2003; Jairazbhoy, 2007; Snodgrass, 2006).

*Amar Singh Rathor* is also the most popular story in *Marwari Khyal*, a form of folk theatre extant in the towns and villages of Marwar district in western Rajasthan. It is a particular favorite at cattle fairs, where tent performances attract large crowds. *Khyal* shares with *Nautanki* a recitative singing style accompanied by loud drumming on kettle drums (*naqqara*). All female roles are performed by men. *Khyal* theatre dates back to the eighteenth century; five play scripts transcribed from actors' copies were published in the mid-1800s (Robson, 1866). An extensive printed *Khyal* literature soon developed and was acquired by the British Museum and the India Office Library in the late nineteenth century. It is now housed in the British Library in London (Hansen, 1992). In performances today, scripted episodes are frequently interrupted for comic routines, singing and dancing, and for monetary donations (Ault, 1991).

Closely related to *Khyal* is the *Nautanki* or *Svang* style (as it was earlier called), found to the east in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It combines sophisticated folk singing

and drumming, erotic dancing and dramatic recitation of poetic tales. The language of *Nautanki* dialogues is generally a somewhat flowery Urdu, although Braj Bhasha and other Hindi dialects are often used for song items. In the nineteenth century, *Nautanki* in performance consisted entirely of songs and recitative elements. Beginning in the early twentieth century, prose passages and comic skits were interpolated. Now an evening's show is generally introduced by dance items and comedy.

One important distinction from *Khyal* is that since the 1920s and 1930s, *Nautanki* actresses have played female roles, and often women lead the companies. The 1966 Hindi film, *Tisri Kasam* ('The Third Vow'), starring Raj Kapoor and Waheeda Rahman, did a great deal to popularize *Nautanki* among urban dwellers. The film was itself an adaptation of the eponymous short story by the famed Hindi novelist Phanishwarnath Renu. More recently, certain *Nautanki* artists have received modest recognition from the state. One actress, Gulab Bai of Kanpur, was awarded a Sangeet Natak Akademi prize in 1984 (Hansen, 1992; Mehrotra, 2006). The art form has been adapted by several development agencies for educational purposes. *Nautanki* also survives by means of audio cassettes and VCDs, and numerous live shows still occur in the countryside.

Amar Singh Rathor (c. 1613–1644) was a historical personage. He is depicted in the seventeenth century *Shahjahan Nama*, and by the early nineteenth century had become a legendary hero, thanks in part to James Tod who recounted Amar Singh's story in his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (Jairazbhoy, 2007; Tod, 1920). Motilal, a *Khyal* poet of the mid-nineteenth century, published a play on Amar Singh that is still in print and used by *Khyal* performers (Ault, 1991; Motilal, c. 1970). The earliest known treatment of the Amar Singh theme in *Nautanki* dates to 1912. Under the joint authorship of Chiranjilal and Natharam, both disciples of the poet Indraman, *Sangit Amar Singh ka Sakha* was published in Hathras and Mathura in that year. Reprints appeared in 1913, 1915, 1916 and down through the 1980s with slight changes. At some point, the first episode was joined by a sequel and brought out as a double issue (Hansen, 1992).

The story is epic in length and character, and its structural patterns can be analyzed in a variety of ways. At its core are two bonds between a Hindu and a Muslim, the Hindu in each case being Amar Singh himself. In the first, mutual respect and loyalty conjoin the Rajput and his Mughal master, the emperor Shahjahan, who relies on Amar Singh as his commander-in-chief and has a high regard for him like no other. This relationship is, however, betrayed. Shahjahan allows a jealous courtier, Salavat Khan, to poison his mind against his loyal retainer. When Amar Singh overstays a leave of absence from court to celebrate his marriage to Hadi Rani, the emperor summons him like a criminal and levies a huge fine against him. When Salavat Khan attempts to collect the fine, Amar Singh, outraged, kills him on the spot. After his aides fail to seize Amar Singh, Shahjahan places a bounty on Amar Singh's head. Amar Singh, lured back to court under false pretences, is deceitfully killed by his own brother-in-law, Arjun Gaur.

After this ignominious murder, the emperor denies Arjun his reward and declares his heartfelt attachment to the great warrior (Gaur, 1979: 54):

Shahjahan:

*shair:*

*jis amar singh ke bal se main is hind kā sultān banā,*

That Amar Singh whose might enabled me to become the Sultan of Hind

*afsos sad afsos usko kar dagū kīyā fanā.*

What a great tragedy, he was extinguished by treachery.

