

Arthur Dudley  
add2115@columbia.edu  
MEALAC, Columbia University

## Keeping the Magic Alive

### How Devakīnandan Khatri's *Chandrakāntā*, the First Hindi Best-seller, Navigates Western Modernity and the Fantastical\*

The rhetoric of indigenous self-improvement popular among Indians in the late nineteenth century straddles pre-Modernity and Modernity, Eastern and Western social practices. Indian reformers, both Hindu and Muslim, consciously imitated their colonial masters but usually also appealed to the reclamation of Indian tradition as a justification for reform. They simultaneously bought into Western notions of technological development as progress while maintaining – or, it can be argued, largely inventing – a traditionalist faith in the possibility of a return to a Golden Age untainted by foreign rule. The ballooning market for Hindi literature in the late nineteenth century reflects this split identity as well, since Western literary forms rapidly became dominant and yet writers drew extensively on existing indigenous literary traditions. Analyses of the Hindi literature of this period have often been

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\* Transliteration of Indic words always presents a challenge. Though precise transliteration is necessary (1) to prove that the writer is competent in the Indic languages in question and (2) to aid scholars hoping to work with the original language texts, it is a hindrance to non-specialists who are confronted with a smattering of diacritics they do not understand. It is too difficult to break the habits of my discipline, so I have given precise transliteration throughout the essay. The one change from standard Hindi transliteration (namely that given in the *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*) is that I am using “ch” (rather than the usual “c”) to represent the unvoiced, unaspirated palatal affricate, i.e. the ‘ch’ in “chair” pronounced softly.

offered by scholars as part of studies of colonial-era social history, but there are very few good articles in English primarily concerned with close readings of a Hindi literary text using the tools of comparative literature.<sup>1</sup>

Here I hope to apply a rigorous literary analysis to an influential text, Devakīnandan Khatri's novel *Chandrakāntā* (serialized 1887, published in full 1892), which is the first "best-seller" in modern Hindi. It was published an astonishing twenty times before 1936 and remains in print today (McGregor 1970: 156).<sup>2</sup> It was so influential that it is claimed that "thousands of people learned [to read] Hindi in order to read the novel" (according to the afterword in my Hindi edition). According to the Hindi scholar Francesca Orsini, it smoothed the way for many more Hindi novels (2004b: 125).

Let us begin with a summary of the plot. The novel's action is quite convoluted, with the many twists and turns one would expect from a Western fantasy novel or from the Indian *dāstān* genre (which will be explained in detail below), but it is at its core a love story revolving around the passion of Prince Birendra Singh for Princess Chandrakāntā of the neighboring kingdom. However, the chief minister to Princess Chandrakāntā's father is also in love with her and is plotting to get her for himself at all costs. The two sides' *aiyārs* (spies) do battle and when the dust settles, of course,

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<sup>1</sup> The resources presently available are as follows: Several essays in Blackburn and Dalmia 2004, especially the one by Francesca Orsini (Orsini 2004a), seriously engage with questions of genre in Hindi and Urdu. The essays in Gupta and Chakravorty 2004 address literary questions from the perspective of "book history." Prior to these, there was only *The Novel in India*, which has an essay on Hindi by R.S. McGregor and one on Urdu by Ralph Russell (McGregor 1970; Russell 1970).

<sup>2</sup> *Chandrakāntā* has recently been translated into English (apparently for the first time) under the title *In the Mysterious Ruins* (Khatri 2004). A new translation just released by Penguin Books (India), which is unavailable in the U.S. as of December 2008, is probably significantly more elegant than the previous one.

Birendra Singh and Chandrakāntā are married. A slightly more detailed plot summary appears in the author's preface.<sup>3</sup>

This essay will argue that colonial India should not be understood as a periphery to British letters but as a cultural metropole in its own right. Indian literature from the colonial period must therefore be judged according to its own standards. We should, as many critics have argued, analyze literary production around the world as part of a single complex system rather than by following the traditional Eurocentric approach, which splits supposedly creative parts of the world (the West) from the parts in which writers can only imitate (for example, colonial India or "the Muslim World").<sup>4</sup> This is not a new point since Erich Auerbach argues in his celebrated 1952 essay "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" that "the traditional divisions of the material, chronological, geographical or typological, are no longer suitable" (1969: 12). We should not be tempted to fall back into old patterns like judging Indian novels mere epigones of low-brow Western novels or seeing them only through the prism of their role in the creation of consciousness needed for the independence struggle. However, viewing all the world's literatures as being interconnected does not mean that sweeping judgments about post-colonial literature are necessarily helpful: Although I see concerns about the emergent Indian nation-state woven into *Chandrakāntā*, I find Frederic Jameson's formulation that "all third world texts are necessarily ... *national allegories*" impossibly reductive, and I cannot connect national

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<sup>3</sup> A full translation of the preface, which is only two paragraphs long, appears as an appendix at the end of this document.

