

Text, Textuality and Digital Media
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Lecture 05: Dastangoi History
Part -1

Hello and welcome to today's lecture. Today we are looking at, we have already studied, you know how orality moves to manuscript writing and chirography. But for a moment we will pause and we are going to take a look at with a close look at one oral form. The form that I have chosen to bring to you today is a form of oral storytelling which is Dastangoi. Dastangoi is a particular form which did exist for many many years, within the subcontinent and even outside the subcontinent. But then it sort of discontinued, died out. But it got revived over the last decade or so. And the story that the exact story that we are going to be looking at, as part of this course is actually another oral storytelling tradition, from Rajasthan, which is being narrated in the Dastangoi format okay.

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So before we go into the story, that is Dastan-E-Chow Bali, we are going to look at the history of Dastangoi to begin with okay. So what you see on your screen is a particular (sto) a group of people sitting and someone a lady there standing up and writing and saying something. And that is image of a story teller, this is from, this is, the label says that this is someone reciting a story

from the Arabian life or what is Alif Laila. This picture has been taken in around 1911. Of course, the you must understand that the very nature of oral storytelling is such that written records are not available, in most of the cases.

So we have to rely on more recent experiences one, two we will also have to rely on maybe for images or descriptions of what, how storytelling actually occurred, through images paintings and other similar sources. So this would give you an idea of how story telling would happen as a as a form in before the age of of of you know televisions or films.

Certainly it is very interesting to also note that though within the European context we have been dating the rise of print to about the really the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and really consolidated by the nineteenth. In the rest of the world, a print take-- outside that of the west, print takes longer time to consolidate. So within the subcontinent as well as in the Middle East and the other parts of Asia storytelling, oral story telling formats continued to have exist, widespread existence till almost the early twentieth century, right.

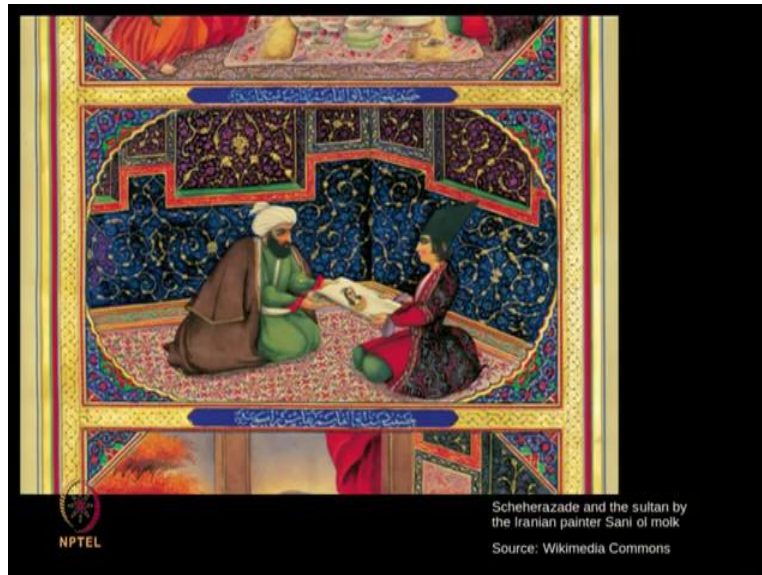
So returning back to the Dastangoi, Dastangoi really is a compound of two Persian words. Dastan as you understand is a story and goi is telling. So Dastangoi is storytelling. And the person who tells the story is called is called the Dastangoi the dastangoh. So these stories are of epic nature. They are they are they are recited or if they were written down, they were read aloud, okay. We understand that movement from the oral to the manuscript culture continues till about the nineteenth century in most of these parts of the world.

Dastangoi tells us the stories of or told the stories of adventures of Amir Hamza who was a warrior, an Arabic Warrior who was supposedly the uncle of Prophet Muhammad. That these are all legends we do not, do not first of all know altogether too much about Amir Hamza number one. Number two the stories, once they were created always moves into that is the nature of oral narrative moves into the rapidly into the realm of the fictitious. And as it moves rapidly into the realm of the fictitious it picks on other stories which get incorporated into the into the Corpus of all the stories that constitute a particular tradition.

So therefore we cannot say that we can really understand who the figure of Amir Hamza was through the stories themselves. We can certainly have a characterization of Amir Hamza but we

cannot have a clear, we cannot have a clear historical record that is to who Amir Hamza was. Now just to put everything into perspective, Dastangoi is only one of the many many storytelling traditions across the world.

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Just to give you a few examples, just heard of you know the of Alif Laila or the story of thousand and one nights, or what is better known as Arabian Nights, all of you know that is part of a kind of a kind of a larger narrative within which much smaller narratives are contained, right.

It becomes a story a story of Arabian Nights, becomes a context of-- within which within which many other stories are included as part of their narrative. It gives a certain structure and that is by and large how oral narratives actually developed, alright. Smaller stories get incorporated included into the larger story. The framework of a larger story.

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There are other sorts of formats. Now this is very interesting. This is a Persian, an image from a Persian manuscript. Now manuscripts would have illustrations it's almost like childrens books to to actually give give vent to the imagination of of the reader, or the listener. The manuscript would (ha) include illustrations, illustrations were a very important important facet of manuscript culture.

