Sultānā the dacoit and Harishchandra: Two Popular Dramas of the Nauṭankī Tradition of North India

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If it is true that under the mantle of respectability accorded to the Indian epics and Purāṇas one finds all manner of ribaldry and indecorous behavior, then perhaps when one delves into the ill-famed world of nauṭankī one will find a much more straightlaced and conservative view of reality than one might expect. Nauṭankī is the popular theatre tradition of the Hindi and Urdu speaking regions of North India, and in particular of Uttar Pradesh.¹ For anyone beginning research on nauṭankī, the issue of its reputation is unavoidable. Hiramā, the innocent cartdriver in Phanishwarnath Renu’s Hindi short story The Third Vow, knew from hearsay that nauṭankī shows were not a proper pastime, though he didn’t quite know why, and the knowledge didn’t prevent him from falling in love with a nauṭankī actress.² Similarly, the Hindi drama critics, if they mention nauṭankī at all, repeat vague warnings; the form is crude and debased, not much can be expected from it. Rām Nārāyaṇ Agrāvāl, author of Sāṅgīt, the leading Hindi monograph on the subject, describes its current state as one of commercial ruin, artistic bankruptcy, and sexual display.³ Female Indian friends simply comment, ‘We were never allowed to see those plays,’ or ‘Why don’t you study something nice?’

I have not yet seen nauṭankī performed. My only visual resources are

¹ The term nauṭankī may refer either to the performance tradition as a whole or to a particular performed play. The printed text of a play is ordinarily labelled sāṅgīt. Related terms are sāṅg, which also means a musical play, and sāṅg, which refers more specifically to the local tradition of Haryana. Khyāl is the related folk theatre of Rajasthan. Contrasted with all these is nāṭak, the ‘modern play,’ written largely in prose and divided into acts and scenes.


photographs in books, a few scenes from the Hindi film Tīrī Kasam, and Ron Hess’ vivid but brief documentary Ajuba Dance and Drama Company. Could these disparaging remarks be judgments upon the content of the plays, which is frankly secular and entertaining? Are they responses to the current style of acting, singing, and dancing, patterned after the commercial film industry? Or are the objections more to the roughness and lewdness of the audience itself, rather than the play? It will be difficult to know until I have viewed performances in their social context in India.

Whatever the case, nauṭankī belongs to a broad category of popular entertainments which Indian taste deems vulgar. It lacks the redeeming religious significance of rās līlā or rām līlā, the other popular theatre traditions of the Hindi area. Together with the related regional theatres of tamāshā, bhavāī, khyāl, māṅch, and jātrā, nauṭankī has its roots in the folklore of village life, and even in the cities its audience is primarily rural in social background and outlook. Nauṭankī has flourished particularly in Kanpur and Hathras, U.P. Kanpur developed into a large industrial city over the last hundred years; the class of laborers who migrated from the surrounding villages constitute the bulk of the nauṭankī audience. Hathras is a small commercial center and rail junction. Being a market town, it also attracts many rural people, and furthermore it is close to the pilgrimage centers of Mathura and Vrindavan which annually draw thousands of villagers from all over North India. The actors themselves are generally of low, often untouchable status, and the musicians are Muslims; one may assume that few have had formal education beyond primary school. Furthermore, an actor by the nature of his profession is considered something of an outcaste, always roaming here and there, and an actress who exposes herself to the view of other men on a commercial basis is no better than a prostitute. The ancient discrimination against professional entertainers still operates to make theirs a despised lot.

These caste and class-based attitudes toward popular theatre explain some of the disdain. They have been reinforced by the moral judgments

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5 See Swann, ‘Three Forms of Traditional Theatre,’ p. 257, on the caste background of svāṅg drummers. Ustād Indraman, Chiranjilāl, Ganeshilāl, and Gobindarām, who established the leading akhārā of svāṅg in Hathras were of the Chhipī caste (tailors) (see Agravāl, Sāṅgī, p. 108). Ron Hess notes that nauṭankī troupe members in Banaras were Dalālī Muslims and Chamārs (personal communication).
of noted post-Victorian literary historians of Hindi and Urdu who were educated by the British and became influential purveyors of British canons of taste. Ram Babu Saksena’s *History of Urdu Literature*, first published in 1927, continues to shape attitudes toward the various genres of Urdu literature. Saksena’s remarks on nineteenth-century Urdu drama, precursor of today’s nauṭāṅkī, illustrate the moral outrage still felt toward popular theatre in India.

Kissing and hugging, lewd remarks and indecent gestures were most frequently indulged in to the delight of the four-anna gallery. . . . The love and passion depicted is of low kind. There is nothing of spiritualised, etherealised, sublimated love. It is sensual and carnal leading to vice and crime.  