<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues for "planetary," while Aijaz Ahmad forcefully argues against the division of literature through the classification of countries as First, Second and Third World (Spivak 2003: 72; Ahmad 1987: 9).

allegories as he does to a condition of “subalternity” (Jameson 1986: 69, 76). Although Jameson’s framework is misleading, *Chandrakāntā* is certainly a salvo in a culture war that plays out through Partition and into the post-colonial period: Language use became associated with religious community. Alok Rai’s analysis of this social change, *Hindi Nationalism*, has a marvelously apt title, which plays on Hindu/Hindi, because *Chandrakāntā* and other books of this time are creating the (Hindu) Indian nation by drawing old strands of Indian thought into a newly formed Hindi literary space (Rai 2001). English literature exerted its prestige when vernacular authors imitated British models. Yet the process, as I will explain here, was much richer and more nuanced than the usual model, which argues that the political center creates culture and the dominated periphery only imitates.

We can place *Chandrakāntā* at the heart of a discussion of colonial modernity because of its ambiguous genre: although the author refers to it in his preface as a novel [*upanyās*], it is so heavily imbricated in the conventions of the Urdu storytelling genre known as *dāstān* that it really belongs to both. Indeed, as a literary form the *dāstān* is similar to the novel in that it is also a long prose narrative, and as Mikhail Bakhtin says of the novel, it is capable of absorbing other genres (2002: 7). *Chandrakāntā* is thus a fusion of two genres which are not particularly different; I will argue here that the author has used the prestige of the English novel in India in order to write a *dāstān* but with the twist that it is in Hindi rather than in the traditional Urdu. This essay will explore the implications of this move by making reference to the best-known Urdu *dāstān* of the nineteenth century, *Dāstān-e Āmīr Ḥamza Sāhibqirān* [lit. The Tale of Amir

Hamza, Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction], and to the English novel in the colonial context.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that Khatri's work engages with the colonial modern (though as we shall see, through subtext rather than overtly) by being concerned with facticity and by being strongly Islamophobic, but on the other hand it appropriates a pre-modern story-telling tradition. If, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests, "the proper study of literature may give us entry to the performativity of cultures as instantiated in narrative," then we can read *Chandrakāntā* as an exemplar of the cultural shifts in the north Indian middle class of the late nineteenth century (2003: 13). Just as Ranajit Guha has argued that nineteenth century Indian society cannot be understood "either as a replication of the liberal-bourgeois culture of nineteenth century Britain or as the mere survival of an antecedent pre-capitalist culture," we need to see literature in the period as a negotiation between European and Indic forms, each inscribing meaning on the literary work (qtd in Chakrabarty 2000: 15). Literary criticism in the case of Western fiction often takes for granted the socio-economic context in which the work was published. On the contrary, for colonial India we must situate literary production in its social context to avoid falling into the analytical trap that Guha describes. To do this we can use the disciplinary praxis of what is called, unappealingly in my view, "book history." According to Abhijit Gupta and Swapan Chakravorty, "Book history calls for a dialogic discipline in which discourse turns inward to its material substance while looking outward to the conditions of its production and dissemination" (2004: 7). A

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<sup>5</sup> The two volume edition compiled (that is to say plagiarized) by Abdu'llah Bilgrāmi and published by the Naval Kishore press in 1871 has recently been translated under the title *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* (cited here as Lakhnavi and Bilgrami 2007).

study of colonial literature must be dialogic in this manner because there already were literary forms in India when Western literature got there and it is in the interstices created when, for example, the novel and the *dāstān* are juxtaposed, that generic boundaries are broken down (Blackburn and Dalmia 2004: 8).

Any responsible account of literature in Hindi has to consider its relationship with its close but estranged relative, Urdu.<sup>6</sup> Hindi and Urdu can be considered the same language, formally speaking, since they share a common grammar and have most of their vocabulary in common. However, at higher registers Hindi draws vocabulary from Sanskrit while Urdu draws from Persian and Arabic, and similarly Hindi is written in Devanagari, the same alphabet as Sanskrit, while Urdu uses a modified version of the Arabic script. Contrary to today's nationalistic rhetoric, the strict separation of the two languages, with the former taking on a Hindu identity and the latter becoming associated with Muslims alone, is a process that began with British colonial interventions at the beginning of the nineteenth century and was not really complete before the language debates during the constituent assembly in the late 1940s that drew up the constitution of independent India.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, what we call Modern Standard Hindi did not come into being until the beginning of the twentieth century, an observation which is understandably anathema for Hindi critics, whose scholarly mythology for the tradition I will address below. As I have argued in another essay, present-day perceptions of language boundaries in India are of extremely limited value

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<sup>6</sup> According to Francesca Orsini, Hindi and Urdu publishing in the nineteenth century were together "part of an osmotic literary system" (2002: 68).

<sup>7</sup> A good but dense account addressing all of these issues in detail is the prefatory material in Shackle and Snell 1990. A less dense account is Faruqi 2007, available online.

for historical study (Dudney 2007). Until the British period, Indians apparently did not classify vernacular languages – which was seen as a major intellectual failure by the British – because they were instead interested in defining usage appropriate for particular literary genres.<sup>8</sup> With the advent of colonialism, this traditional system for policing generic boundaries fell apart, and European concepts of genre will therefore generally be overdetermined for India.<sup>9</sup> Even a text as late as *Chandrakāntā* is written in a register that would be marked as Urdu by the standards of today’s Hindi; this shows the powerful influence of Urdu prose genres like the *dāstān* on Hindi prose. What is fascinating in the context of Hindi and Urdu literature is that moving a story from one to the other is like an act of translation in that it represents a conscious attempt to refashion the text according to a different code system and yet, unlike in translation, the two code systems are not different languages but rather are more intimately tied to one another.

