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Finding Sultana: A Case of *Sāngīts* and the Problem of the Original

Dr. Rittvika Singh

Assistant Professor of English

School of Humanities, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)

Maidan Garhi, New Delhi-110068, India

Email: rittvika.singh@ignou.ac.in

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Abstract

Folktales rarely stay in one form for long. They are told, retold, sung, adapted, written down, and performed again in new contexts. When an oral tale moves into text, it does not simply become a fixed version of something that once floated freely in speech; it enters a new medium that reshapes how it is experienced. Rhythm may turn into punctuation, repetition into structure, and performance cues into editorial choices. At the same time, different communities and institutions develop their own ways of presenting and performing the same narrative, emphasizing certain elements while downplaying others. Studying these shifts allows us to see that variation is not a flaw or corruption of an “original,” but a natural and meaningful part of how folklore lives and travels. Approaching folktales through their mobility and transmission helps us ask broader questions: How does performance shape interpretation? What changes when a tale is sung rather than recited, or taught within a particular institutional setting? How does writing preserve, alter, or even authorize certain versions? By placing textual analysis alongside attention to performance and context, we can better understand folktales as dynamic cultural forms that are shaped not only by their narrative content, but by the voices, settings, and material forms through which they continue to circulate. The paper situates itself within these questions and attempts to meditate on them through the various copies of the text *Sultana Daku* which has been one of the most celebrated and much performed stories on the stage of Nautanki. Taking the tradition of two akhara and their individual *sāngīt* texts of *Daku Sultana*, the paper examines the ways in which the distinct performing styles of these schools seeped into the texts and shaped the way they were written. The circulation of the *sāngīt* chapbooks in a disorganized manner across the region and also its culmination in novel makes the entextualization of the tale of *Sultana* a case study to exhibit the ways that not only orality but also print introduces

variations in a story and hence also reshapes what later adaptations and retellings can draw on.

Keywords: Print, Performance, Akharas, Nautanki, Daku Sultana.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," discusses the tradition of oral storytelling by contrasting it with the practice of reading and writing novels. His tone is mostly elegiac throughout the essay as he ruminates the loss of the tradition of oral storytelling pointing out that with the death of oral transmissibility, the communal retelling and collective wisdom also die. Moreover, it is replaced by the isolated act of reading. He further emphasizes, "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (3). Benjamin's perspective is indeed not lost when seen through the lens of folklore. In the different context, Indian folklorist and poet, A. K. Ramanujan postulates:

Tales are interregional or international in plot and motif but not in what they tell and mean. Types in the indexes keep tallies, but they tell us nothing about meanings. Only individual tellers and their tellings do. Tale types and motifs are useful bibliographical devices; they must not mask differences but lead us back to their sources, the tellings, to what are usually dismissed as variants. For not invariants, but their living use by the variants, is our study. The much-maligned but quicksilver variant is our true focus. (255)

Ramanujan, here, seems to be providing a folkloristic perspective to the difference highlighted by Benjamin. The medium and the change that happens to the tale in the medium is indeed the subject of folk studies. In the same folkloristic discourse a folk tale, therefore, enlivened in people's memory through various forms and also variations. It does not ask in

what form it is alive but only that it is made dynamic every day in the lives of the people it belongs to, be it through retellings, performances or through the print. Printed texts, in this case, become yet another way to keep the lore living.

Nautanki theatre of Northern India, as vastly researched by Kathryn Hansen in her groundbreaking book, *Grounds for Play: Nautanki Theatre in India* (1993), is marked by the continuous production of chapbooks called *Sāngīt*. There have been as many masses of chapbooks produced as there were performances. These *Nautanki* scripts, often circulated as printed chapbooks since the 19th century, embody the interplay of orality, print culture, and performance in colonial North India. Situating the *Sāngīt* of *Daku Sultana* within this history highlights how textual fluidity across akharas (schools) reflects broader material text practices. This paper examines *Daku Sultana*, a popular chapbook of Nautanki theatre, through a comparative study of two performance styles and two writing practices as they emerge from the Hathras and Kanpur akhara of the Nautanki performance. While *Daku Sultana* circulates as a popular narrative across regions, its textual forms reveal significant variations in diction, dialogue structure, lyrical density, characterization, and performative cues. These differences are not merely aesthetic but are deeply embedded in the distinct performance conventions, audience expectations, and institutional histories of the two schools.