When we look at manuscript culture, more closely, we will we will study it at greater detail. But what you see there is an image of the Panchatantra, image from a story from the Panchatantra. However this is a manuscript, which is Persian, alright. Later on in the course we will look at these distinctions of the various subcontinental languages.

But there were this this one theory that you know the way we understand the differences in languages within the subcontinent or anywhere in the modern world did not actually exist, did was not actually exactly the same form a few centuries ago number one. Number two though we identify the story of Panchatantra to be to be Indian, actually the story is a travel; as people travel, so stories travels. As stories from India or the subcontinent moves to the Middle East stories from the Middle East also come into the subcontinent and and sometimes you will have many stories from various legends almost almost matching each other, alright.

So you could see certain similarities between various story patterns. So this is very clearly a Persian manuscripts, Persian manuscript which tells the story, based on the story of the Panchatantra, alright. And the Panchatantra is another very important oral storytelling tradition

from the subcontinent where as I have already mentioned earlier in the course. It is almost like a tree, where there are branches, within branches and within branches.

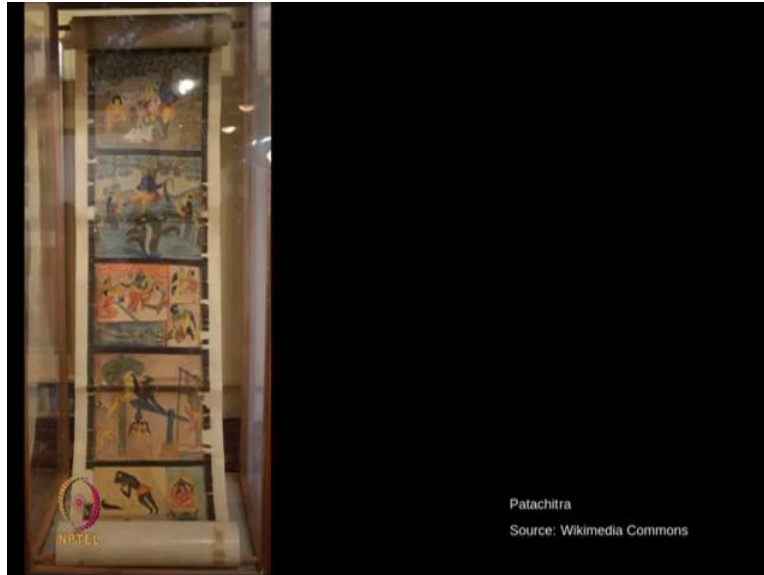
Usually many of the many of the narratives, oral narratives actually have overarching story, a framework almost like bracketing smaller stories within containing smaller stories within as I gave an example that is Arabian Nights.

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But Panchatantra is one which has a branch like structure. Another example of a oral tradition from the subcontinent which has contained framework structure is the Betal Pachisi the story of Vikram and Betal. Where the idea is that Vikram has to go and get Betal and Betal asks him a riddle and he-- moment he answers, moment he opens his mouth, Betal goes flies back. And therefore he reached out the story again the next day. So that is a another way in which many stories get incorporated within a larger framework, alright.

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Another very interesting kind of story telling tradition which is from the subcontinent is that of the Patachitra tradition. This is largely from the Eastern parts of the country, primarily Bengal. And one very important aspect of storytelling is something that we are going to see is that it also you know paves great heap to the visual aspect.

So in the Patachitra you have it is almost like a comic strip. Each segment is telling one part of the story and the story teller actually narrates the story. You can see this a scroll which has been opened up. And as the story teller tells the story, keeps on rolling up the top part of the scroll and opening up the bottom part and holds it before the eyes of the of the of the of the viewer or the group of people seated before them. And tells the story part by part, okay.

And storyteller really knows the entire story by heart. And most of the times the stories are written as I said are are are composed as as verses, as I said verses are easier to remember. Because here in this particular case, for to learn the story other than the images the the the the the story teller had to rely completely on memory.

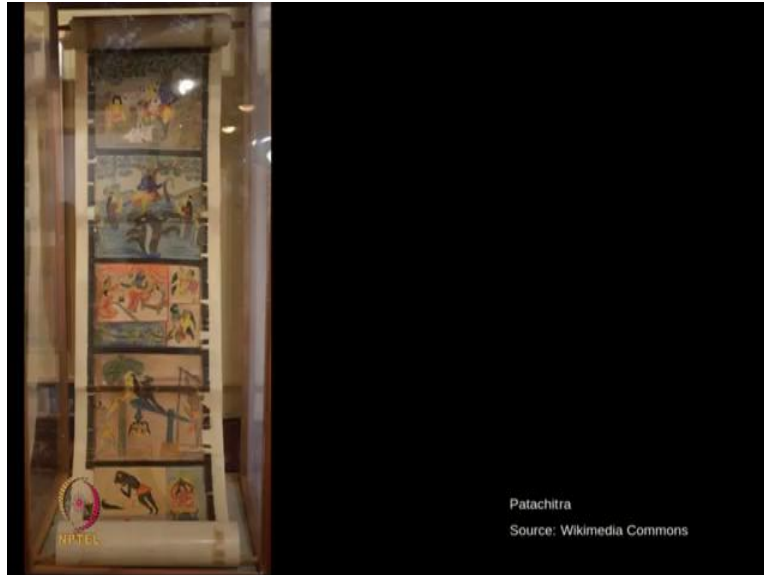
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Whether in the case of a manuscript like this one, they would have they would have a written script which would work as a mnemonic. Which would which would work as an aid to memory, alright. Whereas in the case of the Patachitra, because the narrative is has to be has to be recalled from memory, you see that there is a greater use of versification because verse is easier to remember. And most importantly to note that the the the Chitrakars the the who made these pot paintings, they are the story tellers. So the person who wants to tell a story has to make his own Patachitra and his own scroll which which then uses to tell tell the tell the story to the audience, alright.

