

Dastan-e-Dastangoi: The Tale of a Revival

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Introduction

The grand theatre suddenly mellows down into a dimly lit atmosphere. The hustle-bustle and whispers of the audience, young and old, alike gets shushed when a voice announces that the performance is going to begin soon. As the people settle with baited breaths, the stage brightens with a yellow incandescent lighting. Two white silhouettes appear, which the audience is quick to realize are the two Dastangos for the evening. With a serene white attire, the Dastangos sit in a folded knees position on a mattress which speaks volumes about the magnificent journey ahead. The minimalist setting of the stage is complemented with some dainty bowls of water kept at the sides for the performers to drink from. With a strong voice, strong enough to bring an enigmatic zeal to the erstwhile calm environment, the Dastans of fantasy, trickery, war and more enthrall the audience and take them into the land of the unknown, of fiction and reality. As the show begins, a silence grips the entire space and the two performers, who fill a stage so dark that it is lit just enough so that one can identify their faces, start narrating. They begin with the *saqinama* which is supposed to be a kind of poem praising the fellow who serves alcohol. Such a poetry serves as a kind of introduction to what is promised to be a mesmerizing journey into a land of enchantment, mysticism and beauty, led by the two performers through the magic woven by them with the sheer magnificence of their voices.

Dastangoi literally translates to ‘the art of storytelling’. It refers to an Urdu tradition which can be traced back to the late 15th century India when Emperor Akbar who suffered from dyslexia commissioned a monumental illustration of *Hamza-Nama* (The story of Hamza), which was narrated to him in a unique way. Large paintings were held up for him while the story which

was depicted in those paintings was narrated to him by a professional who was standing on the other side of the painting (Farooqi 2000: 126). The scriptoriums built for the execution of this project also influenced the course of Indian miniature painting. The art travelled across the country from here for centuries before it almost faded from the social conscience in late 19th and early 20th century when the last professional *Dastango* (the storyteller) Mir Baqar Ali died in 1928. However, in the last decade or so, the art of Dastangoi has resurfaced back in the cultural spheres of Delhi when a group of artists started organizing it as a performative art encapsulated in oral traditions, only this time, it was portrayed with elements of theatre and drama, with a touch of urban nostalgia which was just enough to capture the imaginations of people and make them reminisce their cultural heritage. Since then, Dastangoi has attracted the interests of wide sections of urban middle class who have responded to it and have thus caused it to transform into an almost new form of performative art which has roots in its old Mughal heritage but is highly contemporized in its modern rendition.

This study explores an interaction of this revived art-form with the modern society and illustrates how a traditional art which was dominated by elements of a particular religion in both its form and content transforms itself to become more acceptable to the urban audience. It further argues that the term ‘revival’ then, is loosely played with while describing its present position, as much of what is seen today in the name of Dastangoi, both as tradition and as an art, is hugely inventive and thus, even contested. By treating Dastangoi as a social subject, we argue that the art never travels in a vacuum and is hugely influenced by the social currents surrounding it, both temporary and permanent. Without predicting what its future will be, this study aims to explore the possible avenues in which Dastangoi as an art-form or as a social movement might travel on its road ahead based on its current trajectory.

Literature review

Before entering the field, we tried accessing the existing literature that has been produced on Dastangoi or its contemporary revival but we were quite surprised to find out that there were almost no studies on its revival. While a substantial literature is available on Dastangoi as a literary subject, most of it is only available in Urdu, making it out of bounds for a large section of people, involving us. Literature on Dastangoi has largely looked at it as an oral-performative subject and has made an attempt to understand the poetic aspects of various traditional Dastans

(Farooqi, 2000; Pritchett, 1991). In modern times, a book on Dastangoi and its revived form was brought out which made an attempt to re-introduce its nuances within the folds of non-academic literature (Farooqi & Kasim, 2012). However, these works have failed to address the mobility with which this art-form has evolved in modern times and as a result, their association with it has been void of its contextual understandings which can only be revealed by studying it sociologically.

This study, rather than delving deep into the literary features of a Dastan or theatrical aspects of a Dastangoi performance, treats Dastangoi as a social object which is in constant interaction with the social currents it has revived in and is still growing into. The study with the help of a field work further explores that the tradition of Dastangoi extends beyond the world its Dastans create and is quite fluid in its particularities. The contemporary revival can be interpreted to understand an art-form which is trying hard to escape its traditional interpretations and is becoming increasingly mobile in both its form and content.