Another cultural legacy of nineteenth-century England that was even more crucial in the formation of Indian critical opinion was the emphasis on the literary convention of realism and the propagation of social reform. Educated urban Indians in the late nineteenth century became alienated from their traditional literature because of its reliance on stylized modes of representation foreign to European taste. They sought new forms which could serve as proper vehicles for ‘modern’ values and progressive ideals. Bhāratendu Harishchandra, who is considered the founder of modern Hindi drama, rejected the rām līlā, the rās līlā, jāṭrā, and Indarsabhā as ‘corrupt,’ primarily because of their lack of appeal to the educated audience whose dominant interest was in eradicating social evils. Similarly, at a certain point in his career Premchand abandoned the conventions of the Indo-Persian tale (dāstān) and began writing short stories of a more realistic type on themes of social reform.

Hindi literary historians would have one believe that there was a unilinear development toward greater realism and social criticism throughout this period, and that the old forms—which were obviously decadent and out of tune with the new age—died and vanished from the scene. With the exception of Temple’s folklore collection, *Legends of the Punjab* (1884), which includes one svāṅg, information on popular drama is remarkably absent during this time. Consider the case of Lakshman

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Singh, who was known for his translation of Kalidasa's drama Śakuntalā into chaste Sanskritized Khaṇī Boli. Was it the same Lakshman Singh whose seven editions of Gopīchand Bharatī, four editions of Bhakta Prahlād, and three editions of Rāp Basant (co-authored with Hardev Sahāy) in sāngīt style appear in Blumhardt's 1893 catalogue of the India Office Library of the British Museum? Whether it is or not, Blumhardt's bibliographic notes are indicative of the neglect and lack of understanding of popular drama typical of the period. Blumhardt failed to recognize that sāngīt meant musical drama, translating the term instead as 'a legend in verse,' 'a poem,' or 'a tale in verse.' Blumhardt used similar terms for the 27 other plays catalogued in the 1893 volume, which bear the generic titles of sāngīt, sāṅg, svāṅg, and khyāl. The fact of a live performance tradition for Hindustani musical plays in the nineteenth century was apparently unknown to the British bibliographer, and it was similarly discounted or suppressed by Indian literary historians.

The popularity of the plays with the public, however, was tremendous. During the period when Bhāratendu was trying to establish a theatre movement suitable for college students and high-caste ladies, Amānat's play, Indarsabhā, went into 55 editions (before 1893, according to Blumhardt) and was published in cities as far away as Lahore, Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. A commentator noted in 1917, 'The play still holds its own on the Hindustani stage after a run of seventy years, and its universal popularity is proved by the numerous but unsuccessful imitations made of it.' The conventions, staging, music and poetry of the Indarsabhā influenced the Parsi theatre and the new schools or akhārās of nauṭankī that developed in Hathras and Kanpur around the turn of the century. There, under the masters Indraman, Nathārām Gaur, and Śrīkṛishṇa Khatrī Pahalvān, many heroic and romantic legends of both Indian and Perso-Arabic origin were incorporated into the repertoire; 104 sāngīt and khyāl plays are listed by Barnett and Blumhardt as published between 1910 and 1925.

In spite of Bhāratendu's indictment, the līlā plays, jāṭrā, and nauṭankī

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have all survived, and at least in the case of nauṭankī are now being widely printed and circulated. The Persian-inspired dāstāns Premchand read as a youth are likewise popular today in the form of cheaply printed stories or kissās, which have been discussed by Frances Pritchett in her thesis, ‘Marvelous Encounters: Qissa Literature in Urdu and Hindi’. These genres may have changed somewhat over the last century, but they obviously have a stable appeal that has not altered significantly. The reason for this lies in the socioeconomic composition of the reading public in India. The sophistication and difficulty of modern Hindi literature limits its readership to members of the urban middle class with at least a high school education. Popular literature in printed form, on the other hand, provides entertainment and edification for the newly and semi-literate, an audience whose size and importance would seem to have grown over the last hundred years.

A century after the advent of prose fiction from the West, urban Indians are now exploring their traditional literature in a new light. For many years, when Hindustani popular drama began to be mentioned, it was considered a product of Western influence and went under the name of ‘opera.’ Amānat’s play, Indarsabha, written in 1853, was believed to be ‘a musical comedy modelled on European opera.’ This idea apparently started from a reference to European courtiers in Nūr Ilāhī and Mohammad Umar’s work, Nāṭak Sāgar, and was passed on to posterity by Ram Babu Saksena.

The courtiers and the companions of Wajid Ali Shah were always devising means to afford amusement, diversion and fun to their gay master. One of the French companions mooted the idea of stage and presented the scheme of opera which was in the heyday of popularity in France. It was readily accepted as it could utilise the thousands of beautiful singers who thronged the Court. Amanat was asked to write the play and give it an Indian garb.

As a result, Hindustani drama was considered to have no connection with Indian literary tradition. Muhammad Sadiq, in his History of Urdu Literature, wrote, ‘The revival of drama in India in the middle of the nineteenth century owes nothing to the discovery of an indigenous

tradition. It is essentially an exotic ... its technique remained throughout Western.'