And a particular story teller would have a a an inventory of a repertoire of of stories and scrolls, so he would be carrying it along with him to tell various stories to to the audiences, alright. Sometimes these scrolls would also be passed from generation to generation, from father to son usually, because we are largely talking of a patriarchal world. So, and and they would pass on from one generation to another. Sometimes the Scrolls will will go back due to wear and tear and fresh paintings will have to be made and when fresh paintings are made may be new additions are can be made into the into the story. And the story becomes longer or it changes a little bit, according to the times they can be adapted, alright.

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This is another story telling tradition which you may have come across at some point of time. This is the kawad tradition of from Rajasthan, India, where part by part this this kind of a box which opens up and within that there are illustrations and the story teller tells the story.

Once again the story teller has to rely largely on memory other than that images which will give him a kind of queue to the sequence of stories. But the stories are organized as part parts of this large door sort of door which is multi hinged door which sort of keeps on opening and one by one the the narrative slowly unfolds. It is almost like the narrative unfolding.

Now what you see in the case of a scroll very interestingly, very clearly the narrative has to have a has a linear structure, alright, The moment you've gone into this kind of a written material, the narrative has gone into a written structure. Whereas a purely oral form like someone standing up and telling a story may not necessarily have a linear structure. So, the understanding is that stories like Panchatantra till a long long period of time, were not written down and therefore it incorporated many stories the it it it developed a branch like structure, alright.

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However the moment it gets into some kind of a fixed form, the scroll can only open in one particular way and therefore that sort of fixes a certain linearity to the narrative form. The narrative has to move from one image to the next and to the next and so on. In the case of the kawad, there is a possibility that because the kawad opens in multiple sorts of ways, there is a possibility that multiple sort of roots in the narrative could be adopted you know, while while telling the story.

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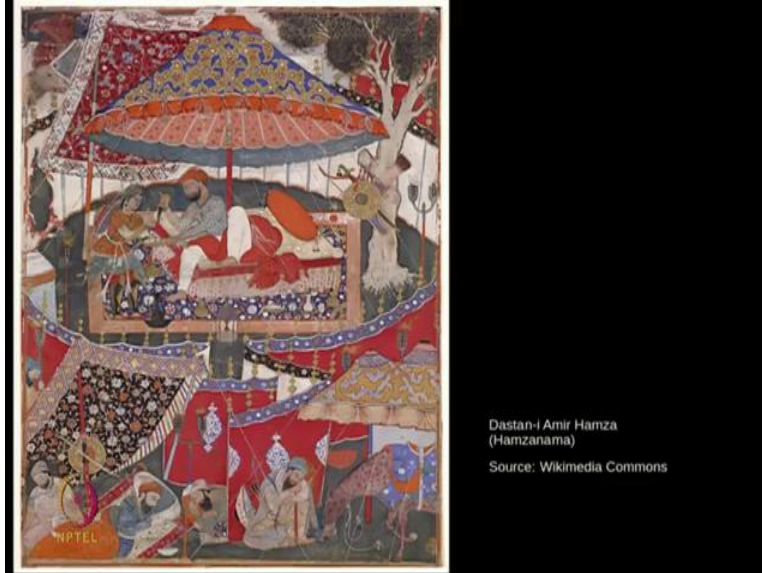


It is not only the subcontinent, just to give you an example, there are many examples across the world. You have this Kamishibai tradition from Japan. This these are as you can see in the picture down lower, there this guy has his entire the storyteller has the entire equipment on a bicycle. So it is a mobile format. And therefore what it what they do is just move they they fix all the cards with all the displays within them and within it and they pull out one card at a time which reveals the card just just next slide or next card behind the one that has been pulled out.

And very interestingly, the stories are could be written behind the card that has been pulled out. So the story for the next card is written on the slide the previous slide, behind the previous slides. So in this particular case therefore a kind of a written narrative is possible. But very interestingly, this is a narrative which because it is it is a kind of a separate slide, separate images, one can before telling the story rearrange the slides. And and the order of the exact the sequence of the slide can be altered by the story teller each, on each occasion. So what I am trying to draw to your attention is that the way the stories the oral narratives are physicalized you know through image making or through writing determines what kind of narrative structure that particular story will take.

In the case of the Patachitra for example as I said because the scroll can only open from one end to the other end, the the story has to have a linear structure. Where as in the case of the Kamishibai it is possible that that there are there are certain elements which can be rearranged. Whereas when a narrative is completely oral, like that of the Alif Laila before it was written down it it could actually reorganize rearrange or the Panchatantra could actually be rearranged a whole lot more many elements can come in go out many other things, can happen, it is a lot more greater flexibility depending on the time and the occasion in which the story is being told, alright.