Approaching the field

The study was carried out as a part of a fellowship and the findings presented in this project are largely constituted by what we gathered during the field work. The field work was done across a period of two and a half months, from late May to early August of 2016 and was carried out in Delhi and Lucknow. It consisted of attending Dastangoi performances, interviewing people related to Dastangoi and attending a few informal gatherings of the performers (*baithaks*). In the field, data was collected primarily through participant observation and a few semi-structured but focussed interviews with people. As a part of our study, we conducted total 13 interviews with various individuals who are related to Dastangoi in one way or the other. These interviews were mostly intensive and semi-structured in their orientation. Interactions with the audience were also attempted through a structured questionnaire which was circulated before and after the shows that we attended. The analysis contained in this project is a result of the data collected not just through the questionnaires that were distributed but also the informal interactions that were attempted with the audience before and after the show. As for the questionnaires, findings from a total of 120 questionnaires (structured) have been made a part of this report. The primary objective of the questionnaire was to gain an insight into what the people think about the various aspects of this art-form.

As an art-form, Dastangoi came up way back in 2005 when its first performance was showcased at the popular India Habitat Centre. Since then, IHC has remained its epicentre and has been responsible for drawing out maximum audience, many of whom have come to be associated with it even as patrons. In the past few years, however, Dastangoi has widened its reach and is now being performed in places like bookstores, small gatherings of enthusiasts and even as a part of workshops for children. For the purpose of this study, we chose two cities, namely, Delhi and Lucknow. Delhi, being the hub of Dastangoi, both in terms of performances and performers, was an obvious choice, whereas, Lucknow was chosen owing to its old ties with this art-form. It is said that a publisher from Lucknow, Munshi Naval Kishore was instrumental in collecting and publishing the entire Dastan of Amiz Hamza in the 1860s, which were responsible for bringing the art form back into light amongst the people of Lucknow and more. Furthermore, Lucknow has for a long time harboured a light house for many art forms of the Urdu tradition, be it Shayari, Qawwali or Dastangoi for that matter. Such a cultural heritage has made Lucknow a prominent site for witnessing the revival of Dastangoi and this is what prompted our interest into making it a site of our field work as well.

As a part of our field work, we attended total 6 shows, out of which 1 was in Lucknow while the other 5 were in Delhi. Out of 6, two performances that we attended weren't exclusively organized as a Dastangoi event-one involved a Dastangoi performance as a part of children's summer camp and the other was a journal launch-while the other four were exclusively organized Dastangoi performances. In Delhi, these shows were organized at Ghalib Institute, Lotus Temple, and IHC while in Lucknow, the show was organized at UP Sangeet Natak Akademi. Here it is stated that, observations from one show which was attended by us in the month of April this year at the Ghalib Institute, were also made a part of the findings. Attending shows at such diverse places and in such eclectic settings provided us an opportunity to engage with the art form on a holistic level by allowing us an access to a varied audience in terms of class, religion and even age.

What's in a 'Dastan' anyway?: A content analysis of Dastangoi

Traditionally, the content of Dastangoi is made up of magical stories which are borrowed from the tale of Amir Hamza, better known as Dastan-e-Amir Hamza (DAH). Another source from where the content of Dastangoi is borrowed is a well-known chapter of DAH, Tilism-e-Hoshruba (THR). These two texts largely define the content of traditional Dastans which are then taken up and reinterpreted by the performers. The content of these Dastans also follow a set pattern and can be identified with some definitive features which provide them with a sense of distinctiveness when compared to any other story. These features are *tilism* (enchantment), *aiyyari* (trickery) and *razm* (warfare) (Farooqi 2000: 132). These three features together make up for a kind of template which every narrative is supposed to revolve around. These elements infuse a story with a sense of mysticism, suspense, magic, fantasies, something which is supposed to be fathomed by the listener and something which can then be converted to realities only through the power of narration. With every encounter between the narrator and his audience, these stories developed and expanded; and a single volume narrative of possibly Persian origin filled up forty-six massive volumes when one of its versions was printed (Farooqi 2000: 126). It is, however, interesting to note that while the above mentioned features remained central to all the traditional Dastans, no matter how imaginative the narrator got, he was always bound by these elements which somehow also helped the audience to connect different versions of the stories together. However, as the old traditions of extremely long and powerful narratives died out, these features started becoming relics and their role in weaving the Dastans receded with time.