This line of thinking was challenged by Masūd Hasan Rizvi at length in his Urdu Drāmā aur Istej, 'on the grounds that Wajid Ali Shah had no European courtiers and that Amānat, owing to a speech impediment, never went to court.' John Pemble notes that there were indeed European figures at court, 'but the idea of operatic influence ... does seem farfetched. Save during the reign of the Anglophil Nasir-ud-din, European music of the non-military kind was not appreciated at the court of Lucknow.'

Whatever the validity of the arguments on both sides, Rizvi's view seems to have prevailed. Buttressed by the outlook of folklore studies, an academic discipline that has developed in India within the last twenty years, popular drama is no longer viewed as a Western derivative. Nautanki has been reclaimed as indigenous theatre, and numerous Hindi critics now view it as a link between modernity and the classical dramas of antiquity. Modern theatre directors have used nautanki conventions to stage both classical and contemporary plays, and playwrights have experimented with the form in their writing. The tradition has gained new relevance as a regional cultural identity for the Hindi-speaking area emerges. Whether this change in thinking will serve to maintain or irrevocably alter the tradition remains to be seen.

So much for the social and historical perspective. The present literary study of nautanki is focused upon two broad questions. 1) What gives the genre its identity? That is, what features not only characterize but can be said to define the form? 2) What connects this genre to other related literary forms and traditions? An examination of the two play texts, Sultana Daku and Harishchandra, begins to answer these questions. While it cannot be claimed that these two plays are representative, or that they

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19 Sadiq, A History of Urdu Literature, p. 393.
20 Syed Masūd Hasan Rizvi, Urdu Drāmā aur Istej (Lucknow: Kitābghar, 1957); see also Syed Masūd Hasan Rizvi, 'On Urdu Drama aur Stage,' Indian Literature, III: 1–2, pp. 138–40.
23 A number of recent Hindi publications attest to the reevaluation of popular drama. In addition to Agravāl, see Nemichandra Jain (ed.), Adhunik Hindī Nāyak aur Rangmanch (Delhi: Macmillan Company of India, Ltd, 1978); Jagdish Chandra Māthur, Paramparāshīl Nātya (Patna: Bihār Rāṣṭrabhāshā Parishad, 1969), and Lakshmi Nārāyana Lāl, Pārśi Hindī Rangmanch (Delhi: Rājprāl and Sons, 1973).
24 Note Balwant Gargi's 1966 and Habīb Tanvir's 1954 productions of The Little Clay Cart in nautanki style, Shāntā Gāndhī's production of Amar Singh Rāthor, a nautanki for the urban audience, and plays such as Habīb Tanvir's Agrā Bāzār, Sarveshvar Dayāl Saksenā's Bakrī, and Mudrārākshas' Ālā Afsar.
constitute a sufficient sample to enable generalization about the genre, their popularity and availability is certain. Study of their performance aspects and social context will have to come later. For now they are viewed simply as texts. The editions of both plays used are from the Hathras school of Nathārām Sharmā Gaur, whose picture appears on each cover under an invocation to Ustād Indraman, founder of the akhārā. Sāngīṭ Harishchandra is subtitled Gulgshan kā Nāg (Snake in the Garden), and this edition was published by Shyām Press, Hathras, in 1977. Sultānā Dākū bears the subtitle Garībō kā Pyārā (Beloved of the Poor), and was also published by Shyām Press in 1977.

None of these details, however, indicate who actually wrote the plays and when. As Agravāl notes, the author can usually be detected by examining references at the end of the play. Bhaṇītās (signature lines) scattered through the plays such as kahai indraman (‘Indraman says’), are to be viewed as remembrances of the teacher, not evidence of authorship, according to Agravāl, for Indraman was illiterate and did not write plays himself. His words were written down by his disciples, and at least some of the verses found in plays of his school may be presumed to have been composed by him. In Sultānā Dākū, three signature lines include the name of Rūparām, and the colophon is clear: kahai nathārām rauko kalam rūpa ab. Rūparām was a resident of Salempur who entered Nathārām’s employ as a scriptwriter in 1920 and published 60 plays under Nathārām’s name in the period before Nathārām died (either 1947 or 1943). Agravāl furthermore lists Sultānā Dākū as one of Rūparām’s works, so it seems safe to assert that this play was indeed written by Rūparām some 35–70 years ago. This is

25 The South Asia popular literature collection at the University of Chicago Regenstein Library, collected primarily by Frances Pritchett, contains four versions of the Harishchandra story and six of Sultānā Dākū. Two of the Harishchandra versions are sāṅgīts of the Haryana school of Chandrālāl Bhāṭ, one is an Urdu masnavī version published from Ludhiana, and one is in popular story (kahānī) form from Calcutta. Of the versions of Sultānā Dākū, three are sāṅgīts: one by Shākrīṣhṇa Khatri Pahalvān, noted writer of the Kanpur akhārā, one by Murlīdhar, another author of the Hathras school, and the third is the 1976 printing identical to the Rūparām text used here. The other three versions are in nāṭak (modern drama) form, and are published in Delhi, Patna, and Hathras.