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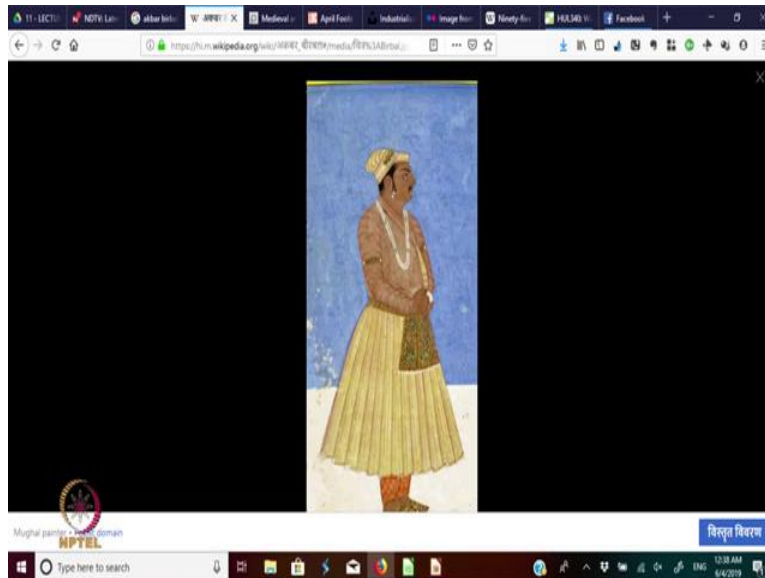


Just to, now going back to the tradition of Dastangoi, what I am going to show you are some of the illustrations which are famous illustrations from the Dastan Amir-E-Hamza or the Hamza, Hamza Nama, alright. As I said, Amir Hamza was supposed to be an uncle of Prophet Muhammad. So really the story is really developed in the eighth seventh to eighth century Arabia. That is where it can be traced back to, you must remember that Islam along with Christianity are two religions which are religions of the book, right, so the where the where the holy book of the of that particular religion is actually written down and if there are different sects then they have their own books, right. So the Quran or the Bible.

So therefore Islam being a tradition of the book, associated with it the, we can trace that the story since it is associated with Prophet Muhammad and somewhere a link to the development of Islam, you, we can also suggest that probably the earliest written records of the earliest written records of Dastangoi as a form also coincide with with the rise of Islam.

Because what the what the rise of Islam actually signifies is certain watershed changes that would have happened in within the Middle Eastern Arabian Universe at in the in the seventh and eighth centuries. However one must say that we know that stories are never created completely original they were always have some basis. So one can imagine that the oral tradition of of what we know today as Dastangoi would be going back further earlier from the seventh century, alright.

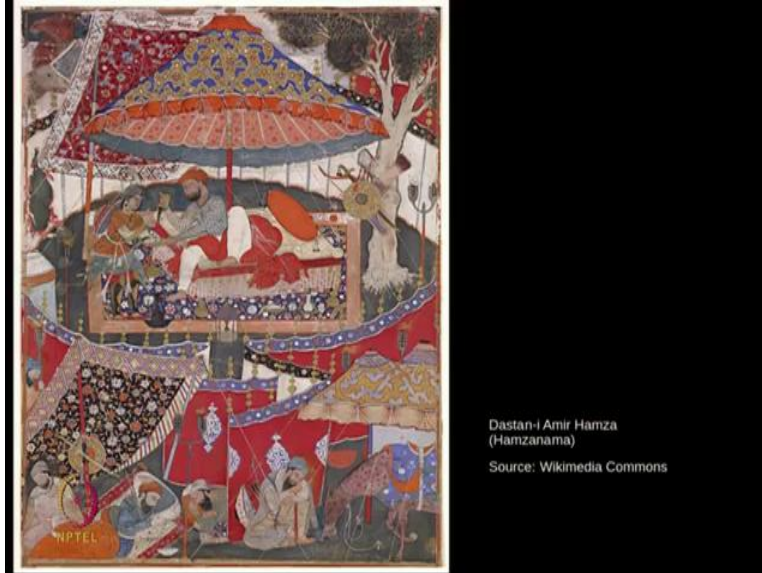
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So to tell you in a nutshell the story is, there is a there is a general format. Now there are many stories which which have a general format, right, I mean the Akbar Birbal stories for example. They have a general format, Akbar and Birbal there there is based on a riddle and ultimately Akbar thinks Birbal is going to get into trouble, but using his wit Birbal actually manages to free himself or show himself as as someone who is witty, someone who is clever and some-- wins back the trust of the of the jahanpanah or the emperor. That is the structure. Within that and and therefore the reader always knows that Birbal is ultimately going to be you know vindicated.

And this is the way oral narratives actually occur. We know that in Betaal Pachisi that at the end the story end of any particular episode any particular story Betaal is going to fly back and go back into the forest and Vikram will have to go and fetch him, so the end is always known. What is going to happen. That that the story will end in a riddle, that is something that is known.