The history of Hindi literature has been deeply mythologized. Modern Standard Hindi, as I hinted above, is a product of nationalism in the early twentieth century and indeed often bears little resemblance to colloquial Hindi. When the Indian constitution was being written in the late 1940s, the choice before delegates was to accept the standardized, Sanskritic Hindi (which was widely despised for its artificiality) or to allow the vaguely defined “Hindustani” (essentially colloquial Hindi) to be the national

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Persian text *Tuhfat al-Hind* [“Present from India”] (c. 1676 CE) by Mirza Khan, which is the earliest known grammar of the Hindi literary dialect known as Braj Bhāṣā, refers to “bhākhā” as the language “which is generally inclusive of all other languages with the exception of Sahāskirt and Parāskirt [Sanskrit and Prakrit]” (Mirzā Khān 1935: 34). Thus, for him all vernacular language is part of the same continuum defined only as not-Sanskrit, not-Prakrit and not-Persian.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one of the three “premises” of Blackburn and Dalmia’s book is that “a literary historiography of nineteenth-century India must reach beyond obvious literary genres and conventional concepts” (2004: 9).

language (Kaviraj 1992b: 54). Not surprisingly, they opted for the former because standardized languages tend to win out in such cases. Critics in the early twentieth century who favored the standardized Hindi were faced with the task of showing (against mounds of evidence to the contrary) that the tradition was venerable, had always been separate from the demonized Urdu tradition, and that the needs of British colonial pedagogy had only played a minimal role in its development and so on.<sup>10</sup> Because of such interventions that have refused to consider the nuances of the genesis of the modern Indian nation-state or its culture, it is difficult to know almost anything for certain about how literature was consumed in colonial India. (This is a sweeping judgment but I have heard it over and over from Hindi scholars frustrated with how hide-bound their field is.) According to Ulrike Stark, there are only two books on early Indian-owned publishing houses that printed in Hindi or Urdu; in general the study of the Hindi printed book is a dismal field (2007: 7, 33). It is important to note that printing in Hindi does not start on a wide scale until the late 1860s. Furthermore, the standard British colonial anthology of Hindi dating to the beginning of the nineteenth century would not be replaced until 1867 when Bābū Śivaprasād's *Hindi Selections* was published (Stark 2007: 33; Blackburn and Dalmia 2004: 4). It is impossible to separate the growth of Hindi prose from colonial conditions and yet we should not allow this to obscure how innovative Indian writers like Khatrī were.

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<sup>10</sup> The classic work in the field is Rām Chandra Śukla's *Hindi sāhitya kā itihās* [The History of Hindi Literature] first published in 1928-9. Śukla's conceptual categories, flawed as they are, remain essentially sacrosanct for most Hindi scholars and the book has been reprinted at least two dozen times.

The Hindi romance novel is the product of a mingling of three traditions: the Urdu *dāstān*, the English novel, and experiments in Hindi prose that primarily came out of the colonial enterprise. Early Hindi prose, despite the fact that its role is foregrounded in the usual descriptions of the tradition, has little to do with Hindi prose of the late nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The problem, which is far too complicated to go into here, hinges on the fact that the modern Hindi critical tradition defines Hindi very narrowly but then attempts to claim virtually every suitable literary work in a host of dialects as a precursor to modern Hindi. Instead, we should look at the *dāstān* tradition and the penetration of the English novel into the middle class Indian consciousness.

The *dāstān* has a long history as a popular entertainment in India, first in Persian and later in Urdu. It was an oral genre, performed by a *dāstān-gū* [*dāstān*-reciter] whose skill could be judged by his ability to suspend the plot [*dāstān roknā*, lit. “to stop the story”] by weaving a tapestry of description (Pritchett 1991: 20-21). Despite the genre’s performativity, it was frequently written down and, for example, one surviving Indo-Persian manuscript of the Amīr Ḥamza story dates to ca. 1612 CE (Farooqi 2000: 126). Indeed, when the 45 volume (!) *Dāstān of Amīr Ḥamza* was being compiled by the Naval Kishore press in the early 1880s, *dāstān-gūs* supposedly came into the publisher’s office to give recitations which were dutifully taken down by scribes (Pritchett 1991: 25). The last great *dāstān-gū* died in 1928, by which time the written *dāstān* tradition had also been replaced by a public appetite for European-style novels (ibid 27).

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the weird and wonderful *Rānī Ketakī kī Kahānī* [The Story of Rani Ketaki] by the Urdu poet Insha’allah Khān (1756-1817), whose nom de plume was Insha’. One day, according to the preface, he simply decided to write a story without using any Persian or Sanskrit words.

The evolutionary logic of a pre-modern Indian genre being replaced by a modern Western genre leads to sweeping statements that ignore the reasons why someone would enjoy reading a *dāstān*. The critic Ralph Russell, for example, judges the tradition harshly on the basis that it is not realistic:

The *dāstāns* can quite justly be called propagandist literature of a highly tendentious kind. Everything is in black and white – the virtuous are all virtue and the vicious all vice. It follows that there are no three dimensional characters, and very little realism of any kind (1970: 109).