26 I am indebted to Ron Hess for allowing me to photocopy these plays from his collection.

27 Agravāl, Sāngīt, p. 116.

28 Agravāl, Sāngīt, p. 108.


30 Agravāl, Sāngīt, p. 272 for information on Rūparām. The dates of Nathārām’s death are given on p. 116 as 1947 and on p. 273 as 1943.

31 Agravāl, Sāngīt, p. 273.
not to say that Rūparām originated the story; the colophon, in fact, states that Rūparām based his version on a novel.

The authorship of Harishchandra is somewhat more difficult to determine. There are several bhaṇītās contained in the play referring to Indraman, as well as to Gannesh, Chiranjīlāl, and Gobindarām, who are named as teachers of Nathārām. The colophon indicates that Nathārām himself is the author: harishchandra kā sāṅgīt dvij nathārām kīyā taiyār. Agravāl implies that Harishchandra was one of the plays Nathārām wrote soon after the organization of the Nathā Chiranjī Manḍalī, which would appear to be in 1890. One could perhaps date the original version then between 1890 and 1910, and indeed the language suggests an earlier dating than Sultānā Dākū. However, one must presume that editorial emendations and additions have occurred over the long printing history of both plays. For example, both plays contain references to the Congress Party, which obviously postdate Independence.

In brief, Sultānā Dākū is the story of a Robin Hood-like bandit who robs from the rich to give to the poor. His rival is Young Sāheb, a British police officer who has been given the task of arresting him. The early scenes sketch out Sultānā’s ruthless discipline of his band of men, his fearlessness, and his fondness for his dancing-girl mistress, along with a prophecy by a fakīr that the dacoit will meet his end when he holds a five-year old boy on his lap and gives him a thousand rupees. Both Sultānā and Young send spies and launch various strategies to outmaneuver each other. Young’s efforts consistently fail until Sultānā makes a generous gesture to Young’s dākiyā (postman or messenger) whom he has captured. Sultānā takes pity on him because of his large family and low salary and promises to meet him in his village to give him a sizeable sum. The dākiyā betrays Sultānā, reports the planned rendezvous to Young Sāheb, and meets Sultānā with his five-year old son whom Sultānā immediately takes into his arms. Young arrests Sultānā, Sultānā is tried and convicted, and at the end of the play he places the noose around his own neck, admonishing the audience not to follow his path but to do good and vote for Congress.

The story of Harishchandra appears in several places in the Purāṇas and has been a popular tale for centuries. Numerous dramas have been

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32 See also Agravāl, Sāṅgīt, p. 109.
written on the theme since 1850. In this version, Harishchandra is a rich and righteous king who has performed 99 sacrifices (yajña) and must accomplish only one more to gain liberation. Indra, feeling threatened, wishes to obstruct the king and sends the sage Vishvāmitra to torment him. Vishvāmitra in the form of a boar uproots a garden, and when Harishchandra comes to slay him, he appears as a Brahman and requests three boons, challenging Harishchandra’s reputation as a truth-sayer. Harishchandra promises to grant the boons, and Vishvāmitra first asks for his kingdom and then for a dakṣiṇā of gold, which Harishchandra is unable to provide because he has given away all he possesses with the first boon. His virtuous wife, Tārāvatī, suggests they sell themselves to provide the money, and the couple and their young son journey to Banaras. Tārāvatī and the boy Rohit are purchased by a Brahman, but an untouchable buys Harishchandra and sets him to work at the burning ghāṭ collecting the tax on dead bodies. One day Tārāvatī appears with the dead Rohit, victim of snakebite. Harishchandra demands the tax which Tārāvatī is too poor to pay; she shreds her sārī and gives him a piece. After the body is cast into the Ganges, Vishvāmitra retrieves it and brings it to Tārāvatī, raising rumors that she is a witch. Harishchandra is appointed to behead her, but just as he raises his sword, the gods appear, and he is cleansed, reunited with his son, and given direct passage to heaven.

The plays are well-constructed in terms of the pacing of episodes, and they share a number of structural features. Both plays pit the hero against a persistent rival who tries to undo him. In both cases, the hero is famed for his generosity, and the hero’s generosity is exploited by the villain and turned against him. Preliminary scenes are devoted to suggesting the hero’s character. For example, Sultānā explains to his mistress that the reason they always seem penniless is that he gives away all the money he robs to the poor and to the men who work for him. Harishchandra’s righteousness is demonstrated by his eagerness to help the afflicted gardener, but only on the morrow, for evening is a sinful time to trouble others. The intermediate scenes are framed by the series of contests between the hero and the villain. Young Sāheb engages Sher Singh as a counter-spy, but Sultānā slays him; Young sends four spies dressed as musicians accompanying a dancing girl, but Sultānā detects

their lack of musicianship and shoots all five of them; Sultānā tips off the police and lures them to Gangāpur but then sends a spy to distract them while he raids the zamīndār’s estate. Similarly, Vishvāmitra tortures Harishchandra on the difficult journey to Kāshī by offering him water, but Harishchandra resists and remains truthful; Vishvāmitra sells Harishchandra’s wife and child into slavery, while Harishchandra looks on helplessly; Vishvāmitra comes as a beggar to demand Harishchandra’s daily gruel, leaving him too weak to perform his duties for his master.