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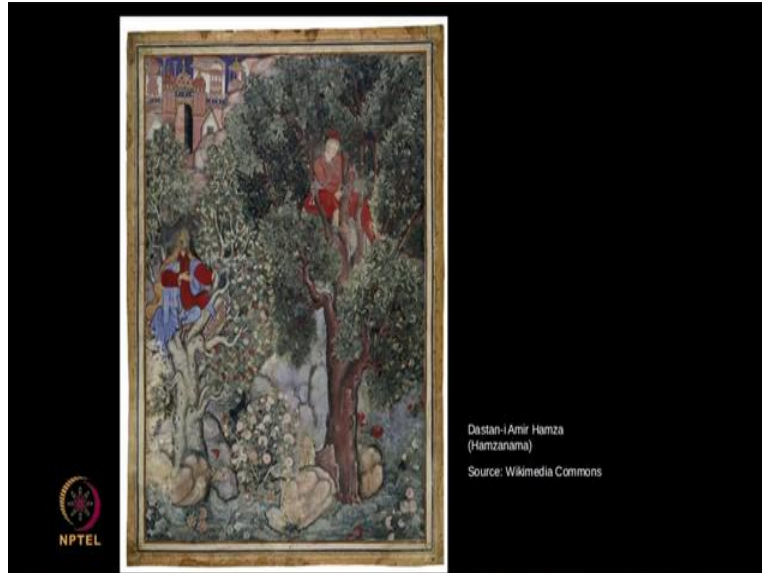
So in this particular case actually there are two polar opposites within the within the within the set of stories. There is this Amir Hamza and the trickster who is Afrasiya. And it is a is a battle between the warrior- the honest, the brave Amir Hamza- and on the other hand there is the trickster and his with his team of other tricksters which is and the jinns and others which is Afrasiya and it is a battle between Amir Hamza and Afrasiya. And in the end Amir Hamza will always win, alright.

So these stories actually grew as they travelled through the Middle East and Central Asia and as they travelled they gathered more local stories into the into the corpus of this this tales which are Dastangoi. So there was no fixed book a particular sto-- Dastango will have a particular set of repertoire of Amir Hamza stories.

The more experienced Dastango, the more popular Dastangos would have a greater (report) repertoire of stories, having a (great) greater repertoire of stories is very is is very useful because you make sure that you are always have something new to the to offer to the particular group audience.

Because if there are many Dastangos they would all be telling stories and maybe the audience would have would have heard a particular story. So it really would make a mark if you had a particular unique story, a new story to offer.

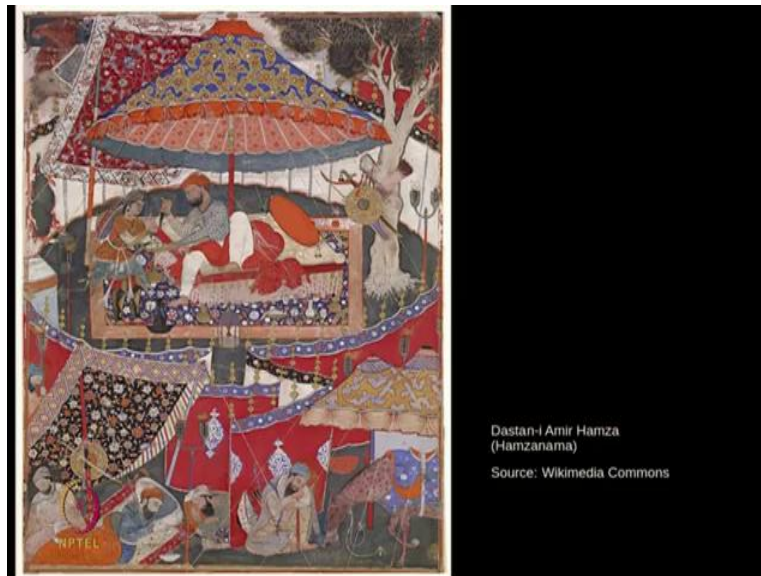
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It is like telling jokes on a during a dinner party. If if everybody knows the joke, it falls flat, similarly, so the oral repertoire had to be large. So there would be not any fixed book, people would know various stories, they will have different collection of stories that they would have mostly embodied, alright.

However there was another tradition also which I will come to, for a moment, but the most important point is that these stories, as they traveled through central Asia through Persia and what are other parts of the Middle East- Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and other places- they they sort of gained collected a lot many more stories within this pantheon. Various people would have, various Dastangos would have various repertoires. And as people travelled, so stories would travel with them and stories the evidence suggests that the stories started emerging within the Indian subcontinent somewhere between the eleventh and fourteenth century quite naturally so, because this was the time when Islamic rulers started emerging in India, right, and along with them, along with them the-- came an entire set of culture, entire set of literature and entire set of food habits and stories, okay.

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So as well as architecture, so many things came along with each change of, and this has this has been happening within the subcontinent indeed all parts of the world where people, when new empires are created, they create newer cultural inputs and have an have an have a supplementary effect on the entire culture of the place where that where that, where where people have come and settled down, alright.

So it is on the thirteenth or fourteenth, the eleventh to the fourteenth century between that these stories slowly start emerging into India. And as the stories travel, so Amir Hamza also travels to different lands in his infancy and even as a and and some parts of the most lovable parts of this, these stories is the the stories of Amir Hamza the little child or or the person who the the young boy who is able to who has many adventures, he is obviously very naughty person.

So it is it is very popular this these stories were very popular with the kids one can imagine, and he travels and takes on various adventures and encounters various interesting people and and tries his tries his you know prowess over them, daring he is a very daring young man.