By closely analyzing printed versions and performance-oriented scripts associated with Hathras and Kanpur, the paper demonstrates how each akhara's theatrical practice shapes the written text itself, thus highlighting a reading

practice often overlooked while studying folk practices. The two akharas have evolved with their own distinct style of performance even when they were strongly connected to each other. While Kanpur akhara gave precedence to narrative, acting and dialogues on the one hand, Hathras stood its ground on the foundations of good singing and musical compositions. Though narratives were essential to the performance, it was abundant musical scores and not the intricacies of storytelling that characterized the stage performances. Nevertheless, the differences in presentation and convergence in terms of story and characters are reflected in the texts of the respective akhara. For the purpose and scope of this paper, the case of very popular Sāngīt Sultana Daku is taken as an example to elucidate the contrast between the two akhara. This Sāngīt, like many others, was published by both Hathras and Kanpur schools with different subtitles: the Hathras text has *Garibon ka Pyara* as the subtitle; the Kanpur text opts for a more expressive subtitle, *Haye re Paisa*. The story of Sultana is based on the life of the dacoit Sultana who was considered as the Robinhood of India. According to local accounts, he belonged to the Bhantu tribe and was a nuisance for the rich traders of the city Najibabad, Bijnor in the 1920s. He killed and pillaged the houses of the rich and distributed his loot amongst the poor. The British police force failed to capture him as Sultana knew all the tricks to evade the arrest. After a long drawn-out game of hide and seek Sultana was finally captured by Freddy Young, a British officer on special duty. Sultana became a legend and many songs and lore/s came to be associated with him. Nautanki performances too adapted this story and presented it on stage. Mohammad Hussain made a film in 1972 by the eponymous title starring Dara Singh as Sultana and Sujit Saraf has retold the legend of Sultana through a fictional account, *The Confession of Sultana Daku* (2009). The apparent changes in the subtitle of the two texts suggest no drastic change of focus in the plotline which two different subtitles might indicate. The story

remains the same and so does the progression of the events. However, what is interesting to note in these two texts are the ways in which the preferences in performance and representation of social contexts by the two akharas have seeped into the texts.

The Sāngīt of Hathras is full of lyrics, and only a few prose dialogues which are referred as '*vaarta*' (conversation) are present in the text. Kanpur's performance was more dialogue oriented, and songs were integrated into the narrative. It has already been mentioned that the Kanpur Nautanki introduced women on stage, and their presence was indeed a crowd puller. Kanpur text exhibits unnecessarily lengthy interactions of Sultana with the female characters –Phoolkunwar and Sundari – running into several pages. This is symptomatic of the amount of time the actresses were intended to spend on the stage during the performances. In the Hathras text, women characters come and go. Phool Kunwar, the dancer and singer does not dance and sing more than once in their texts whereas she has been given three to four songs in the Kanpur's text. Not only this, the interaction between Sultana and Sundari, a rich man's daughter whom he meets during one of his plundering raids, has been extended by elaborating the conversation as Sultānā incessantly tries to impress and convince her to marry him and she keeps on refusing. The text also shows the way through which the risqué and the chaste were tied together in one performance, which is the very characteristic of Nautanki. After a long drawn scene between a man and a woman which could have resulted in a romance on stage, the woman Sundari, before jumping in the well to escape Sultānā, preaches : "*. . . pativrataon ka yahi kaam hain, pran jaye to jaye magar asmat mein dhabba na aane paye, aur jitni meri pativrata behenein hain wo aan par jaan de dengi par sat nahin digavengi*" This is how virtuous women behave, they can give up their lives for their honor and all my righteous sisters would die but never allow

themselves to sway from the path of virtue' (my trans; 45). She further advises:

*sang pati ke ho sati wo chhorti sansar ko
 sat digawe parpati se dhik hai aisi naar ko
 aabru ke vaste chhore kutum parivar ko
 pati se badhkar na samjhati hain wo sirjanhar
 ko. . . (45)*

She commits Sati with her husband and dies with him

The woman who does not follow the right path and falls for another man is detested

For her honor she can also leave her family

She does not consider even God to be greater than her husband. . . . (Author Trans)

The Hathras text has kept the conversation brief and therefore, has not provided any such nugget of morality. Sundari, however, does sing a bhajan and urges God to protect her honor. The example would be pertinent here as it also shows the melodiousness that Hathras akhara has in comparison to the Kanpur:

*Prabho ab meher ki nazar tum ghumao
 beiman se meri izzat bachao
 nahi mane shaitan piche pada hai
 kisi tau isko yahan se bhagao
 siwa apke mera sathi na koi
 rahe sharm tadbir hi kuch batao
 bigadte hue tumne lakhon banae
 dayanidhi zara mere bhi kaam aao
 yahi arj hai apse Indarman ki
 raha doob beda kinare laga. (35-36)*

O God cast your benevolent eyes on me
 Protect my honor from this dishonest man

Drive him away from here somehow

You are my only companion now

or Give me some advice to save my dignity

You have saved millions in despair

O Kind one, Help me out too

Indarman requests this to you

Save my sinking boat now (Author Trans).

One of the most important factors through which one can analyze the relevance of Nautanki in its time is its role not only as a medium of entertainment but also of mass communication. The texts from both the schools clearly indicate this when they try to tell people about the importance of depositing money in the banks. The Hathras text, seemingly an older one, puts it clearly through the words of Mr. Young as told to the businessman who has just been robbed by Sultana. He advises him, "*peshtar hi tum jama gar bank mein karte rakam/sethji to aaj kyu sehte itna ranj gham*" 'Had you deposited the currency in the bank before/Why would you now bear this trouble and sadness' (Author Trans; 44). The Kanpur text puts a spin on it and elaborates in a behr-e-tavil:

*Bank aur daak-khane meina karte nahin;kyo
 jama tum rakam apni sarkar mein.*

*Tumko malum nahin waha pe pehra rahekul
 khajana rahe unke akhtyar mein*

*dusre byaj bhi waha se kafi mile,hota ghata
 nhiaise rozgar mein.*

*fir bhi afsos mujhko ye kehna pada gadi jati
 rakam yohi bekar mein. (49)*

In the banks and post offices; why don't you deposit your money with the government?