Music and dance and comic interludes are also incorporated into the middle portions of the two plays. In Sultānā Dākū, musical entertainment is easily provided for by the presence of a dancing-girl as Sultānā’s concubine, who makes several appearances. These are supplemented by comic scenes in which wealthy merchants are harassed by Sultānā’s men. Thus Ragghumal the baniā (moneylender) is roasted over a fire to make him confess the whereabouts of his gold, while later a wealthy seth and his munīm (clerk) are forced to do dāNd-baiṭhaks (a type of calisthenics) on pain of death and are discovered in this humiliating posture by Young and his men. Although the Harishchandra play is much more sombre in mood than Sultānā, the build-up of pathos is attenuated by several lighter scenes. A lengthy exchange between the gardener woman and her lazy husband appears early in the play. The entire scene is in colloquial Braj Bhāṣā and relies on the humor of conjugal bickering and slapstick. In the market of Kāshī, a rowdy prostitute appears who wants to buy Tārāvaṭī and Rohit. She provokes laughter with a comic description of her trade, but is finally driven off with curses by Vishvāmitra. The ghouls on MaṇiKarṇīkā Ghāṭ also provide entertainment for the audience in a macabre song-and-dance routine wherein they taunt Harishchandra. (None of these incidents are contained in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa version of the story.37) It may be observed that neither play contains a vidūṣhak or clown, nor does either possess a dominant romantic theme or sub-plot, two features that are often cited as indispensable.38 Perhaps a clown figure is introduced on stage outside of the scripted scenes, or perhaps the interludes noted above are the extent of comic and romantic material in these two plays—it is impossible to say.

Although the tone and predominant mood of the two plays differ greatly, Sultânâ manifesting more of the sentiment of heroism while Harishchandra is full of pathos, the appeal of both seems to be to the popular desire to see social reality reversed. That is, in these two plays the powerless become powerful for a time, and the powerful become powerless. In Sultânâ, an outlaw of presumably humble origin acquires fame, respect, and wealth through his brave deeds. Wealthy merchants, great landlords, even the British police fear him and are unable to diminish his stature. Moreover, his heroic status is enhanced by his altruism; he is the protector of the poor. This type of folk hero is popular in many cultures, and references in the South Indian context have been discussed by Stuart Blackburn.\(^{39}\) Blumhardt also lists a play of this type.\(^{40}\)

Harishchandra represents the other side of the same coin—a mighty and virtuous king fallen to the level of an untouchable. The lasting success of this legend again lies in its inversion of the social order, its acknowledgement that even the great must suffer and endure oppression at the hands of the lowest of the low. Of course, the fantasy for the viewer of escape from social events as they are normally perceived is mediated by an overriding emphasis on duty and truth. Harishchandra after all is going through this to prove his virtue, and in the end he is rewarded. His sojourn among the untouchables is abruptly terminated, and all that he has endured becomes but a līlā, a play of the gods. He goes off to heaven while the outcasts of the world slave on. The old order is restored in Sultânâ Đākū as well. Though Young Sāheb comes to admire Sultânâ for his valor and the two strangely become friends after Sultânâ’s capture, Sultânâ is finally hanged as a criminal. He pleads guilty, and never repents, but his last request is that his nephew be brought up by Young Sāheb and be prevented from becoming a dacoit. Thus in both plays the status quo of society is restored. Good deeds meet with reward ultimately, and bad ones with punishment. But this occurs only after the audience has had the satisfaction of watching the everyday world turned upside down for several hours.

Two other motifs—disguise and treachery—appear in these plays with sufficient frequency to be considered important. Detecting an enemy’s identity becomes synonymous with survival in the spy-ridden


world of Sultānā, and it is not surprising that the characters in this play are constantly impersonating each other. Early in the play, Sultānā’s men capture someone they believe to be a spy in the guise of a fakīr. Curiously enough, the fakīr is genuine and Sultānā must make profuse apologies to avert his wrath. Later, Sultānā disguises himself as Young Sāheb and raids the police station for arms. Young’s spies pose as musicians and attempt to gain entrance to Sultānā’s camp. Sultānā’s pradhān or headman, dressed as a policeman, tricks Mathurā Singh at Gangāpur. Sultānā’s side’s disguises work; his enemies’ consistently fail. But nevertheless Sultānā must be vigilant, for the enemy may be within as well. Betrayal is an ever-present danger in the dacoit’s world, and to control it Sultānā is ruthless. He kills his guard Sumarnā for leaving his duty to take a drink of water. When his trusted soldier Sher Singh goes over to Young’s camp, Sultānā discovers the truth through another spy and similarly dispatches Sher Singh to the other world. Finally, Sultānā is entrapped by the dākiyā, who sides with Young for a higher reward. Treachery results when a disguise is not perceived; the hero’s own men may in essence be in disguise, may not be his own.