Rather than being some childish genre or a failed novel, according to Farooqi, “the *dāstān* acquired its own identity in the new culture” of Urdu literature (as opposed to Persian literature, which Urdu had begun to turf out in the late eighteenth century) and Urdu writers were able to take the stories in directions that had never been tried in the Persian tradition (2000: 125). Indeed, it has an important role in the history of Hindi literature as well because the Amīr Ḥamza story was brought out in Hindi<sup>12</sup> by the Naval Kishore press in 1879 under the title *Amīr Hamzā kī dāstān* [The Tale of Amir Hamza] (Pritchett 1991: 23). Thus although the *dāstān* is now seen as anti-modern, it was a productive genre in the late nineteenth century when the Indian bourgeoisie was heavily invested in modernization. Aspects of *Chandrakāntā*, like the description of Bīrendra Singh’s going to battle and the behavior of the lovers (fainting in one another’s presence, for example) are *dāstān* set pieces.

Key to *Chandrakāntā*’s relationship to the *dāstān* tradition is its use of the concept of *aiyārī*, an untranslatable word referring to adherence to a sort of chivalric code for

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<sup>12</sup> Namely in the Devanagari script with Persianate vocabulary replaced with Sanskritic vocabulary.

tricksters.<sup>13</sup> The word itself is derived from Persian ‘*ayyārī* (a man who practices ‘*ayyārī* is an ‘*ayyār* while a woman is an ‘*ayyāra*), which in turn derives from Arabic and has a long history in Persian and by extension in Urdu literature. The oldest reference I have come across appears in a Persian local history from the fourteenth century called the *Tarīkh-i Sīstān [History of Sistan]*,<sup>14</sup> in which ‘*ayyārs* apparently figure as mercenaries-cum-city constables (Anonymous 1987: 329-330). From this beginning as a title applied to young adventurers who joined military forces as irregulars, it comes to take on a range of meanings having to do with trickery (Orsini 2004a: 448). The thesaurus-like definition in Steingass’s *Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* reflects this shift:

‘*ayyār*, fem. ‘*ayyāra*, A cheat, knave, impostor, charlatan, conjuror, juggler; sly, mischievous; a horse curveting or prancing from sprightliness; one who travels much, a rover, vagrant, vagabond.

There is thus a constellation of meanings that keeps us from precisely defining the nature of an ‘*ayyār*: Is he a huckster or a sorcerer with real power? Do we respect him or disapprove of him? Is he a comic character or not? In Urdu, the term has the same ambiguity, and this inability to pin down the character lends itself to literary use.<sup>15</sup> As Hamid Dabashi observes in the introduction to *The Adventures of Amir Hamza*, “*Ayyari* as a social type reflects a kind of selfless valiance that defies all sorts of bourgeois morality... The moral ambiguity of *ayyari* extends the rebellious social type into an explosive literary trope, and the result is a mode of narrative frivolity that defies ordinary characterization”

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<sup>13</sup> The transliteration *aiyārī* is Hindi while ‘*ayyārī* or ‘*aiyārī* is the Persian/Urdu equivalent. I will use either form depending on context.

<sup>14</sup> Sīstān is a region presently divided between southeastern Iran and southwestern Afghanistan. It was once important for its fertile agriculture and control of coastal shipping routes between India, Persia and Arabia.

<sup>15</sup> In Platts’s *Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English*, the entry for ‘*ayyār* reads “adj. & s.m. Sharp, artful, shrewd, cunning, sly, mischievous (syn. *ćatur*);— an artful or crafty fellow, a knave.”

(Lakhnavi and Bilgrami 2007: xiv). Indeed, this standing outside of society on the part of the *'ayyār* makes him the tradition's equivalent to the figure of a jester or a fool in Western romances and this, according to Musharraf Farooqi (the translator responsible for a recent revival of the *dāstān*), makes the trickster in the Urdu *Amīr Ḥamza* "a new archetype and does not reflect the traits of the trickster in classical and contemporary literature" (Farooqi 2000: 165). One contemporary description of a late nineteenth century Delhi-based *dāstān*-narrator's performance notes that "when he described *'ayyārs*, people would laugh until their sides split..." (qtd in Pritchett 1991: 17). *'Ayyārs* are more complex characters than either villains or heroes in the *dāstān*, because "they are never innocent, yet they are innocent of villainy" (ibid 151).