In the past few years, a marked shift can be observed if one looks at the new Dastans that are being performed as Dastangoi. The content of Dastangoi has escaped the traditional folds of DAH and THR as the new Dastans have been created which have less to do with traditional Islamic stories of conquest and fantasies. One of the first modern Dastans which was adapted from contemporary times was that of partition: *Dastan-e-Taqseem-eHind* which was a tale on Indo-Pak partition. After its first show in 2012, many such adaptations have come up since which have made an attempt to escape the traditional Urdu, Indo-Islamic flavour this art form was originally identified with. What led to this shift in the content of Dastans? How has this change helped Dastangoi to unravel itself in its new avatar: a modern 21st century avatar? In our work, we found that there are two factors which have mainly led to this development. One of these are related to its attempts to establish itself as a popular art form to widen its reach

amongst the audience and the other has to do with a motivation-a drive to portray Dastangoi as a socially conscious art-form amongst the publics.

While a clear-cut linear understanding as to how this change has come about cannot be ascertained, people associated with Dastangoi view this change as inevitable, if not 'obvious'. Danish Husain, one of the first and most popular Dastangos of modern times is of the view that this is bound to happen with any art-form. He says,

“Art does not happen in a vacuum. It happens within real people by real people for real people. So, it is inevitable that it will take shape, reshape, distort, mould as it unfurls in the milieu it performs in.”

This sort of an assessment pointed to us an interesting aspect about the receptivity of Dastangoi as an art-form. This flexibility in terms of its content is quite telling as it is only by being flexible can Dastangoi percolate into the masses and get rid of its traditional image of being an Urdu form of imaginative story-telling. In our interaction with the audience, this point came up quite often. One of such individuals remarked,

“The stories of Tilism (magical lands) and Aiyari (trickery) might have been enough to enthrall Akbar-The Great, but they are certainly not that appealing to me! I'd rather be interested in listening to a story I can connect with more easily, maybe a story of my city or my times perhaps!”

One of the other things that we found in our interaction with the audience is that most of them did not identify themselves as proficient in Urdu and this became a major disability when it came to understanding the traditional Dastans of DAH and THR. About 70% of the respondents that we surveyed marked their knowledge of Urdu as “Average” or “Very Less”. Here, it is noteworthy that a lot of what these people speak in their common tongue has elements of Urdu present in it, but what mattered in this case was that while the literary renditions of folk tales of DAH was identified as “Urdu”, former was not. Thus, what is incomprehensible gets the “Urdu” tag and is then shunned out as alien. This distinction of “Urdu” and “Non-Urdu” becomes even more crucial when you perform a Dastan for non-conventional audience, say, children.

One of the performances we attended was especially organized for kids and was a retelling of Satyajit Ray's 1969 film 'Gupi Gayen Bagha Bayen' which is a story of two villagers who encounter ghosts and spirits on their journey. Now such a plot fits perfectly in the traditional framework of a typical Dastan but when it was performed in front of ten or twelve year olds

who largely belonged to an elite school of South Delhi, its narrative marked a departure from traditional style of performing Dastangoi. The performance even involved instances where Fouzia and Valentina (the performers), stopped in the middle of performance to explain some of the verses to the audience. The same kind of style was noticed by us in another show that we attended at IHC. This time it was another Dastan for kids, “Dastan Little Prince Ki” which was again an adaptation of the 1943 novella of the same name. This Dastan unlike any other that we had seen before had verses from English and even French. Now these type of experiments with the content of Dastangoi signal towards an attempt by the performers to make the art form more popular and more acceptable amongst the nascent audience. When we asked these performers as to what makes them perform such Dastans especially for children, we got some interesting responses. Valentina Trivedi, who has been involved with Dastangoi for past three years is of the opinion that children make for a better audience than adults in many ways. They are always eager to listen to a good story and in this technological world of TV and internet, where we adults end up having an extremely poor retention span when it comes to listening, they are able to appreciate the art of storytelling in a much better way than us. She is also of the opinion that Dastangoi bears huge potential when it comes to being a pedagogical tool for making children learn about history or even our present society. Hence, we see how Dastangoi is curating an audience for itself by remoulding its content specifically and thus carving out a niche but ‘loyal’ audience for itself.