This element of uncertainty or paranoia is raised to a metaphysical plane in Harishchandra. As Harishchandra plummets down the social ladder, reality is less and less what it seems. Most of the havoc is created by Vishvāmitra appearing in various disguises: first as a boar in the garden, then as a Brahman, then as a beggar on the ghāt, and even as the snake in the garden. Furthermore, every character in the play is a mask of an eternal quality or force. Harishchandra is Truth incarnate, Tārāvatī is wifely modesty (pativrata), the untouchable Kāliyā is really Dharmrāj, the God of Death, and the prostitute is pāp or Sin. The treachery that Harishchandra confronts is not just Vishvāmitra’s trickery, it is the caprice of the gods, the fickleness of fate in a cruel world.

This emphasis upon disguise and treachery in the two plays is not merely a dramatic device to keep the audience guessing. Nor is the matter summed up by the trite conclusion that fate is unpredictable. The joint issues of identity and trust seem to be the central concern here. Each play deals with the difficulty of truly knowing another person, and thus with the fundamental problem of relying upon the other and establishing trust. In a world where identity is socially defined and communicated by exterior signs of dress, speech, or behavior, the accurate perception of inner worth and character (identity in the Western, ego-oriented sense) may be a matter of some anxiety. This anxiety appears to be represented in the deeper structure of these two plays and may account for some of their appeal.
Most observers suggest that the real power of nautanki lies in its language and music. While a lengthy consideration of the musical side of nautanki is beyond the scope of this paper, language and music are wedded in the text in the form of poetic meters, and an understanding of them is essential to an appreciation of the nautanki form. A number of distinct meters are found in both plays, and most of these meters are common to the two plays. This fact becomes significant in view of the wide divergence in linguistic orientation of the texts. Sultānā Ğākū is in Urdu, though it is not an extremely Persianized or ‘high’ register of Urdu, while Harishchandra is in Sanskritized Hindi, with some mixture of Braj. This linguistic variance is obvious from the first pages of the two texts. Sultānā’s mangalācharan (invocation) is addressed to Khudā or the Islamic God, and suitably ends with a pun: bahar-e-musibat se merā bhī beṛa pār lagānā, which could be translated as either, ‘Help me cross over the difficult sea,’ or ‘Help me overcome difficult meters.’ Harishchandra’s invocation on the other hand is of the familiar Sanskritic variety addressed to Shiva; curiously, it too includes a request for chhand shakti, ‘power in meters.’

The entirety of Harishchandra is in metered lines, a trait considered characteristic of the original Hathras school, while Sultānā Ğākū contains some unmetered passages termed vārtā. However, there is a tendency even within these to rhymed prose. For example:

kyō nahī tadbīr ek se ek ālā hai,
aur mere khyāl mē sultānā jald hī āth āne vālā hai.

It is assumed that such vārtās are spoken rather than recited or sung.

Indications of the meters employed are given in the text in the form of abbreviations preceding the lines where the speaker’s name would be given in a Western play. Thus ‘do’ stands for dohā, ‘chau’ for chaubolā, ‘dau’ for daut, ‘baharat’ for bahar-e-tavīl, ‘k’ for gavvālī, and so on. The manner in which these meters are interwoven can be demonstrated from the beginning passage of Sultānā Ğākū following the mangalācharan.

Dohā:

jilā eka bijanura hai yū pī ke dāramyānā

shahara najibbādā ko lo usamē hī jānā

Chaubolā:

paidā hūa uṣī ke andara eka dākū sultānā
barā chusta chālāka bahādura lā javāba maradānā

thā usakā ye kāma amīrō kā basa lūṭa khajānā

bekasa aura garībō ko ārāma sadā pahūchānā

Shair:

tīn sau dākuō kā jhuṇḍ jiske sāth rahtā thā

yahi karte the sab jo kuchh vo apne mūh se kahtā thā

pulis ke khuaṇ se din rāt vah jangal mē bastā thā

na kuchh gam thā bahādur ko ajī har vakt hāstā thā

Translation:

There is a district Bijnaur in Uttar Pradesh. There in the city of Najibābād the dacoit Sultānā was born. He was extremely agile, clever, and brave, a man without equal. His job was to loot the treasuries of the rich and bring relief to the poor and helpless. His band of 300 robbers did whatever he commanded. Fearing the police, he lived day and night in the forest, but he had no sorrow. On the contrary, he was always in good spirits.