The character *'Amar Ayyar* in the *Dastan of Amir Hamza* will suffice to show the essence of the *'ayyār* as an archetype in the *dāstān* tradition. While Hamza's cradle is taken to the mythical Mount Qaf and he is born surrounded by fairies [*parīs*], *'Amar* comes into this world when his impatient father induces early labor in his mother by kicking her in the stomach. Upon being born, *'Amar's* first act is to steal the ring off the vizier Buzurjmehr's finger (Lakhnavi and Bilgrami 2007: 61). The text itself says (in the voice of Buzurjmehr),

This boy will be the prince of all tricksters, unsurpassed in cunning, guile and deceit. Great and mighty kings and champions of the order of Rustam and Nariman will tremble at his mention and soil their pants from fright on hearing his name. He will take hundreds, nay, thousands of castles all by himself, and will rout great armies all alone. He will be excessively greedy, most insidious, and a consummate perjurer. He will be cruel tyrannical, and coldhearted, yet he shall prove a trustworthy friend and confidant to [Amir] Hamza, remaining staunch and steadfast in his fellowship. (ibid)

The passage establishes the contradictions of the *'ayyār*, who is able to defeat great heroes and armies on his own and yet does so by deceit. He has major character defects and yet can be fully trusted by his friends. All of these characteristics show that *'ayyārs* are conceived of as figures perpetually moving across the boundary between acceptability and infamy, the court and the wilderness, and so on. Similarly, the *'ayyārs'* practice (*'ayyārī*) and the sorcerers' craft (*tilism*) have a mutually constitutive relationship because sorcerers and *'ayyārs* both exist at the margins of courtly life and of the possible (Farooqi 2000: 153, 164). They often battle one another, and because sorcerers are capable of using disguises they are like *'ayyārs*, and *'ayyārs* dabble in magic so they are like sorcerers. *'Amar*, for example, has a supernatural gift: As a boy, he is visited and blessed by the prophet Khizr, who gives him the boon that he can run faster than anyone in the world (ibid 90). He also carries a magic *zambīl* (purse or pouch) in which any item, no matter how large or heavy, can be comfortably stored.

The author's preface to *Chandrakāntā* is itself largely about *aiyārī*. The rhetoric is subtle but evocative. He describes the *aiyār* in traditional terms, namely stating that *aiyārs*

were jacks-of-all-trades, that is they change their faces [i.e. use disguises], know a great deal about medications, play music, run [or another interpretation is "spread information"], wield weapons, do spies' work, and so on – they know all these things. (Khatri 2004, translation mine)

But he attempts to rationalize *aiyārī* as a historical practice and as a reason for reading his book. He writes that when kings fought, *aiyārs* were able to use their cleverness to broker peace without a drop of blood being shed. Here he departs from the Urdu archetype in constructing the *aiyārs'* character because his emphasis is on how honorable and necessary *aiyārs* were. Tej Singh, the *aiyār* sidekick to Birendra Singh and

thus the counterpart to ‘Amar Ayyar in the novel, is primarily a paragon of virtue and the *dāstān* set-piece of the ‘*aiyyār*’s making mischief for mischief’s sake really only appears once in *Chandrakāntā*. There is a really amusing scene in which after being instructed to take as much gold as he can carry, Tej Singh fills his every pocket and even his mouth, and carries away a vast sum. But even here, the gold belongs to the villain Krūr Singh and so rather than just being comical, Tej Singh is essentially righting a wrong. (In contrast, there are extended scenes of ‘*aiyyār*-based comedy in the *Dāstān of Amīr Ḥamza* in which ‘Amar as a boy is tormenting his teacher or giving laxatives to a nobleman who has been instructed to stay sitting in court no matter what – with predictable results.) Clearly the novel is different from the *dāstān* because rather than being a useful tool in the narrative practice of suspending the plot (described above), the *aiyyār* is always advancing the plot by going on a mission related to the plot. Furthermore, Khatri argues, *aiyyārs* are still among us in a way because

Today *bahurūpiyās* display these very same *aiyyārī* skills.<sup>16</sup> But these people do not have all of [the *aiyyārs*] qualities, only changing their faces, and that is not useful.

This need to historicize and sanitize the archetype and to relate it to the present does not appear in the traditional *dāstān*, which exists, as Farooqi puts it, in “magical time” which is neither past nor present.<sup>17</sup> The most important departure from the *dāstān* on Khatri’s part is his explanation for why readers will benefit from his book. He writes,

The most important use is this: Someone who reads such books will not quickly fall for such a trick.

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<sup>16</sup> A *bahurūpiyā* is literally “a person who has many forms” and it refers to a kind of professional impersonator. Until recently it was the specialty of certain castes but nowadays the *bahurūpiyā* is a stock comic figure in Hindi films (e.g. the character played by Shreyas Talpade in the 2006 film *Dor*).

<sup>17</sup> For example, in the *Dastan of Amīr Ḥamza* there are British goods for sale in the trinket shops (Farooqi 2000: 139).

In other words, he is arguing that his work has a didactic purpose in showing people how not to be scammed. Bringing *aiyārī* into the present is a realist move (even if many of the things the *aiyārs* do, like perfectly imitating other people they have never met, are not realistic) and in the text itself giving the book a didactic spin connects it to the many, many tracts on Hindu self-improvement that were circulating in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the only real *aiyārī* trick that is repeatedly avoidable in the story is mistaken identity. For example, Tej Singh the *aiyār* instructs Birendra Singh to recognize him by a secret black spot under his eyelid. Inevitably, an enemy *aiyār* dresses up as Tej Singh and since Birendra Singh forgets the identification procedure he reveals information to the fake Tej Singh. Elsewhere, when Nāzim the *aiyār* impersonates Princess Chandrakāntā's handmaid Chāmpā, Chandrakāntā's *aiyāra* [female *aiyār*] Chaplā asks "her" about a conversation they supposedly had together last night. When Nāzim cannot answer, she knows he is an imposter. The significance of the motif of mistaken identity can be interpreted if we consider the Hindu nationalist message of the novel: you must be able to identify your Muslim enemy even if he is disguised as a Hindu.