Another direction in which the content of Dastangoi has made a shift towards is that of socio-political issues like sedition, issues of caste and communal divides and even gender. Now a days, most of the Dastans that are coming up invariably deal with a social issue. A Dastangoi performance on one of the stories of sedition in JNU when the institution was making headlines all over the country was very well received by the protesting students. It marked a significant boost for Dastangoi amongst the youth as it helped the art form to make a statement amongst these students about the power of Dastangoi to bring in powerful social narratives or challenge them. During our field work, we met several Dastangos who told us that now, traditional Dastans are almost out of the picture or even if they are, they are performed only in front of a niche audience which is culturally and linguistically comfortable with them. These Dastans now serve as a template within which new ones are woven. The focus now of most of these performers is to take on the social narrative of contemporary issues through their stories as it helps them in connecting with the audience faster and also deeper. Nadeem Shah, who has been a Dastango for almost half a decade now, is currently working on a Dastan which he claims

attacks myriad of social evils of our society, caste, class, gender, poverty, corruption, everything. Fouzia, who has the credit of being the first female Dastango to her name is working on a Dastan on the life of Gandhi which she aims to launch this year on or around 2nd October. In the past, she has performed Dastans on gender issues like *Nanhi ki Naani* which was adapted from Ismat Chughtai's short story. When asked, she exclaims,

"I'm a woman and yes I've seen a lot which I want to tell the world. This is how I do it. This is my outlet where I can let the world know of what I've seen and felt as a woman."

To performers like Fouzia, Dastangoi provides a platform like none else. It accords them a stage all to themselves where they can sense emancipation in its extreme form and thus, speak out their minds in entirety and with a conviction that is heard and appreciated by the masses. Another female performer we interviewed said,

"In a play, you are a part of the group, you are bound by your role, script etc. but here, you are free, alone and can say whatever you want to say, in whichever way you want to say it. Dastangoi liberates you like no other art form does!!"

But, in spite of its 'liberating' features, Dastangoi has been taken up by a very few women and even amongst those very few, only a handful have gone on to pursue it full-time. When asked why Fouzia wonders, 'maybe it's because of the existing household structures of our society'.

"Humare samaaj me ladkiyon ko tehzeeb me rehna sikhaya jata hai. Unhe zor se bolne se bhi manaa kiya jata hai. Aise me agar koi apni behen-beti ko Dastangoi karte dekhe, stage pe chillate hue dekhe to aap socho kya hoga!!"

(Our society teaches girls to be cultured. They are not even allowed to speak in raised voices. In such a society, imagine a person seeing a girl from his family, up there on stage, performing, and shouting!!")

Over a course of one such conversation with a female Dastangos, we even overheard that one of the leading male performers had disapproved the validity of a Dastangoi performance which involved two female performers as for him, it was essentially an art form for men. Women could at best be an associate to one of the male performers, that's it! It was quite appalling to hear such stories as they marked a sad reality about Dastangoi where it was evident of how in its nascent stage only, it has been gripped by patriarchal leanings of the few who claim it be a powerful agent of social change.

One of the most popular Dastans of modern times, *Mantoiyat* was based on the life and times of the popular author Saadat Hasan Manto. While Manto is no stranger to the Indian theatre, this and many other adaptations like we mentioned above, signalled which we think is a significant attempt of Dastangoi and that is, an attempt to project itself as a socially conscious art form. Such an attempt becomes even more significant in today's times where any art-form invariably has to make a choice between leaning towards being more entertaining or socially responsible. Theatre today has taken up the responsibility in a social space where it addresses myriad of social issues and Dastangoi, which is perhaps a part of this wider family of theatre has also fallen in this pursuit. This point however-whether Dastangoi is a part of theatre or not-does not go uncontested. During our interviews with one of the performers, we accidentally happened to refer Dastangoi as a part of theatre and this evoked a strong negative reaction from him. He said,

"I'm sorry but the view that Dastangoi is theatre is a myth. It's much more nuanced than that."

As far as we are concerned, this denial marked a lot of things. First, Dastangoi today, intends to carve out a separate definition (if not genre) for itself and second, its inability to do so has led to differing opinions on what it is. Danish Husain, for example who himself is a seasoned theatre artist agrees that Dastangoi is a part of theatre:

"Yes, it is theatre. Not because we wished it that way but because in our modern times performative arts are literally restricted to performances in theatrical arenas. If we were to understand, as theatre is understood in modern times, it will be loosely considered as one."