*aise bahādur sher bin kaise tasallī āyagī,*

How can I be consoled at the loss of such a brave lion?

*jis vaqt dekhūn lāsh ko chhātī merī phatjāyagī.*

When I see his dead body, my chest wants to burst with grief.

To test the Rajputs, Shahjahan holds Amar Singh's dead body and threatens to bury it with Muslim rites. This leads to a series of battles that claim lives on both sides. Finally Amar Singh's men recapture his body, his cremation is arranged, and his queen Hadi Rani is able to mount the pyre and become a *sati*.

The second relationship is between Amar Singh and a Pathan named Narshahbaz Khan. The two meet early in the play in a deserted region while travelling their separate ways. Narshahbaz is dying of thirst, and Amar Singh offers to give him the last water he has with him. In return for this favour, Narshahbaz pledges his lifelong support and friendship. Amar Singh exchanges turbans with him, a sign of high esteem, declaring Narshahbaz his *pagrī palaṭ yār*. Narshahbaz vows to defend him to the end. Only after the two friends swear their eternal loyalty does Amar Singh reveal his Rajput identity, which had been concealed until now (Gaur, 1979: 5–6):<sup>5</sup>

Narshahbaz:

*dohā:*

*qasam khudā kī qurān kī, karūn qaul filhāl,*

I swear by God and the Quran, I now pledge my word:

*pānī pīyā kisī din, main kar daūn halāl.*

I will prove my gratitude one day for the water that I drank.

*chaubolā:*

*pānī karūn halāl, hāth kābe kī taraf uṭhāūn,*

I will raise my hand toward Mecca,

*paṛai āp par vaqt kisī din bal apnā dikhlāūn.*

And one day when you need me, I'll show my strength.

*jahān pasinā gire āpkā tahān main khūn bahāūn,*

Wherever you might struggle, I'll shed my blood.

*jo itnī nā karūn tau beṭā main pathān kā nāūn.*

If I fail to do this, then I am no son of a Pathan.

*daur:*

*tā hashar kabhī na bhūlūn,*

I'll never forget this till the resurrection day.

*terā absān qabūlūn.*  
 I feel much obliged to you.  
*bachī merī zindagānī,*  
 You saved my life.  
*rahai umar bhar yād tuḥārā ek kaṭorā pānī.*  
 Until I die I'll always remember your cup of water.

Amar Singh:

*dohā:*  
*tū mere par ho chukā, jān-nisār gamkḥvār,*  
 You have become my devoted and true comforter.  
*to maiñ bhī pagṛī palaṭ, tuḥai banāūñ yār.*  
 Let me exchange turbans and make you my friend.  
*chaubolā:*  
*tuḥai banāūñ yār, yār nahīñ milai terī sānī kā,*  
 I've never found your equal, friend:  
*mushfakman is qadar huā absānmand pānī kā.*  
 One who became a dear companion for the favor of water,  
*zarā bāt par kḥud bīmā de chukā zindagānī kā,*  
 Who offered a lifetime guarantee over a small matter.  
*liyā maiñ ne pahchān hai lutfā asal kḥāndānī kā.*  
 I recognize the seed of a noble family.  
*daur:*  
*palaṭ dastār āj se,*  
 Exchanging turbans, from today,  
*banāyā yār āj se.*  
 I've made a friend, from today.  
*amar singh nām kabāūñ,*  
 My name is Amar Singh,  
*asal bind rajpūt to maiñ yārī kā paran nibhāūñ.*  
 As a true Rajput scion, I pledge my word to this friendship.

After Amar Singh's death, Narshahbaz reappears in answer to Hadi Rani's call to capture her husband's body. Despite being taunted by his kinsman for befriending a Hindu, the Pathan lives up to his promise. In the quest for Amar Singh's corpse, Narshahbaz is killed on the first day of battle. His place is taken by his son, Nabi Rasul, who forms an alliance with Amar Singh's nephew Ram Singh. On the second day of battle, Amar Singh's brother Bhallu is killed. Finally, on the third day, Ram Singh and Nabi Rasul succeed in defeating the Mughal army. Narshahbaz and his son, then, are directly responsible for saving the honour of the Rajput hero's lineage. Through Narshahbaz's self-sacrifice, Amar Singh is cremated properly and his wife enabled to commit *sati*. In a summation of the tragedy, the poet says:

Kavi:  
*chaubolā:*

*begairat gaddār amar singh ko khīrkī pe mārā jī,*  
 That shameless traitor killed Amar Singh at the window,  
*rāṭhorōñ kī sāt pusht kā bujh gayā ek sitārā jī.*  
 And the star of seven generations of Rathors was extinguished.  
*narshabbāz paṭhān nabī ne satī karāī rānī jī,*  
 Narshahbaz the Pathan and Nabi enabled the queen to attain *sati*.  
*amar singh rāṭhor vīr huī terī amar kabānī jī.*  
 O great warrior, Amar Singh Rathor, this is your immortal story.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout this play, the close ties of friendship that transcend Hindu-Muslim difference are contrasted with acts of disloyalty and treachery, usually perpetrated by a *sala*, the brother of one's wife (and a common term of abuse). The play seems to say that one should beware of the *sala*, regardless of community. Amar Singh's friendship with the king is undermined by Salavat Khan, who is the king's *sala*. Here it is indeed a Muslim who deals treacherously with Amar Singh. Later, however, it is a Hindu, Arjun Gaur, who kills Amar Singh. Importantly, Arjun is Amar Singh's own *sala*, the brother of his first wife. Villainy is clearly not reserved for either community. It inheres rather in the nasty status of *sala*-hood, which transcends religious identification (Hansen, 1992: 184–8).

Nobility and loyalty, in more positive terms, are the stuff of heroic renown. The drama unambiguously presents Amar Singh as the embodiment of these traits, and shows him rejecting narrow communal bounds to serve a Muslim master and succour a Muslim friend. In the 2004 performance, these cross-community ties gestured beyond the feudal order in which they were originally positioned, to point toward possibilities within the political reality of the day. The historical fact of the Rajput-Mughal alliance, memorialized in this drama in personalistic terms, reverberates with a widely held notion of composite culture that has direct consequences for the imagining of the nation today. That this vision is promulgated within a retro entertainment format that is threatened with extinction by modernity makes the message even more poignant. If *Amar Singh Rathor* and *Nautanki* can continue to live on, surely there is more than a chance that secular values too will survive.

### **Hashr's *Yahudi ki Larki*: On Stage and Screen**

*Yahudi ki Larki* also has a long history in multiple media. It was written by Agha Hashr Kashmiri, Urdu's most prolific playwright, who lived between 1879 and 1935 (Gupt, 2005; Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1999). Hashr was born in Banaras, a descendant of shawl merchants from Kashmir. He wrote professionally for numerous Parsi theatrical companies, including the Alfred, the New Alfred, and the Corinthian in Calcutta. He established and ran several companies himself, such as the Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company, but these did not endure long. Over his lifetime, Hashr composed in a number of different genres: romantic, historical, social, and mythological. He began with imaginary tales, focusing on idealized beauties and their

tortured admirers. These plays were highly lyrical but entirely derivative, and devoid of any immediate connection to the social realities of the times.

In his next phase, Hashr produced a number of adaptations from Shakespeare. The strategy involved relocating a Shakespearean tale to a pseudo Indo-Islamic milieu, renaming the characters, and adjusting the plots to bring out elements of melodrama and miraculous spectacle. These plays are set in imaginary time and space, but unlike the old romances, the dramas project individual dilemmas and resolutions and suggest the emergence of a new self-consciousness. A growing interaction with the changes in the surrounding society developed in Hashr's middle years. Beginning with *Khubsurat Bala* (1909), Hashr made dynamic use of the Shakespearean style but integrated it within the social drama set in contemporary times. The melodramatic structure of these 'socials' was part and parcel of the formula derived from the Victorian stage. It provided the satisfaction of clearly delineating good and evil, while highlighting moments of dramatic climax at the ends of acts through the device of arresting action in the tableau.

*Yahudi ki Larki* (1913) began a larger project of critique of the colonial state, albeit set in a historical framework. The strategy of temporally displacing the narrative was a necessary one imposed by strict codes of censorship. In an implicit allegory with British rule, Hashr set up a conflict between the oppressive Romans of ancient times and the victimized Jews who were compelled under threat of death to worship idols and engage in pagan revelry. As in many later dramas and films, an 'inter-caste' love interest between Rahil, the heroine, a Jew, and Marcus the hero, a Roman, propelled the plot forward. Other dramas of Hashr's that expressed patriotic leanings include *Hindustan Qadim o Jadid* ('Hindustan Old and New'), *Garib ki Duniya* ('The World of the Poor'), and *Bharat ki Pukar* ('India's Cry').