Reading *Chandrakāntā* can be an odd experience for the modern reader because the style so freely mixes what are today considered Hindi and Urdu vocabulary, and yet the author is dead-set against any sort of Hindu-Muslim unity that such syncretic language implies.<sup>18</sup> The text's Islamophobia is easy to lay out: Firstly, there are four Muslim characters in the novel (who are identifiable by their names), namely the *aiyārs*

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<sup>18</sup> In the preface, for example, in the same sentence Khatri uses the Arabic-derived *tājjub* for "surprise" and the Sanskritic word *kṣamā* for "indulgence" – the former is now considered Urdu and the latter Hindi. Likewise, he uses the Sanskritic word for book ("*grāṅṭh*") alongside the Perso-Arabic word ("*kitāb*") as well as the Perso-Arabic word for volume or fascicle ("*jild*").

Ahmed and Nāzim and the bandits Āfat Khān ‘Khūnī’ and Zālim Khān, and they are all despicable. Ahmed and Nāzim plot with the villain Krūr Singh on the condition that he sign an contract stating his willingness convert to Islam (Khatri 1966: 3). When Nāzim is caught by Chaplā, she ties him up and beats him, which is significant on the one hand because she is a woman humiliating a man and on the other because Nāzim does not take the punishment well. Indeed, she merely threatens him and he “begins [lit. began] to whine and cry” [*chillāne aur rone lagā*] (ibid: 6). Thus, the Muslim *aiyārs* are duplicitous cowards, and indeed they die ignobly towards the end of the novel in what amounts to a brawl. About the two bandits, I need say little. Zālim means “oppressor” and Āfat means “disaster” while Āfat Khān’s moniker “khūnī” means “the bloody.” Zālim Khān and Āfat Khan have pretensions to being *aiyārs* but Tej Singh tells Zālim that “Your father [and] grandfather may have been aiyars but you are all crooks and dacoits [bandits]” (Khatri 2004: 281). Thus Āfat and Zālim are degenerates who have disgraced their *aiyār* forefathers. This may be a reference on the author’s part to one strand of thinking in the wake of the 1857 uprising, namely that Muslims in India had only recently become duplicitous. (The assumption that Indian Muslims’ loyalty had recently changed was a way for the colonial state to avoid dealing with the question of whether Muslims had truly been loyal to the British before 1857.) Like Nāzim and Ahmed, Āfat and Zālim also meet an ignominious death, basically at the hands of a lynch mob. The second Islamophobic trope in the text is the idea that all Muslims are co-conspirators in a vague but universal plot. When Ahmed and Nāzim make their offer to Krūr Singh, they specifically say that the large Muslim population of the city will

accept Krūr Singh as their rightful ruler when he deposes the current (Hindu) king. Indeed, the Muslim network is so closely knit that Zālīm Khan is related by marriage to Ahmed and Nāzīm. Similarly, Birendra Singh is annoyed to find his army full of Muslims. He discusses the situation with his father and points out that their loyalty is suspect and yet they cannot be dismissed because they would immediately join the enemy. The solution he happens upon is to send the Muslim soldiers out in front of his army's cannons so that on the first sign of trouble his own artillerymen could shoot down his own Muslim soldiers. Clearly this genocide-lite is harrowing given what we know of post-Independence Hindu-Muslim relations in India. Lastly, religious conversion is an uncomfortable theme that is addressed twice in the novel. The unscrupulous Krūr Singh has no compunction about converting to Islam but a stranger incident takes place later in the novel: when Jagannāth, a Brahmin astrologer (whose role in the story is discussed below), swears to Tej Singh that his (Jagannāth's) "life is forfeit" if he predicts something wrong then Tej Singh says that the promise is meaningless because he could not kill a Brahmin without incurring the severe curse that the act entails (in traditional Hindu jurisprudence, the higher the caste of the victim the worse the penalty for the murderer). Then comes one of the strangest one-liners I have ever read. Jagannāth replies, "It's not difficult at all. You can become a Muslim first and then slaughter me" (Khatri 2004: 144). I am not sure whether this is meant as pure comic relief or whether in fact it is a way of saying, "Muslims are so wicked that even our highest religious prohibition does not apply to them." These instances of anti-Muslim rhetoric are all fascinating because the *dāstān* tradition has the same relationship built

into it but in reverse: Islam is the standard and the conquerors go out and convert infidels. Whereas the communal violence present in the *dāstān* is formulaic (“X-number of infidels were killed or converted”) and the infidel is never defined as Hindu, *Chandrakāntā* makes it plain that the enemy is specifically Muslim. Indeed, the Brahmin Jagannāth originally works for Krūr Singh but because he considers his master “irreligious” he switches sides to join with Tej Singh and Birendra Singh. Religion therefore confers moral inevitability on people: Brahmins must be good, Muslims must be bad. This sense of identity politics is in line with what we know about the introduction of the British census, which for the first time generated precise data on the concentration of different religious communities in different areas but also, of course, required people to specify which community they belonged to and this forced people to take on identities that were broader in scope than many people had hitherto used (Kaviraj 1992a: 20ff). Rather than belonging to such-and-such a caste, it was now possible for people to think of themselves as Hindus.