One of the crucial parameters to identify and place any performative art in theatre is by locating it in the form/content duality. With Dastangoi, it becomes extremely difficult to do so, as most of what we see in modern times is inventive, especially with respect to its form. Most of the performers we interviewed, agreed to the fact that little or no trace remains of how it was performed originally. "In such a scenario, to say that you are 'reviving' it becomes highly problematic (even contested at times)", one of them remarks. What can however be done here is an analysis of how Dastangoi is performed in modern times and whether its performativity bears signatures of what we would call a theatrical drama or a play.

Story, Narration and Performativity

“As a performing art, it extends the boundaries of poetic recitation and takes it to the level of performance, as a form of narration it extends to dramatized rendition, and as a form of storytelling it extends to drama through the device of using two actors.”

Mahmood Farooqui

“Yeh jo likhe hue lafz hain yeh to bole hue lafzon ki laashein hai.”

(These words that are written are nothing but the corpses of the spoken words.)

Ismail Kadare

It is learnt that Dastangoi as practiced in late 19th and early 20th century was far from being a theatrical performance. It was usually performed in open bazaars in the middle of a bustling crowd and was performed by a single individual. In modern times, however, it has undergone several changes where it is now a duet show and has come to be dominated by significant elements of theatre. Dastangoi as an act of performance has been shaped in the contemporary context, keeping in mind people's reception abilities in a culture where the visual has come to dominate.

The text and the performance, within the tradition of Dastangoi, cannot be looked at in isolated compartments. Instead, they interact with each other on a highly interspersed basis (Diana, 2002). Unlike dance, where the aesthetics of the performance leave almost no room for textual appreciation or stand-up comedy where the text usually dominates and to a level, even dictates the performance, Dastangoi exhibits a marriage of text and performance, woven into a symbolic conjunction which is brought about by language. This language is intrinsic to the performance and is largely derived from the text which transforms it into a site of presentation. One could, therefore, argue that this art form could perhaps be understood in J.L. Austin's usage of the term 'performative' as language that acts. Performativity can thus be located in two brackets, the story and its narration. While the nuances of the story involve the audience at textual levels, the narration keeps the audience engrossed as well. The movement of the plot is accentuated with the gestures, voice modulation and more through the narration, making the story and

narration work in tandem with each other. This whole that is created by a complementing relationship between story and narration makes Dastangoi a performative art distinct from others.

In Dastangoi, the narration addresses various flavors contained in the story. The performer may or may not choose to get into a character to express a particular flavor. Here, it should however be noted that the 'performance' is ever evolving because the performer is self-conscious and reflexive, and is both a performer and an audience. Talking about this, one of the performers remarks

“Every time a Dastan is being performed, it is getting re-constructed, not in its words, but in its narration, its performative aspects, gestures, eyes movements, everything.. it’s practically a new Dastan every time.”

It was also observed by us that sometimes, the performer wove responses to the audience’s enthusiasm or remarks into the narration, like in a stand-up act. This rose the level of performance to new heights, causing much delight to the viewers. This improvisation, however, was signature of only a few seasoned performers. Such interactions have become a feature of many performative arts of today which aim to connect with audience at many levels apart from just performance. Asking whether these changes were consciously introduced, one of them replies,

“No they weren’t deliberate but you also have to see who the audience was 150 years back and who the audience is now, are they same? Of course no! So, it is obvious that the performance will be affected by who is consuming it.”

One of the sites where this figuring out of what can work and what can’t takes place is rehearsals. Interestingly, these performers denote these rehearsals as “Riyaz” which is often used in the parlance of musical rehearsals. “Riyaz” then entails not just memorising or practising the Dastan but also rehearsing to improvise on what is memorised and figuring out how to make the narration of a Dastan more captivating. Performers usually rehearse not alone but in groups where they take turns to perform while the rest of them take on the role of audience and give a feedback afterwards.

Expectedly, the roles of teacher-students have not yet evolved as all these performers are still learning to master this art and only one or two can claim to have an authority over it. These rehearsals or what they call as “*baithak*” are pretty informal but not devoid of agendas. They usually last for about 2-3 hours where they rehearse new Dastans as well as revise their old ones. Very often, friends who are not Dastangos but are somehow related, usually by interest, also join them making it an enjoyable evening for all and not just a mundane rehearsal session. The ‘*baithak*’ is usually at someone’s house and at a time when all are free from their routine jobs. What struck us the most about these *baithaks* is that they aren’t just routine rehearsals, like it may happen in a rehearsal for a play or a dance form. Here, since there are no props that are to be used in the performance, the idea is to use this time to hone the individual craft of narration and get comfortable with your partner as it is the chemistry between the performers which serves as the ultimate prop during the show. It makes everything else look better. A sense of camaraderie between the Dastangos is a must and it’s during such *baithaks* that they try to develop this bonding which reflects in their performance later.

