

INDIAN FICTION – Early Modern Period

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Overview

Fiction writing in India took a variety of forms during this period. Historical fiction in Indo-Persian genres (*qissa/dastan* and *masnavi*) flourished at Muslims courts in Delhi and the Deccan. A greater emphasis on romance and adventure features in a number of significant prose poems. Historical ballads also appeared, largely from Hindu writers and mainly in Tamil. Near-continual warfare between Hindu, Muslim and European powers, and between themselves, seems to have imprinted itself on the literary imagination. Finally, a ground-breaking prose story was written in Tamil in the mid-18th century, though it did not appear in print until the following century. The stage was thus set for the emergence of Indian modern fiction.

Indo-Persian

Hamzanama The *Hamzanama* (or *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*, ‘Adventures of Amir Hamza’) is representative of the multiple literary and cultural influences that converge in this period. The picaresque text draws on the Indo-Persian genre of oral storytelling (*dastan/qissa*) to narrate the story of Amir Hamza, the legendary uncle of the prophet Muhammad. The hero is put through a series of escapades, including narrow escapes from deceitful friends and dangerous animals. Many versions of the work circulated orally and in manuscript, but a canonical text was produced when an illustrated Persian manuscript was commissioned by Akbar in about 1562 CE.

Padmavat Another multi-layered historical narrative in this period, with many versions and influences, is the *Padmavat*. Epic in scope, like the *Hamzanama* (and other narratives of the period), it is a fictionalised account of a 14th-century battle between a Hindu king and a Muslim attacker. Although written from a Hindu point of view, it shows the influence of Indo-Persian literary models. The story turns the bare bones of history into a morality tale that expresses the joy of transcendental love and the union of a human soul with god. We have a 1540 CE manuscript written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi in Awadhi (a north Indian language closely related to Hindi), but the story is much older and generated many later textual versions.

Urdu Urdu, which received little encouragement at the Mughal court in Delhi, developed under the patronage of Muslim rulers in the Deccan, especially at the courts of Golconda and Bijapur. Sufficiently distant from Delhi, writers in these smaller kingdoms still drew on Persian literary forms but injected more Indian substance to forge a new literary identity of Deccani Urdu. The long historical narrative, in the *masnavi* genre, was their preferred vehicle of literary expression.

Kamal Khan Rustami Among the many talented writers of Deccani Urdu was Kamal Khan Rustami (17th c. CE). Supported by Muhammad Adil Shag of Bijapur, in 1649 he wrote *Khawar Nama*, which borrowed its title from a 14th-century Persian text. This long (23,000-line) *masnavi* is a historical narrative story based on the military exploits of Ali, son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad.

Nusrati Nusrati, Rustami’s contemporary, also wrote epic *masnavis* as court poet of the Bijapur ruler Adil Shah II. He was a prolific writer, but his most-celebrated work is *Ali Shah* (1665), a narrative poem chronicling the military campaigns of his patron. With vivid imagery and religious fervour, Nusrati describes how his Muslim patron defeated the Mughals and later the Mahrattas.

Romance

Telugu The *Pratapacharitramu* by Ekambaranathudu (late 16th c. CE) is an important milestone in the development of narrative fiction in Telugu. Although earlier works in the language had utilised prose interspersed with verse, this is the first fully fledged prose poem.

Kannada A similar status in the adjacent language of Kannada is held by Nanjundakavi (early 16th c). Among his many historical narratives, the best known is the colossal *Ramanatha Charite*. He invented a complex plot of palace intrigue, in which a queen falls in love with her stepson who refuses her advances. Her love turns destructive, but the writer imbues the older woman’s passion with dignity. In the end, the prince wins glory by defeating an invading Muslim army.

Oriya An author who produced similarly original romantic narratives in the Oriya language was Narayana Das (also 16th c. CE). While he followed the tradition of earlier poets by weaving together mythological characters with folktale motifs, unlike them he produced stories with a clear narrative line. His successor was Nilambar Bidyadhar (18th c. CE), whose *Prastaba Chintamani* shows a similar skill in telling the story of prince who gets lost on a hunting trip. When he is taken in by forest dwellers, he falls in love with their daughter. A clichéd tale, perhaps, but told with a vivid imagination.

Tamil The category of romantic narrative poem is represented in Tamil by *Viralivitutu* ('The Message sent by a Virali [female singer]'). Written in the late 18th century by Cuppiratipa Kavirayar (b. 1758), it follows the fortunes of a young, educated man who leaves his wife after a domestic quarrel. He falls into a trap set by a prostitute, escapes and wanders from court to court before returning to his wife.

Ballads

Maturai Viran *Maturai Viran* ('The Hero of Madurai') is one of several Tamil historical ballads composed in the 17th and 18th centuries CE. This text, datable to 1680-1700, tells the story, in simple verse, of a low-caste man who violates social codes but becomes a local god. He elopes with a high-caste woman, defeats the army sent to punish him and is then enlisted by the king of Madurai to rid the city of thieves. Viran again runs off with a royal woman and is summarily quartered. When the repentant king asks a goddess to restore his limbs, Viran refuses and is worshipped as a god (as he still is).