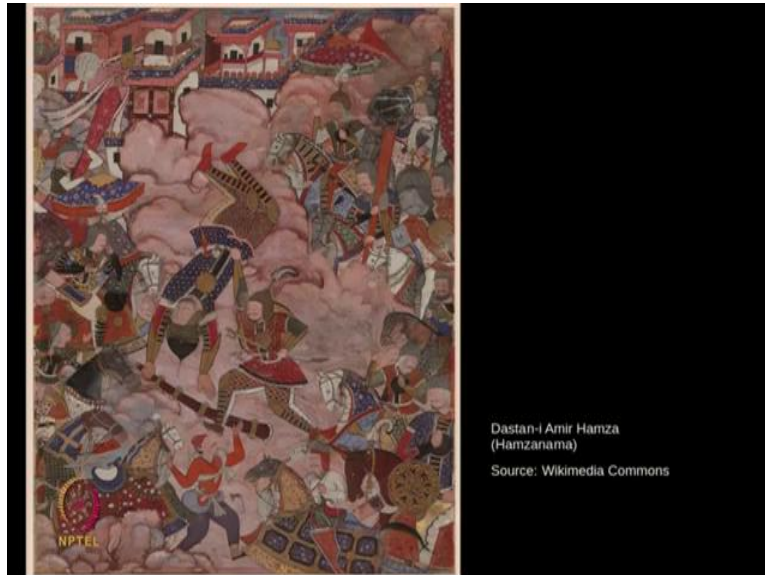
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And this this fame of the Amir Hamza stories, this spreads far and wide within the story and he is then called by the Chief Minister of the King of Persia to aid him in his troubles, during his troubles, alright. And what one of the important things that he can fight is the the emperor of the sorcerers which is Afrasiyab Jadoo.

And Hamza is busy fighting against all the jinns and the tricksters under the Afrasiyab Jadoo. And he he actually you know manages through his wit and through his courage able to overcome the the forces of Afrasiyab.

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Now these stories slowly they move into courts they become very popular so the rulers also get interested in them and so one of the important rulers who who took on these stories (were) was Akbar. Akbar himself was extremely fond of these stories and storytelling in general, and he himself told stories, but most importantly, the thing that Akbar did, was that he he commissioned. And these images that you are seeing comes comes from that, that Hamzanama which is the Hamzanama or the Dastan-I-Amir Hamza is a set of folios- very large paintings- which would like be kept upright and the audience a lot of them so you did not have projection devices in those days.

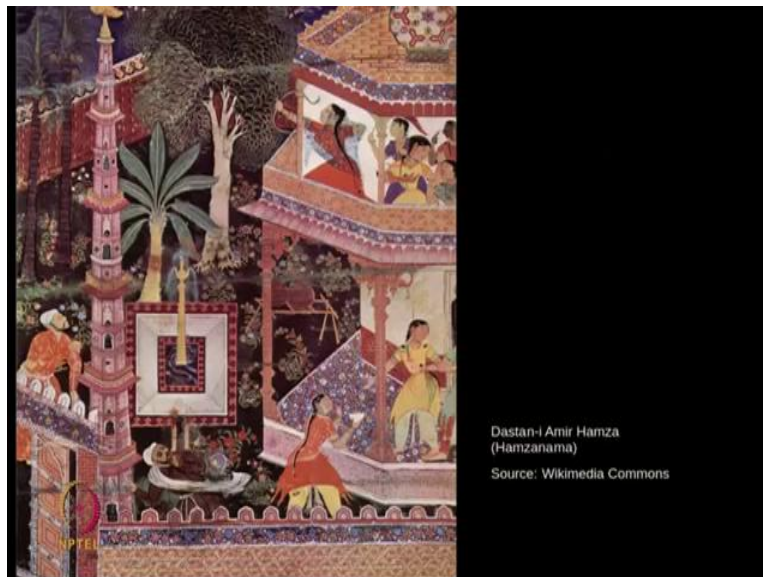
So therefore you would had to had to have large paintings for a lot of people to, the entire Court to be able to watch and see and enjoy. And so, it these now above fourteen hundred illustrations that were painted and these are some of the examples. If I could let you through some of the images once again, you know, each of the images sort of captures a certain important episodes episode of the (part) of the particular tale of the Dastan-I-Amir Hamza.

And so these folios would be painted were painted and, they were, they were, behind each of the each of the paintings the (sto) parts of the story there will be texts which will be inscribed, so we

can imagine when the when the folio is put up, there is the storyteller who stands next to next to the folio and tells the story and can refer to the story to the written text from time to time and be able to sort of tell the story in a much more I mean rely less lesser and lesser on the on memory, alright.

Now once again just like our Japanese form the Kamishibai, these folios could be rearranged okay. Usually there would be one folio to every story sometimes there could be more than one folio to every story. But the stories could be told in any particular order and therefore because they exist as distinct shape unlike that of a codex, right, or a scroll. So In a codex, each of the pages are then bound together in the spine all together and you cannot rearrange the pages as you want. However a set of slides a set of folios could be rearranged as one wishes, alright.