From 1915 onward, Hashr wrote a number of mythologicals, plays retelling episodes from Hindu epics and legends. Hashr's plays such as *Bilva Mangal* devoted to Surdas, *Sita Banvas* from the *Ramayana*, and *Bhishma Pratigya* from the *Mahabharata*, show the inclusive scope of his craft. Writing primarily for the Madan Theatres in Calcutta, Hashr in these plays turned increasingly to Hindi expressions over Urdu ones. Late in his career, Hashr similarly extended his range to the traditional narrative corpus of the Parsi community. In *Rustam o Sohrab* (1928), a play that is still performed today, he celebrated the primordial struggle between two warriors who were father and son.

Finally, Hashr wrote many screenplays, most of which were versions of his earlier dramas. During the silent film era, his socials and mythologicals (*Ankh ka Nasha*, *Dhruva Charitra*) contributed to the development of early Indian cinema. Unfortunately, none of these survive. With the coming of sound to Indian films, Hashr's genius as script-cum-song writer could be most fully realized. His dialogues and lyrics for *Shirin Farhad* were famously enacted by the singing duo Kajjan and Nisar.

In 1933, New Theatres released *Yahudi ki Larki* as a film starring Kundan Lal Saigal as Marcus, the Roman prince, and Rattan Bai as his Jewish beloved. Hashr wrote the screenplay, and the plot followed the drama closely. Several songs from the

film, including a rendition of Ghalib's well-known *ghazal*, *Nuktachin hai gam-e dil*, are available on the internet.<sup>7</sup> In the late 1950s, the film reappeared in several versions, including *Yahudi ki Beti* directed by Nanubhai Vakil, and *Yahudi ki Larki* directed by S.D. Narang. Most memorable was Bimal Roy's *Yahudi* of 1958, co-written by Hashr and Nabendu Ghosh.<sup>8</sup> Meena Kumari, Dilip Kumar, and Sohrab Modi starred, the music was by Shanker Jaikishan, and Helen and Cuckoo danced. Many scenes focused on the impossible romance between Marcus the hero and Hannah the heroine (Rahil in the original play)—impossible because of their different religions, and because of the hero's prior engagement to Octavia, a Roman princess (Desiya in the play).

In recent years, the play has featured at various drama festivals around India, including the 2000 National School of Drama festival in a production by Nadira Babbar's company, Ekjute. The play has been in the company's repertoire for some years, earning critical acclaim. Chaman Ahuja sees in it a unique fusion of East and West. 'The way Nadira made broad gestures, exaggerative movements and poetic style of delivery go in tandem with "imaginative" realism and create a kind of total theatre was breath-taking, indeed' (Ahuja, 2000).<sup>9</sup> In 2005, the play was performed at an Urdu drama festival in Chandigarh organized by the Haryana Urdu Akademi. This production was under the direction of Ahmed Anjum Dehlavi, the same director as for the 2004 National School of Drama show.<sup>10</sup>

Both the play and the film use the motif of cross-community romance to question religious boundaries, as well as generate the obvious romantic tension. The suspense is increased through disguise: the identities of both hero and heroine are obscured, to different degrees. Marcus disguises himself as Manshiya, a Jew, in order to woo Hannah. From the start, however, the audience is aware of Marcus's true identity. His deception becomes known to Hannah and her father Ezra at the end of Act 1, following a scene in which Marcus dines with Hannah's family on the Sabbath, but refuses to consume the ritually sanctified bread. By contrast, Hannah's true identity is unknown to everyone except Ezra—including herself. She is revealed to be a Roman only at the very end of the drama. The back story is that after Ezra lost his own offspring to marauding Roman soldiers, he rescued Hannah and brought her up as a Jew. This daughter who was exchanged in infancy is at the end returned. All obstacles to her marriage to Marcus are removed when her Roman identity is finally revealed.

The historical epoch in which this romance unfolds heightens the melodrama and builds an emotion-laden discourse against religion allied with politics. The Romans insist that their religion, the state religion, must be practised by all communities. Ezra rejects this command, putting his life and that of Hannah in danger. He views the Romans as oppressors (*zālim*) and declares himself a rebel. He stands up for justice and freedom of religion, refusing to bow down, as Hashr (2001: 22) records:

*Sivā kbudā ke kisī ke āge na dil jhukā hai na sar jhukegā.*

Except before God, I have never bowed my heart, nor will I bow my head.