Muttuppattan Muttuppattan is another Tamil historical ballad, but with a very different kind of hero. In this story, which scholars have dated to the 17th century, the eponymous hero is a Brahmin who falls in love with two Untouchable women from a caste of leather-workers. There is a very affecting scene when Muttuppattan tries to convince their father that his love for his daughters is genuine and only succeeds when he agrees to make leather sandals (touching leather was taboo for Brahmins). He is later killed when defending his father-in-law's cattle, and is worshipped in local villages.

Tampimar The *Tampimar* ('Little Brothers') is a Tamil historical ballad set in Travancore, a kingdom that ruled most of modern-day Kerala and part of the Tamil country from 1729 until Independence in 1947. Unlike the other ballads, however, it includes named historical figures from that time, focusing on an internecine war between two factions of the ruling family. Like the other ballads, though, the heroes (the two brothers) die a violent death and are deified by local people.

Desinku Raja Desinku Raja is an historical ballad written in Telugu, probably in the late 18th century. It narrates the heroism of a Hindu Raja (Desinku) who dies on the battlefield defending the fort of Gingee from a Muslim army. This work is raised above the level of ordinary storytelling by tender scenes when the queen says goodbye to the army on the eve of battle, when the raja's friend (a Muslim) dies from brave but foolhardy action and when the victorious Desinku is rewarded by his overlord.

Prose tale

Guru Simpleton The story of 'Guru Simpleton' (*Paramatta Kuruvin Katai*) occupies a unique place in the literary history of India. It is the first piece of fiction in an Indian language written by a European. C.J. Beschi (1680-1742?) was an Italian-born missionary who spent four decades living in the Tamil country, where he wrote not only an epic poem, two grammars and several essays, but also this first example of fiction—all in Tamil. Beschi's genius is that he took a series of existing oral tales and wove them into a (more or less) coherent story in eight chapters.

Questions/Discussion

1. The theme of Hindu valour against Muslim invaders is found in several examples of historical fiction produced in this period (echoing the Muslim versus Christian stories narrated in the medieval south Slav epics). On the other hand, those wars do not feature prominently in the Indo-Persian narrative poems and stories of the same period. Is there a political or literary explanation for this anomaly?
2. The Urdu literature produced at the Muslim courts in the Deccan is not as well-known as that written under the patronage of the Mughals in Delhi. Is this best explained by the greater scholarly and public attention

given to the Mughal Empire? How was Deccani Urdu regarded by Hindu and Muslim scholars during the early modern period?

Reading

Mohammad Sadiq, *History of Urdu Literature* (Oxford, 1964)

Frances Pritchett, *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dastan of Amir Hamzah* (Columbia, 1991)

Shamsur Fauqui, A long history of Urdu literary history: part one. In Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (California, 2003), pp. 805-863

Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period* Tamilnadu (OUP, Delhi, 1992)

Text

From the *Hamzanama*, trans. Mamta Dalal Mangaldas and Saker Mistri, 2008

Once upon a time, there lived in India a young emperor who loved to ride wild elephants. He used to roam far and wide with his soldiers, through the forests and mountains of his kingdom, crossing deep and fast-flowing rivers, in search of these mighty beasts.

One day, when the young emperor was out riding in the forests of Narwar in North India, he saw a herd of wild elephants. He chased them deep into the woods and ordered his men to use rope snares and capture the elephants. The huge legs of the elephants became entangled in the ropes and as they struggled to free themselves, the emperor leapt on to the back of the leader of the herd. Digging his heels behind the matriarch's ears, he commanded the wild beast to be calm. Once the elephants were subdued, the emperor left his soldiers in charge, and rode back to the camp to rest in his tent.

On the evening of the elephant hunt, the sun set quietly over the forests. It did not want to disturb the Ruler of Rulers, the Badshah, the Noblest Emperor of all times: Akbar the Great. In Akbar's camp the men were bustling about, waiting for Darbar Khan, Akbar's court storyteller. The emperor loved listening to tales of magic and adventure, and took his storyteller with him wherever he went. Akbar sat in a large and resplendent tent, drumming his fingers impatiently on the rubies and diamonds on his throne.

When Darbar Khan finally entered the royal tent, Akbar leapt up to embrace him and said fondly, 'Come, and amuse us with one of your stories.' Then he turned to his men, 'Darbar Khan can tell a different story every day, for a whole year. He is a wonderful storyteller. When he describes a rainstorm, you will shiver and feel the cold wind on your face. If he portrays a battle scene, the very ground trembles with the sound of horses and elephants in full charge.'

Often the storytelling continued for many hours and was accompanied by music and dancing. As he listened with his head propped on one hand, Akbar found himself wishing that he could read. It would be fun he thought to himself, to be able to read stories on his own—but then, he wouldn't have the wonderful voice and expressive hands of Darbar Khan to transport him to these exciting new worlds.

The musicians took their places, and Darbar Khan in his scarlet robe, bowed low before the emperor. 'Today's tale my Badshah, is from your favourite book: the Hamzanama. There is no other book like it in the whole world. The paintings in the book are so dazzling that when you see them, it is as wondrous as seeing the sun and the moon for the very first time. The colours glow like the jewels in your majesty's throne. And the hero of my story, the great Persian warrior Amir Hamza, is as strong and brave....' Darbar Khan smiled, 'well, almost as strong and brave... as you, my Emperor.'



Image from the illustrated manuscript of *Hamzanama*, 1560s