Besides this newly defined Hindu-Muslim enmity, which can be seen as a product of Hindu nationalism, the text has a need for scientific or quasi-scientific rationalization, which I trace to the influence of colonial education and to the English novel more specifically. In various points in *Chandrakāntā*, the author goes out of his way to explain how something seemingly impossible is actually rational, and yet there are many aspects of the novel, most if not all of which seem to come from the *dāstān*, that seemingly contradict this emphasis on rationality. Firstly, the author’s preface makes an appeal to his readers that if there is any mistake or omission [*“galtī yā bhūl”*] would they

be so kind as to send a letter to him about it. Although he could merely be talking about typographical errors, it seems more likely that he specifically means factual mistakes. He appears to be making a truth-claim about the representation of reality in the novel, and throughout the text *aiyārī* (which is a scientific craft) is a stand-in for magic, which is accepted at face-value in the *dāstān* but is often questioned in *Chandrakāntā*. Thus, when Princess Chandrakāntā finds herself face-to-face with a giant stone crane (which in fact is about to swallow her), she is not frightened because she knows it is not magical but rather mechanical:

Chapla had so conditioned Chandrakanta's mind that both had learned to reject the existence of ghosts and jinns or magic [*jādū*], and considered it all some kind of espionage activity [*aiyārī*] (Khatri 2004: 128, 1966: 33).

Similarly, there is a "red stone" that renders people unconscious when they sit on it but there are wires connected to the stone and disconnecting the wires stops the effect (Khatri 2004: 201). Thus what is being described appears to be electrocution. Other techniques of *aiyārī* are carefully described, such as fake corpses which are identified as fake because they have no bones in them and the tools of the trade like *lakhalakhā* (smelling salts used to wake someone) (ibid 100). Towards the end of the novel, a new character, Siddanāth Bābā is introduced, and everyone thinks he is a *yogi* (a Hindu holy man whose penance translates into magical powers) and he tells them that he is not a *yogi* because he can only do what "an ordinary man or an *aiyār* is capable of"; and yet this statement on his part that he is not personally a *yogi* does not preclude the possibility that in the world there are real yogis with real powers.

The novel is full of such tension between the possible and the apparently impossible. For example, when Chandrakāntā is standing in front of the stone crane, she steps on the stone that activates it and it swallows her. She then finds herself in a weird place described in exactly the same terms as *tilism* in the *dāstān*, including dancing women and other mysteries.<sup>19</sup> So if she does not believe that this is magic but rather *aiyārī* then what do we make of it? In the *dāstān*, the hero trapped in a *tilism* is often given a magic tablet [*lauḥ*] with instructions on how to defeat the *tilism*, and the same thing happens to Birendra Singh in *Chandrakāntā*. Are we meant to believe that this is magic or is there a way for Birendra Singh to receive instructions addressed to him by name written on a block of stone without the aid of magic? There is a fascinating disconnect between different conceptions of magic in play: In the *dāstān*, a *tilism* is a place which is wholly created out of enchantment. And yet in *Chandrakāntā*, a *tilism* apparently breaks the rules of reality just like in the *dāstān* but here it only seems magical. *Chandrakāntā* therefore uses a narrative style that I will call “improbable realism.”

The status of the *tilism* is not the only *dāstān* convention that is modified by Khatri. A major tool both for advancing the plot and providing the reader with information is the use of *ramal* by Pandit Jagannāth the Astrologer [*jyotiṣī*].<sup>20</sup> Now since Jagannāth is a Brahmin and his title, *jyotiṣī*, indicates that he is trained in traditional Hindu astrology, it is fascinating that the word used to describe the technique of his fortune-telling is

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<sup>19</sup> *Tilism*, which is a cognate of talisman, is a difficult concept to define. It is basically magic whose efficacy is accepted by Islamic tradition (for example magic charms) and yet in the *dāstān* it comes to mean an enchantment that literally traps the protagonist in a magical place of its creation. According to Frances Pritchett, entering a *tilism* is a double-detachment from reality because even the rules of the *dāstān*-world are suspended there (1991: 43).

<sup>20</sup> Introduced in the Hindi text on p 27 and in the translation on p 39.

*ramal*. *Ramal* (or more properly *raml*) is an Arabic term for geomancy (prophecy by drawing lines in the sand and throwing small objects like pebbles or dice), which according to an interpretation of a few lines in the *Qur'an*, has divine sanction in Islamic belief (Bearman et al. 2008: IV, 1128, col 2). According to one of the evil *aiyārs*,

[Jagannāth] is so precise in his *ramal* throwing that if you want to ask him where some person is right now and what [that person] he doing and how should [that person] be caught then he'll tell you immediately.