Rehearsals then become important sites to observe not just how a Dastan gets rehearsed but also how a Dastango practices improvisations, which makes for a sort of rehearsed spontaneity on-stage. Most of the performances we attended lasted for about 30 to 45 minutes, barring one, which was for about 20 minutes.

“You have to end a performance when it is at peak! The audience should almost get a shock that it’s over, if you stretch it for about an hour or two, that’s not going to happen, they’ll start to get bored.”

This sort of an arrangement is in stark contrast to how it was performed in the past. We learnt from one of the professors we talked to, that, in earlier times, Dastangos used to narrate stories for hours. They didn’t need to memorise or rehearse them. But then, those were different times, says another performer.

“Dastangos, or the storytellers, unlike modern actors were creating concurrently as they were performing. That requires an unimaginably vast repertoire from a modern actor’s perspective. They had command over languages, dialects, idioms, metaphors, poetry, mimicry, voice modulation, and other skills which may very well be needed for an ideal performer as per Natya Shastra. We, the modern actor, are nowhere close to that repertoire.”

Another big transformation that signatures this art-form in its revived form is the arrival of second performer. Said to be a result of combination of both functionality and aesthetics, Dastangoi was converted from being a solo performance to a duet one. It's functional because the performers feel that it is virtually impossible for a single individual to go on for that length of time without suffering a break in her voice. However, now that a few of them have got seasoned after doing it for years, some are experimenting with performing individually. In fact, two of the performances that we attended were solo performances, both by top Dastangos of our times. This sort of a break from its traditional form is crucial when one analyses its transformation from being a popular artform to becoming a theatrical, performative one. Interestingly, to some, this break is so stark that for them, it's not even 'Dastangoi' anymore. Talking to one of the retired professors of Urdu in Lucknow, who has been an avid follower of this art since his childhood and is regarded by many as its important critic, we found that he was in denial of many of these transformations. Disapproving the presence of a particular stage setting he shrugs and says,

“Why invent it when it is already present?”

“Aap aayie Lucknow me main apko dikhata hoon. Dastangoi ki ravaayat aaj bhi zinda hai yahan aur waise hi zinda hai. Yeh sab kuch nahi bas gorakhdhanda hai!!”

(You come to Lucknow and I'll show you. The tradition of Dastangoi is still alive here, in its original form. All that you see in Delhi is nothing but gorakhdhanda (scam))

Viewing such contestations was very interesting as they point out to an important aspect of this revival and that is, the ambiguity it has created for some. While those some, who claim to have grown up with this tradition see and disapprove or contest such reinterpretations of Dastangoi, they can do very less to challenge it. This is mainly because the revival of Dastangoi like many others was carried out mainly in Delhi and in Delhi too, it was carried out by the affluent, for the affluent and amongst the affluent only. With IHC being its favourite venue, Dastangoi has enjoyed a substantial appreciation from the elite sections of the society and for some, this has disqualified it to be called so, as for them, Dastangoi is an art-form for the masses. While talking to the performers, when we asked them whether they thought that it was an art for the elite, barring few, most of them seemed to get uncomfortable with the question and responded in a manner which was almost 'practised'.

“No it’s not, you see we have performed in classrooms, streets and places. It’s not elitist at all!”

But when such answers are compared to where Dastangoi has been actually performed frequently, glaring differences could be pointed out. Some were honest in their responses,

“The trappings of modern theatrical performance anyway make it elitist. Performance tickets, performance spaces, enclosed spaces, gentry, language are all entry barriers for making anything plebeian. I wish we could be ubiquitous.”