Marcus, too, argues for tolerance, insisting that the Romans treat everyone the same (Hashr, 2001: 29):

*Yahūdī ho yā īsāī, pūrab kā bāshindā ho yā eshiyāī, bad ho yā nek,*  
Whether the man be Jew or Christian, Easterner or Asiatic, evil or good,  
*Magar kbudā ke rahm-o-karam kī nazar sab par hai ek.*  
God casts his gaze upon each one with the same mercy and kindness.

After Marcus reveals himself to Hannah and she rejects him, he invokes the universal spirit within man and places love above all else (Hashr, 2001: 39):

*Yahūdī hūñ ki roman hūñ, maiñ nūrī hūñ ki nārī hūñ*  
I may be a Jew or a Roman, born of fire or of light,  
*Koī hūñ kuchh bhī hūñ, par terī sūrat kā pūjārī hūñ.*  
But whatever I am, however I am, I worship your countenance.

The Romans thus represent the politically repressive state that attempts to impose its religious orientation on all subjects. The Jews appear as a largely defenceless minority who refuse to bow to persecution. Understood as a historical drama, Hashr's play recalls a period in which conflict in reality raged between these two peoples. But there is also an obvious allegory that operates together with the historical mode of telling—not displacing it but supplementing it—whereby the Romans represent the West and the Jews the East, and by extension the conflict is played out between the European colonial regimes and the peoples of the Orient, or more specifically the British Raj and India. This elision of identities is apparent in the 1958 film, wherein the costuming, hairstyles, and dance moves of the Romans, though polysemous and eclectic, often gesture towards European manners. The wedding ceremony in the film, which provides the setting for the climactic confrontation between Hannah and the Roman king, also looks quite Christian.

However, this reading is upset somewhat by the distinction the play draws between the religious beliefs of the two communities. Here it seems there is a clearer association of the Romans with Hindus and the Jews with Muslims, or at least with certain Orientalist stereotypes of the two groups. The Romans are depicted as idol-worshippers, and their religion is associated with revelry and debauchery. The Jews on the other hand are shown as hard-working teetotalers who believe in an unseen God. The superiority of the Jewish religion and its elision with Islam comes out in the Urdu phrasing, such as Ezra's use of the word 'infidel' (*kafir*) to insult Marcus, and his offer to convert him by having him recite the credo of Islam (*kalma*) to marry him to his daughter according to *shariat*, the religious law (Hashr, 2001: 44–5).

Notably, everybody wants to make converts. Ezra insists that Marcus convert to Judaism if he is to marry Hannah. Ezra himself is repeatedly threatened with death for

failing to convert to the Roman religion. Finally, Hannah in jail in the last act refuses to change her religion for Marcus. All three characters resist conversion, declaring their loyalty to their own religion stronger than ties to individuals.

Marcus:

*sārī duniyā se ziyādā ye shukr-lab mujhko,*  
Greater to me than all the world is this dear face,  
*aur usse bhī ziyādā merā mazhab mujhko.*  
And greater even than that is my religion.  
*aisī shai yah, ise insān nahīn de saktā,*  
Such a thing is this, a man cannot give it up.  
*jān de saktā hai, imān nahīn de saktā.*  
He may give up his life, but never his faith (Hashr, 2001: 45–6).

Ezra:

*marnā manzūr hai magar yah dil-figār azrā tabdīl-e mazhab-e ābāī se majbūr hai.*  
He is willing to die, but this heart-sick Ezra is helpless to change the religion of his ancestors (Hashr, 2001: 76).

Ezra:

*batā, tū duniyā aur dīn—donoñ meñ se kis chīz ko pasand kartī hai?*  
Speak, which do you prefer—the world or religion?

Rahil (Hannah):

*abbā jān! dukh, bīmārī aur dīgar takālīf se bhārī huī duniyā ke liye haqīqī masarrat aur jāvedānī surūr se ankheñ band karūñ? lāl ko ṭhokar mārkar patthar ko pasand karūñ?*  
Father! Should I close my eyes to true joy and eternal bliss for a world full of sorrow, illness, and other troubles? Should I kick the ruby aside in favor of the stone? (Hashr, 2001: 89).

To the extent that the drama proposes a resolution to communal conflict, it is through a common discourse of justice (*insaf*) that knows no distinctions of class, community, or religion. The twist is that this justice is to be found in Roman law (*roman qanun*). A major turning point occurs when Hannah makes an impassioned complaint (*faryad*) before the Roman king to prevent Marcus from marrying Octavia. Accusing Marcus of infidelity, she demands capital punishment, an extraordinary sentence for being jilted. Put on the spot, the Roman king declares his commitment to justice. He announces his impartiality to the status of the petitioner, agreeing to hear out Hannah even though she is a Jewish commoner.