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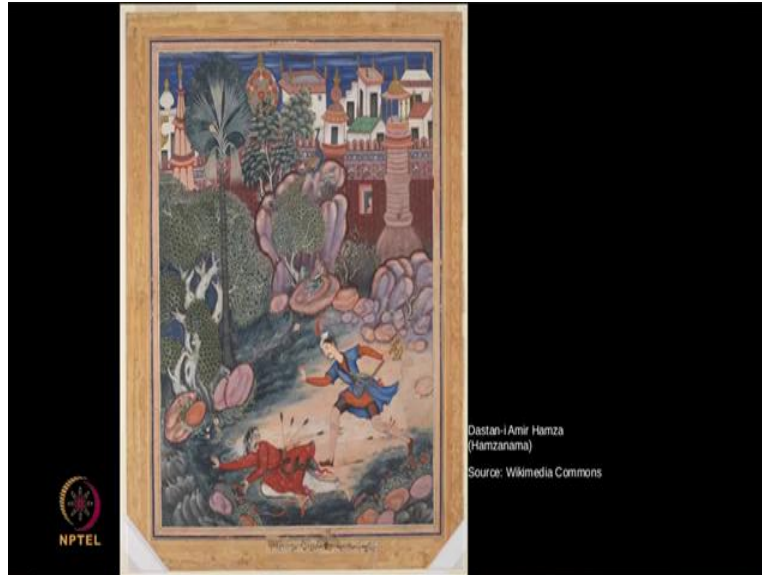
Now so this kind of audio visual kind of storytelling was very very was very very appreciated and enjoyed by the court and even outside the court. Now, as we move on you know the centuries, we have these stories getting into folklore people within the, general masses and these stories would get into the day to day, everyday languages that that people would be using.

So as we know the language of of the people within the northern part of the subcontinent was Hindustani or Urdu and that would be the kind of narrative. And the moment that happened, the

moment that happened you would have that, you know, that that you can expect many of the local stories then start entering into the, into the these narratives, alright.

The first evidence of Urdu text of Dastangoi being printed was in the early early nineteenth century under the aegis of the Fort William college, which is a which is a British. Remember, when the British came here, they had administrators who came in from England and they needed to in order to administer; they need to learn the local language. So while learning the local language, the one of the methods of learning languages is through learning the literature of of of that particular community of that language. And when when they figured out that this is one of the stories which are available which are popular at that point of time, so one of the earliest Urdu printed versions of the of Dastangoi or the Dastan-I-Amir Hamza was printed by the British in the in the in the form of in the press in of the Fort William college. .

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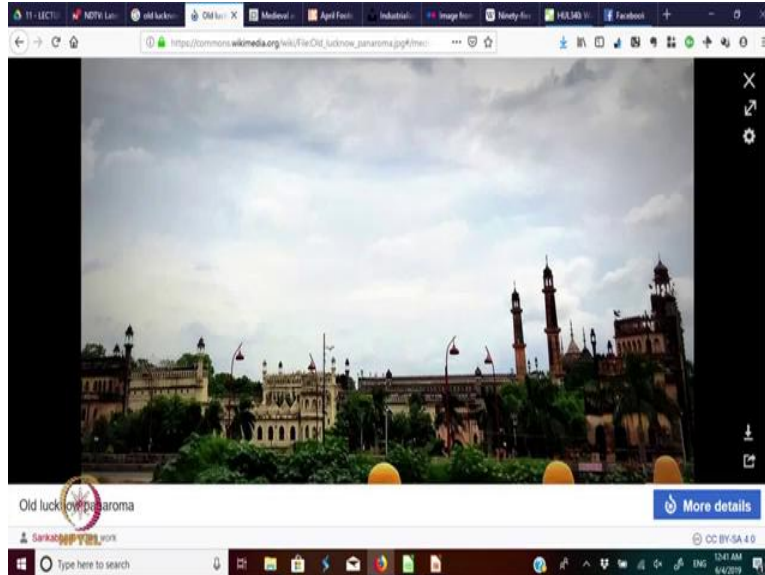


Now this form continued to retain its oral format till about the middle of the nineteenth century you know the printed volumes of the Fort William college were primarily those for learning. And they were did not-- the illiteracy was very limited within the population. So there these did not have too much of a circulation, within the general population.

But something very important happened at around the middle of the middle of the nineteenth century, which is the the what we can call variously call the First War Of Independence or the mutiny the sepoy mutiny, when all that happened various Dastangoes who at that time, you understand Delhi was the center of the Mughal Empire, and most storytellers would travel to Delhi, as they do, as people do today, because it is a land of opportunities.

But when Delhi was under threat, there was a lot of unrest in Delhi, people moved to Lucknow. Remember, during the one of the important centers, during the during the mutiny was Awadh and lot of lot of these Dastangos along with many other intellectuals of the times moved to, and artists of the times moved to Lucknow. So the stories they moved to Lucknow.