Notice that although the language (Urdu in this case) is consistent throughout, the dohā and chaubolā are Hindi meters scanned according to the total number of mātrās (counts or measures) per line, while the following shairs (Urdu, shers) observe the rules of Urdu prosody, in which short and long stresses are arranged into specific patterns of feet. In an Urdu verse, the number of stresses per line and the placement of short and long stresses must remain constant, but there is a certain amount of flexibility, in practice, regarding the reading of a syllable as short or long. The meter for these shairs is a simple, symmetrical pattern of four feet of short-long-long-long. If one tries to scan the dohā and chaubolā lines according to Urdu prosody, such a regular pattern fails to emerge. Here one must count the sum of the stresses and consider such matters as placement of the caesura. Thus dohā meter consists of two lines of 24 mātrās, divided 13 + 11. Chaubolā consists of four lines of 28 mātrās,
ordinarily divided 14+14. Hindi meters such as these are freely juxtaposed with Urdu *shers*, *qavvālis*, *bahar-e-tavūl*, and *ghazals* in all nauṭankī texts observed so far, and spot checks of scansion indicate that the respective rules of Hindi and Urdu prosody are followed faithfully by the poets.

Another interesting formal feature of nauṭankī verses is that the Urdu style of rhyme, employing the *qāfiyā* and *radīf*, is often imitated in the Hindi meters as well. The term *radīf* denotes a word or words at the end of a line which are identical throughout a poem. The *qāfiyā* is the rhyming syllable or word which immediately precedes the *radīf*. In the first two lines of the *shaïr* above, the word *thā* is the *radīf*, and the rhyming words *rahtā* and *kahtā* are the *qāfiyā*. Notice the same type of rhyme in the following *chaubolā* from *Harishchandra*.

*Chaubolā:*

harishchandra bhūpa kī ajudhyāpurī rājadhānī thī
surapura kī sampadā nirakhi sampadā pashemānī thī
rohitāshva priya putra satī tārāvati paṭarānī thī
sabhā taura sachchidānanda shambhu kī maharabānī thī

Translation:

King Harishchandra’s capital was Ayodhyā. Seeing his wealth, the heavens were ashamed. His favorite son was Rohitāshva and his principal queen, Tārāvati. He was blessed by the Lord Shambhu in all ways.

Here *thī* is the *radīf*, and the preceding words, all of which end in -ānī, contain the *qāfiyā*. This tendency is observable in many verses and seems to represent a noteworthy synthesis of Urdu and Hindi formal devices. If one could generalize, the direction of influence seems to be from Urdu onto Hindi. That is, Hindi meters such as the *chaubolā* have been Urduized, have acquired an Urdu ring not only through vocabulary choices but through the adoption of characteristic rhyme schemes as well.

Larger rhythms are created in a nauṭankī text by combining various meters in characteristic ways. The basic building block of nauṭankī writing is a combination of the meters *dohā*, *chaubolā*, and *daur*. This unit is so essential that it can be justifiably considered the main formal identifier of the genre. A *dohā* is almost always followed by a *chaubolā* in a nauṭankī text, and these are often interlinked, the final half-line of the
doḥā being repeated at the beginning of the chaubolā. Interlinking is characteristic of the Harishchandra text, for example:

Doha:

do ghānte hūe hamē isi jagaha nara nāha
hama ne tau dekhā nahī yahā koī bārāha

Chaubolā:

yahā koī bārāha vagairah hama ne nahī nihārā
huā merā āgamana yahā para suna kara nāma tumhārā

Translation:
I've been here two hours, oh lord of man! I didn't see any boar here. I didn't see anything like a boar here. I came to this place after hearing of your name.

The linkage of doha to chaubolā is also one of sense. The chaubolā often repeats and expands on the content of the doha.

The chaubolā is generally followed by a daur, a Hindi meter of four lines, $13 + 13 + 13 + 28$ mātrās, rhyming AABB. As an example:

Daur:

nirakhī āgavana patī kau
<s><s><s><s><s>

satya sankalpa bratī kau
<s><s><s><s><s>

uṭhī tāravatī rāṇī
<s><s><s><s><s>

ādara kara baithāla palanga para aise bolī bānī
<s><s><s><s><s>

Translation:
Seeing her husband, who had made a resolution to adhere to truth, coming, Queen Tārāvatī arose, saluted him, seated him on the couch and spoke this speech.

Dohā-chaubolā-daur generally forms a speech by one character. The daur moves the action forward by forming an address to another character. Formally it provides for closure by returning to a final line of $28$ mātrās, the same as the chaubolā. Patterns of consonant and vowel imitation, in addition to line-final rhyme and meter, also bind the doha-chaubolā-daur into a poetic unit. In sum, the doha-chaubolā-daur is a unit of ten rather long lines, with a powerful rhythmic thrust to it, and an internal
structure making it highly amenable to oral recitation. It is used primarily for long speeches by the major characters, or for passages of narration by the kavi (poet).