In the 1958 film, this scene forms the dramatic climax that showcases the histrionic talents of Meena Kumari and Sohrab Modi. Importantly, it is here that the Roman state appears in a very different light. The possibility of an overarching moral order that transcends religion and community is suggested as Meena Kumari goes beyond her father's hostility to the Romans and appeals to the king. In the course of her long, impassioned speech, spectators may be reminded that Meena Kumari was born

Mahjabin to the Parsi theatre actor Ali Bux and his wife Prabhavati, who as a dancer had taken the name Iqbal Begam. She inherited the composite culture of the Bombay entertainment industry of the 1940s and 1950s and herself was an emblem of fluid, shifting identities.

The great actor, Sohrab Modi, veteran of Parsi theatre, also appears at the height of his powers, declaiming in rhymed couplets in true Parsi theatre style. Accusing the king of a double standard, he ironically intones (Hashr, 2001: 66):

Ezra:

*Tumhārā gam hai gam, mufalis kā sadmā ik kahānī hai.*

Your sorrow is true sorrow, the misfortune of the poor but a story.

*Tumhārā aish hai aish aur hamārā aish fānī hai.*

Your enjoyment is a way of life, and ours merely transitory.

*Yahāñ bachpan burhāpā vāñ burhāpā bhī javānī hai.*

We go from childhood to old age, but for you even old age is youthful.

*Tumhārā khūn hai khūn aur hamārā khūn pānī hai.*

Your blood runs pure, and ours is but water.

The grand theatricality of the *mise-en-scene*, the broad physical gestures, and the frontal address of the actors before the camera emphasize the connections between the film and its dramatic roots.

## Conclusions

Unlike *Amar Singh Rathor*, which is a tragedy resulting in the deaths of the Rajput hero and countless other warriors, *Yahudi ki Larki* in its staged version ends happily in marriage. Both stories explore the liminal terrain beyond strict religious boundaries, enlivening it with tales of friendship and romantic love. Loyalty, honour, justice and mercy are terms that resonate throughout these plays, designating codes of behaviour that transcend narrow affinities.

At the multiple levels of meaning available through theatrical representation, these performances, in their own respective time, celebrate the ideals of composite culture while delivering song and dance, action and melodrama. Perhaps it is the ambiguity of their allegorical structure that makes such forms of theatre amenable to reinterpretation almost a century after their first appearance. The potential for strengthening awareness of the composite culture of today's India among the audience is skillfully enhanced through subtle additions to and modifications of the earlier more traditional performances. The audience reactions indicate that the potential for re-kindling of these historical art forms as well as awareness about the crucial importance of composite culture for the identity of the huge nation called India remain alive and can indeed be strengthened through such performative interventions.

## Notes

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2. *The Hindu*, 15 September 2000: 23.
3. For details see Chakraborty and Kundu (2007); Nijhawan (2008); Savarkar (1969 [1923]).
4. Especially now also in light of the recent defeat of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Indian national elections during May 2009.
5. This excerpt is recorded on Sonotone audiocassette 1323, performed by Ishtiaq Varsi and Zahid Husain Varsi (early 1980s). It is also found on the T-series Nautanki of *Amar Singh Rathod* by Rafik Master and party, URL (consulted 24 September, 2009) from [ishare.rediff.com/filemusic-Amar-Singh-Rathod-Nautanki-id-10038491.php](http://ishare.rediff.com/filemusic-Amar-Singh-Rathod-Nautanki-id-10038491.php).
6. Transcribed from an EMI audiocassette of the Braj Bhasha film, *Jamuna Kinare*, which features a shortened Nautanki performance within it, published by The Gramophone Co. of India Ltd., 1983.
7. For a complete list of songs from the film, see URL (consulted 25 September, 2009) from [www.earthmusic.net](http://www.earthmusic.net). Songs in playable files are available at URL (consulted 25 September, 2009) from [www.dishant.com](http://www.dishant.com).
8. A DVD of the film is available, published by Baba Digital Media, Mumbai, copyright 2001.
9. Chaman Ahuja, 'Indian Theatre at the Crossroads', URL (consulted 25 September, 2009) from [www.tribuneindia.com/2000/20000625/spectrum/main9.htm](http://www.tribuneindia.com/2000/20000625/spectrum/main9.htm).
10. *Chandigarh Tribune*, 1 April 2005, URL (consulted 25 September, 2009) from <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2005/20050401/chd.htm>.

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