This interpretation can be further substantiated by looking at the set of a Dastangoi performance. Minimalist as it may be, the stage exuberates class and attempts to create a sense of cultural nostalgia only the urban middle class can identify with. Such a stage setting surely provides a sense of exclusivity to Dastangoi from other forms but it also contributes to creating a sense of alienation for many who are not familiar with that ‘taste of class’ and one can clearly see Bourdieu’s concept of distinction at work here, where to appreciate a particular style, you need to be a member of a certain class. Minimalism here, actually maximizes what Dastangoi expects from you as an audience. Such minimalism in terms of stage setting some argued, was functional and had a message for the audience. The message was a subtle reminder that what they had come to experience was not a visual one. Dastangoi is supposed to grab your attention by entertaining you orally; so, the simple white costumes, an almost empty stage and a dark stage with just enough light to see the performers, all this is supposed to help you focus on the narration and not get too distracted by its aesthetics.

Reading between the lines: A word about the audience of Dastangoi

To understand the audience of this art-form, we used questionnaires and personal interaction with a select few of them. As our field area was the performances held in Delhi and Lucknow, a variation in the audience and their views was expected and hence, we analyzed the Lucknow and Delhi audience separately.

Dastangoi as a performance is still a nascent phenomenon and even in a place like Delhi which now has hosted several shows, the audience is quite unaware of what to expect when they go to see a Dastangoi performance. For most of them, it is a journey they embark upon, based on what they’ve heard about it from their acquaintances. The performer then becomes much more

than a performer, he becomes the window through which the viewer understands and interprets the entire tradition of Dastangoi and even learns to appreciate it. This was evident in the ways in which first timers were asked not to clap but say “*waah-waah*” to exhibit their appreciation in the middle of the performance. These type of gestures are signatures of other art forms of Urdu tradition like Mushaira and Qawwali. By doing this, Dastangoi successfully creates an ambience, which helps it in locating itself amongst the other arts-forms of oral tradition from where it can go on to carve out a space for itself.

“Unlike Mushaira or Qawwali, Dastangoi has still not established itself as an institution and this inadvertently puts the onus on the performer to entertain the audience while at the same time, teaching them about Dastangoi as well.”

Telling the viewers about the details of what constitutes a Dastan, how to follow the narration, where and how can they as viewer be a part of it, all this becomes an exercise which the performer consciously or at times, even unconsciously undertakes. In this way, what makes Dastangoi an art is not just the performer or the Dastans or the presentation of it, but also the audience. The live interaction with the audience, the momentous *wah-wahs*, the live giggles on the jokes in between is what makes Dastangoi not just another performance but one that remains etched in the memory of both the Dastango as well as his audience.

Most of the audience we interacted with in Delhi told us that they had little or no knowledge of Urdu and could not understand a substantial part of the performance but they still enjoyed it. This, in our eyes, is quite telling as this is the section of the society which truly represents the elite class which does things not because they are fun or entertaining but because they represent a membership to a certain lifestyle which denotes a certain ‘class’ to its participant. Things like abstract painting, Italian operas where a significant number of audience has little or no clue of what is going on are some of the ways in which this can be understood. This is a section of society which doesn’t comprehend the content in its entirety, but enjoys the ambience, the mood and all that comes on the side of going to a show. This ignorance on the part of viewers is actually an asset for the performer who can utilize it to make his art look more exotic amongst the audience. Urdu, in recent years, has been marginalized in most of the sections of our society but it has gained substantial currency amongst certain sections of the elite which identifies itself as a class that doesn’t write or speak Urdu but certainly appreciates it. Urdu has become an important marker of cultural capital for the elite and Dastangoi due to its original dominant

tradition of Urdu serves as a perfect avenue to both gain and showcase this cultural capital. The social spaces are usually frequented by a privileged class which claims membership to this language not in terms of them speaking or conversing in it but as something which they have acquired a “taste” of. Watching Dastangoi at IHC then, is more a matter of status symbol rather than an action of interest or curiosity. This aspiration on the part of viewers has been very aptly sensed by both performers and organizers who have now started marketing it in appropriate places like book launches, film-festivals or similar events which are small gatherings of few privileged individuals.

The performance at Lucknow that we attended was organized at U.P Sangeet Natak Akademi organized by a non-profit social sector group. It was again a large hall and the show was ticketed, thus implying a similar audience in terms of their “class” status as in Delhi but there was a stark difference with respect to the attitude of the audience in Lucknow, as here it was more receptive and forthcoming as compared to Delhi. Many were already an audience of Dastangoi who had come with friends or family to introduce them to the art form. On interaction, there were a few who complained about the tickets being highly priced because of which they weren’t able to bring their children or more members of family. This sort of engagement was striking to observe since what we saw and observed in Delhi was entirely different. We even came across a few individuals who had come forward to see the show to just make a “contribution” to the art-form by buying a ticket for the show. What we found, however, is that the Lucknow audience was used to free shows in the genre of performative art and to build an audience in Lucknow especially, at least in the initial phase, the tickets would have to be priced differently than a show being conducted in a metropolitan city like Delhi. As compared to Lucknow, the audience at Delhi seemed to be more agreeable to spend on viewing a Dastangoi performance again but then motivations for these might have been totally different.