Another meter commonly used for narration is the bir chhand, also known as alha chhand, because of its use in the Hindi oral epic, the Alha Khand. Bir chhand, as it is used in these nauṭankī plays, is a Hindi meter consisting of two rhyming lines of 16 + 15 māṭras each:

**Bir chhand:**

jindā usai nahī rakhatā thā jisa se kuchha ho jāi kasūra

rauba kahau aise jālima kā kisa se raha sakatā hai dūra

Translation:

He allowed no one to live who had committed a wrongdoing. Consider the might of such a tyrant! He avoided no man.

This meter is used frequently in the Sultānā Ḍākū play, in keeping with the dominant sentiment of vīrya or heroism. It is not surprising to find this meter, normally associated with the singing of heroic ballads, adopted into the narrative portions of nauṭankī texts.

For shorter speeches and dialogue, the dohā-chaubolā-daur format is obviously unsuitable, and here the nauṭankī author commonly uses meters like bahar-e-tavīl. This can be described as two rhyming lines of 24 stresses each (according to Urdu scansion), or four lines of 12 stresses each, arranged generally in feet of long-short-long.

**Bahar-e-tavīl:**

pāke jar jo na khairāt kauṛī kare

unkā dushman khudā ne banāyā hū māi

jin garibō kā gāmhvār koī nahī\n
unkā gāmhvār paidā ho āyā hū māi

Translation:

God has made me the enemy of those who, becoming wealthy, contribute nothing to charity. I was born to console the poor who have no consoler.
Also favored for dialogue are forms such as *shair*, *qawālī*, and *ghazal*, which are essentially couplets or quatrains in various common Urdu meters. These terms, as used in nautankī, appear to be somewhat interchangeable and may suggest musical forms rather than specific poetic genres. Rapid dialogue is executed by breaking up a couplet sequence between two characters so that the one appears to be answering or capping the other’s remarks. For example, note the dialogue between the guard and the police inspector after Sultānā’s raid on the station:

Sipāhī: kahiye kahiye kyā abhī āyā thā sultānā yahā
Thānedār: vo na āyā balki sāhab kā huā anā yahā
Sipāhī: bas to dhaukā ho gayā āyā thā vo hī ban ke yang
Thānedār: hai yah kyā kahte ho tab to kar gayā chhal mere sang

Translation:
Guard: Tell me, tell me, was Sultānā just here?
Inspector: No he wasn’t, but the Sāheb was.
Guard: You’ve been fooled. That was him disguised as Young.
Inspector: What are you saying? Then he deceived me!

Each of these plays also incorporates a number of poetic genres from other traditions. In the *Harishchandra* play, several folksongs or light classical forms appear such as *dādrā* and *ṭhumrī*, and the specific rāgas to be employed are also given, e.g. Ḥāman, Kālangarā, Sindhu Bhairovī. The *lāvanī*, originally a Maharashtrian folksong popularized in Tamāshā and Parsi theatre, is also represented in *Harishchandra*. Sultānā *Dākū* contains three *dādrās*, several examples of *Māṇḍ* (a Rajasthani folk melody), and also references to two different styles of *lāvanī*: *lāvanī langarī* and *lāvanī rangat barī*. Both plays contain some songs introduced by the initially puzzling abbreviation ‘thī.’ This turns out to be a reference to *tarz-e-thietar*, literally ‘tune from the theatre,’ that is, the Parsi stage. This diversity of metric and song forms typifies the nautankī genre. Amānat’s *Indarsabha* featured not only *dohā*, *chaubolā*, *sher*, *ghazal*, and *chhand*, but songs such as *sāvan*, *holī*, and *ṭhumrī*. Contained in these song forms is the checkered history of nautankī, which has drawn sometimes upon the folksong repertoire of the U.P. area, sometimes upon other regional theatres, sometimes upon the commercial urban stage, and today, more and more, upon the Bombay cinema.

This preliminary look at nautankī suggests the following observations. Unlike classical Sanskrit drama, the nautankī play is not *rasa*-oriented. Its structure is based on conflict, and audience satisfaction
is derived from bold strokes of action, rather than subtle delineation of feeling. Nor does the hero always triumph in the end. He may perish like Sultānā, for the greater good of society at large. Nauṭankī allows for expressions of social criticism and relaxation of customary sexual taboos, yet its fundamental orientation is conservative, reinforcing traditional attitudes toward social class, women, and the law. Formally, its conservatism is expressed by a stylized type of language that blends features of Urdu classical poetry with narrative and lyric genres from Hindi folk literature. While the heavy reliance upon rhyme and rhythm produces a static, declamatory effect, the alternation of various metric blocks and the interpolation of music and dance sustains audience interest. In short, these two texts are constructed with a degree of formal sophistication that should no longer surprise students of oral literature, and yet is often overlooked. The power of a popular drama tradition like nauṭankī with its audience in India would appear to rest upon the public sharing of linguistic patterns familiar enough to be understood, and yet sufficiently archaic, stylized, or novel to be strange and entertaining.