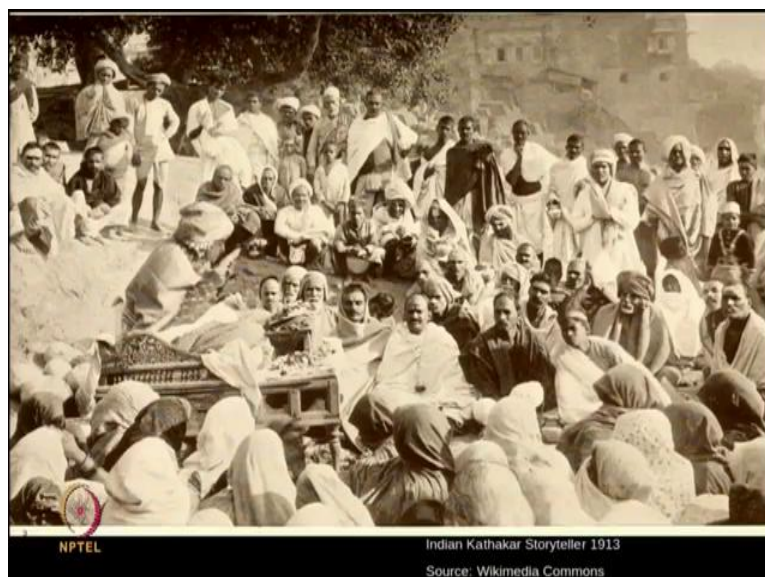
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Now once they had moved to Lucknow you know these, by then print had entered and Lucknow becomes a very important space for print in within the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. And the Nawal Kishore press starts trying to print some of these stories these these volumes.

Now, what happens then is there is an addition to these these stories, when once they move to Lucknow, there is a there is a movement of of also narratives again mixing themselves when and new stories being told. And then you have the you have the you have the tradition of the Tilismi.

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The idea of the Tilismi. Now moving into the Dastangoi narratives, alright, the Tilismi or the magical universe okay those of you who are aware of you know the Tilismik world you would know that the Chandrakanta stories are a very important set of stories within the world of the Tilismi. Now these stories, the similar kind of narratives would get involved with the traditional Amir Hamza stories Dastan-I-Amir Hamza stories.

And they became much more over the centuries they became much more subcontinental stories, very different from the tradition of the Persian. Now the Persian the stories of the Arabic Persian origins which had not travelled to India, there was another route and there one can study and see and that was a venue that was a that was a venue where the stories became more music, they would be sung. It and and words combined with music that is a very different tradition. Whereas within the subcontinent, the storytelling tradition within the Dastangoi, continued to remain one which was purely a vocal exercise- people would say stories.

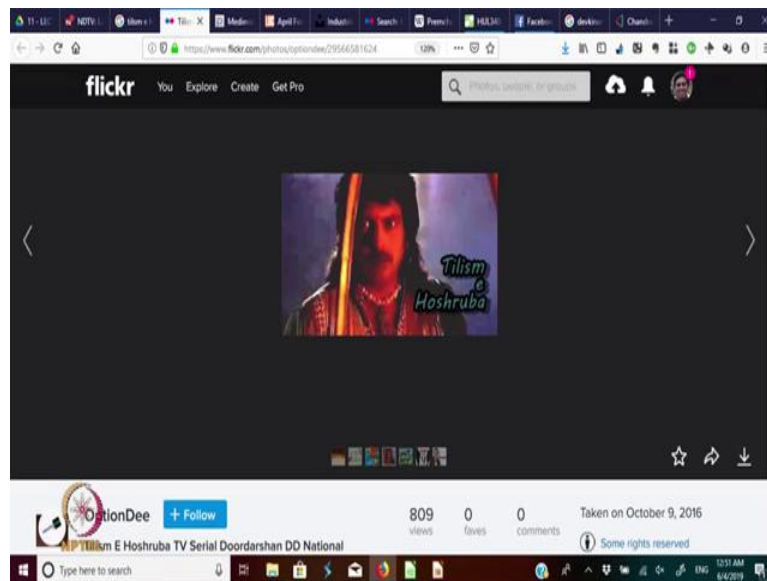
There were no musical instruments or use of any music involved along with it, alright. So the primarily be storytelling. Now what you see on the image here is an image from nineteen thirteen of someone a kathakar or a storyteller who is telling a story, one history tells us that there was a tradition of a storytelling session at the on the steps of Jama Masjid in Delhi, every every Thursday which would be there.

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But slowly these stories, the Nawal Kishore press started, you know finding out when moment when print comes in and this is something we are going to see when we study print later on within Europe. When the first printers come in, they suddenly figure out that they need a lot of stories to be, to to to tell, and so the Nawal Kishore press starts printing them. And in order to print them, they collect these stories, so the many of these stories were collected from various Dastangos and it ran into many many volumes. These stories actually ran into many many volumes, each (vol) and they were about they were about forty six volumes of thousand pages each that that were collected.

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Of course, while collecting these stories, they would undergo some changes the the people who are actually inscribing these stories, writing these stories, would incorporate or even delete or leave (ou) leave out, there will be lot of mutations involved in these stories when they are written down.

But once they written down they have a fixed form. Today it is the this this stories of Amir Hamza which come from from the Tilismi Hoshruha; which is the most interesting most important chapter of this set of volumes which are published by the Nawal Kishore press.

Tilismi Hoshruha is a Tilismi the magical universe, Hoshruha is that which will rob your or take away your your equanimity hosh consciousness. One can take over your consciousness the magic will take over your consciousness. Tilismi Hoshruha- that is the story which was told, but slowly over time what happened, prints takes over and then this was by and large by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century, this the last Dastangos really can be have been recorded.

They the coming of theatre the Parsi theatre then very soon after the coming of films, and the coming of the talkies slowly this tradition of oral storytelling dies out, alright. So we and it till it

has about revived over about a decade ago or since about two thousand five, two thousand six, some artists have revived these stories. More about Dastangoi in our next session. Thank you.