From our experience in the field, what can be made out is that a “loyal audience” for Dastangoi is yet to be carved out as most of the people who see it have varied motivations which range from interest to sheer pleasure of giving company to friends or family. When we talked to performers about our observations, the reactions we got were mixed. Some of them completely rejected our observations while others showed no sign of surprise.

“Agar hall me 500 log baithe hain to main un 500 ke liye show nahi karta. Show to bas un 50 logon ke liye hota hai jo samne ke front rows me baithe hote hain. Bakiyon ka contribution to bas itna hota hai ki unhone ticket kharid li, unka time-pass ho gaya aur humari kamayi ho gayi!”

(If there are 500 people seated in the audience, then I don't perform for all 500 of them. The show is meant for just those 50 people who occupy the front row seats in the hall. The contribution of rest of them is just that they bought the tickets, had a leisure time and I minted some money!)

Dastangoi: A community fractured

Till last year, Dastangoi as an art form was flourishing like anything. Riding on the success train of the popular duo, Mahmood Farooqui and Danish Husain, the art-form achieved new heights within a mere span of a decade. With a presence that was felt even internationally, the duo along with a set of trained enthusiasts shaped a closely knit community which was collectively working to establish Dastangoi as an alternative genre of performative art. This work reflected on many levels as people from different walks of life joined the community and some even gave up their bread and butter to work as a full time Dastango, even though in a nascent stage that it is currently, this decision could be called anything but wise, economically.

However, the community in past one year has been fractured as some of the vital members of the group have left and have started working separately. Such a split proved to be disastrous for the entire art-form particularly at this point, as now Dastangoi as a community is void of a single collective force which had worked for years together. The popular duo of Farooqui-Husain which was almost single-handedly responsible for turning it into a sensation got off the stage and this led to a huge setback amongst the enthusiasts as well as patrons of the art-form. The effects of this split were even experienced by us as researchers. On quite a many occasions it was either very difficult or impossible to talk to some people of one group, if we were identified to be working with the other group. Such apprehensions within a small community might be short-lived but it has surely led individuals and groups to pursue Dastangoi in their own separate ways which very often leads to contested opinions on its tradition. Dastangoi then becomes an individual pursuit which is driven more by personal whims rather than being governed by established norms. This further prevents it to cement itself as an institution wide enough so that it can branch out in different directions while remaining intact to its institutional roots. In a society where the art is already fighting many battles to remain in popular folds, Dastangoi, with a fractured community of its own seems to be fighting another battle all

together. A battle to become an institution and establish itself into a tradition that is different from and bigger than individuals and groups it is run by.

Conclusion

This study, though illustrative in its approach, has limited its findings to the observations made in the field and this has definitely left some important areas untouched. Contours of this study revolve around an interaction that is consistently taking place between a social movement and the society it is moving in. How and what this movement translates to, is yet to be seen as Dastangoi constantly experiments with both its form and content. Where these experiments lead this art-form to, is being keenly observed by both its performers and researchers. As marked by one of our respondents,

“Whenever an art-form changes, it either evolves into something new or it dies out. Dastangoi in this light, has certainly refused to die out and has chosen to evolve into something new.”

Impact of certain interactions, however, are yet to be observed in this case, the state, for example. It would be extremely interesting to see how the state interacts with this art-form and in the given social environment, how (if at all) does it compel Dastangoi to mould itself. In the absence of an institution or even a face, to say the least, such an encounter can bring a sea of changes to how it is being practised and performed. As we mentioned above, Dastangoi is a fractured community and within these fractures are developing contestations which are shaping and reshaping its tradition amongst the performers making it more fragile. What also remains to be seen are the changes that the introduction of new Dastans will bring to this art. With Dastangoi escaping the folds of Urdu literature, its language is expected to come closer to the common tongue and with this dilution, how or whether the tradition of Dastangoi will survive is a question in itself. These are some of the questions that further researches on the subject might be interested in looking at.

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