Don't you know that there is security all over and all the coffers are safe with them?

Additionally, you get quite an interest on your money, in this business you wouldn't be in loss

But still I admit it sadly that the money is saved in burrows uselessly (Author Trans)

People were initially averse to putting their wealth in banks and the government had to raise people's awareness through public broadcast of the messages. The kind of emphasis given to this seemingly unimportant point in both the texts suggests that Nautanki was used for social purpose.

As far as the language of the two texts is concerned, they are quite different from each other. The language of the Hathras text is more stylized, and poetic as compared to that of Kanpur, but the lack of stylization might be on account of the increased number of prose dialogues. There is also a mixture of languages in both the Sāngīts and Urdu words are liberally used. However, the Kanpur text also makes use of common English words and therefore, it becomes more informal or fashionable for that matter. For instance, Phoolkunwar tells Sultana that "zindagi us bashar ki sada khwar hai, jiski public ke agey hai izzat nahin" 'the life of that human being who has no respect in public's eyes is wretched' (Author Trans; 8). and Sultana is seen instructing that "final kariye pardhan kul groh ka" 'Finalize the gang, Chief' (Author Trans; 9). Sundari remains inaccessible to Sultana not only because she is a virtuous woman but also because she is a rich man's daughter and speaks English, "Hold thy tongue you quite fool/ It is not proper by the rule" (39). Even the chorus of the Kanpur text is in English (though incorrect) written in Devanagari script:

O my Father God willsez (will's) our helper my dear

By your kind action are in iskie (sky) the happer(?)

I pray you come here

Come near, Come near

Everyone loves you because

It is the cause, it is the cause

You are kiliyar (clear) all persons are here

Who show me such a great figure

Such a terrbul (terrible) deed is in that we are anebut (unable) to bear

India is in terrbul (trouble)/Save me from these people

Shrikrishna and Pannalal will then all as well we cheer. (1)

This was something that the popular performances of Nautanki theatre would experiment as even the the Hathras text of Amar Singh Rathore carries a eulogy for Queen Elizabeth II in English. However, such an instance has not been found in other Sāngīts of the *akhara* and therefore, this eulogy can be considered as a one-time attempt to serve a specific purpose.

Differing ideological positions of the two akharas can be perceived from the way both the texts end- with Sultana's advice to the audiences/readers as he walks towards the gallows. The Sāngīt of Hathras ends with an appreciation for the then government of the Congress Party: "Raj Congress ka hamesha kayam rahe, jisme badmasho ki na ho sakti guzar, koi kaisa bhi qatil bhale kyu na ho - with,wo chadha hi diya akhirash daar par. . ." 'The rule of Congress should prevail forever, under whom no goons/dacoits can survive, No matter how ruthless the murderer is, he will be finally sent to the gallows' (Author Trans; 60). On the other hand, the Kanpur text mourns Sultana's death and valorizes him: "Haadsa akhiri ka bayaan kya karoon, thartharati kalam, thartharati kalam, apne hatho se fasi laga ke suno gaya Sultana hastein hi mulk -e-adam. . ." 'How do I tell you the story now, my pen trembles, my pen trembles, Sultānā tied the noose with his own hands and went to heaven with a smile on his face' (Author Trans; 64).

Although it is inevitable that a text will be treated differently when transferred to two different writers or akhara, the changes introduced in them reveal their own unique style, performance strategies and ideologies. One major difficulty in approaching these texts is interpolations and accretions which occurred in the texts during multiple reprints. They are difficult to determine with any degree of accuracy. However, a comparative study of Sāngīt Sultana Daku texts reveals not only the differences but also the similarities that are bound to occur in a performance genre that joins them together. It would be pertinent here, to cast a glance on the narrative of Saraf's novel as well. The novel begins where these plays end and gives voice to Sultana who is captured and talks about his adventures to Pearce, the personnel in jail. What the novel quite interestingly does here is bring back the orality of the tale and hand it to Sultana, a man who awaits his hanging and soon to be dead. Benjamin makes a curious observation regarding his assessment of reasons that he believes are responsible for the decline of orality. He says:

It is, however, characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story. (6-7)

Benjamin's reservations have been extended in the novel and in a moment of folkloristic justice the resourceful wisdom

endowed by death, by the imminence of its arrival and more significantly its realization has put not only the storyteller at the centre but also the "source" of the story. Stories travel and so do the tellers of those stories. A text in performance and print and then back to performance is a live document that stands as a testimony of antiquity and perhaps is the most viable exercise of archive.

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