[unke ramal pheṃkne meṃ itnī tezī hai ki jab chaho pūchh lo ki falānā ādmī is samay kahaṃ hai kyā kar rahā hai yā kaise pakṛa jāygā? vah faurān batlā dete haiṃ.] (Khatri 1966: 27, translation mine)

Prediction with this degree of specificity is not possible (even in a world with GPS satellite navigation), and yet one of the characters offers a rational explanation for why *ramal* cannot work with *tilisms*: they are made from the same metallic materials and so interfere with one another (Khatri 2004: 289). The example of *ramal*, I think, clarifies Khatri's aim. He is not attempting scientific realism but merely verisimilitude that is content to include the improbable bordering on the impossible as long as there is an explanation proffered.

Nor has the debate on Khatri's scientific intentions concluded more than a century after the novel's publication. When a Chandrakāntā Festival was being planned at Chunar Fort in 2002, the grandson of the author, Kamlapati Khatri, strenuously protested.<sup>21</sup> He accused the organizers of the festival of wanting to use the television serial of *Chandrakāntā* (which was cancelled after only a few episodes but is still widely

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<sup>21</sup> Chunar is a small town in southeastern Uttar Pradesh, some 40 km from Varanasi. In the novel, Chunargarh is the stronghold of King Shivadatta Singh.

known) for inspiration rather than the novel itself. Tellingly his main complaint, as the *Times of India* paraphrases it, was that

The 'tilism' which were based on technical and scientific facts, were shown as jadoo in the teleserial (Dikshit 2002).

As explained above, the words "*tilism*" and "*jādū*" are operative. Although in the context of the *dāstān*, *tilism* is often translated simply as "magic" (because it can refer to enchantment or to a place that has been created out of enchantment), here that is inappropriate. What Kamlapati Khatri means by "*tilism*" and apparently what his grandfather meant, is simply a bizarre, magic-like place. But such a place lacks actual *jādū*, which is a term that in current usage refers to stage-magic as well as to black magic generally. Creating the wonderment of magic, it seems, does not necessarily require magic.

Khatri's realism, although it is hardly realistic, seems to have been motivated by his familiarity with the English novel. Khatri had read the works of G.W.M. Reynolds (1814–1879), which were widely available in Hindi translation, before he started writing (Orsini 2004a: 444; McGregor 1970: 158; Joshi 2004a: 315). According to Priya Joshi, Reynolds was a writer of "melodrama"; indeed, it was low-brow writers of this sort that were most translated into Hindi in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Leonard Woolf perfectly expresses the snarkiness of metropolitan elites towards the reading habits of the periphery: "Hardly ever mentioned here... the fodder on which the subalterns chew the

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<sup>22</sup> Joshi offers two charts, one showing the number of libraries in India at which certain novels were available and another showing books that had been translated into three or more Indian languages (2004a: 308, 310). She addresses the same issue of book availability from the perspective of publishing in Joshi 2004b.

rud in the cantonments of the empire” (qtd in Joshi 2004a: 281). Joshi is working with much the same methodology as her mentor Franco Moretti, and it seems to me her analysis is marred by the same unanswered questions as his: She concludes that the novels that were widely read in India had convoluted plots but contained simple explanation of modern conveniences, like banking, and that this was because such intricate plots were familiar to Indian readers from indigenous texts but modern elements were unfamiliar (Joshi 2004a: 318). This is of course hugely reductive but more worrying is the question of whether the readership created demand for such novels or whether such novels were being translated because the British – most of whom thought that Indians did not read at all – decided that anything more sophisticated would not be understood in India. Who has the agency? I have difficulty with Moretti’s “distant reading” methodology when it comes to established Western literary genres but to apply it to India, where according to the 1881 census only something like 6% or 7% of the population was literate, is less useful than considering individual texts produced by the colonial encounter, each of which contains a difference balance of Indic and Western patterns, and each of which has a specific location in the colonial encounter (Moretti 2007: 1; Stark 2007: 14).

I would offer a different analysis of how the novel met the *dāstān*: It seems that this kind of writing was well-suited for a fusion with indigenous forms like the *dāstān* because they are both written in what Bakhtin calls “adventure-time” in his discussion of the chronotope (Bakhtin 2002: 86). The hallmark of novels written in adventure-time (Bakhtin refers to Greek romance in particular) is that the love story at the center remains

unchanged, that the novel has a “certain encyclopedic quality and that “random contingency,” namely chance meetings and meetings that never take place have a major role to play (ibid 89, 88, 92). Furthermore, adventure-time stories take place on an “abstract expanse of space” (just like the vaguely defined kingdoms of Vijaygarh (“Victory City”) and Naugarh (“New City”) in *Chandrakāntā*) (ibid 99). All of this describes the *dāstān* perfectly. Indeed, Khatri’s phenomenal literary career continued with more stories written in adventure-times, and his detective stories, like his *Bīrendravīr* (1895), which combines *aiyārī* with even more rational explanations of fantastical happenings, are beloved (Orsini 2004a: 448, 460). Even in *Bīrendravīr*, which has moved much closer to a Western literary model, good and bad are predetermined. Namely, physical markings on people show what their destinies will be and if circumstances apparently go against the markings then something is not as it seems (ibid 462-4).

*Chandrakāntā* is not an aborted novel, but rather a fusion of the novel and the *dāstān*. It comes out of a more complicated cultural environment than novels written at the same time in Britain: Modernity and pre-Modernity, West and East, Hindu and Muslim were all operative in the creation of the text. The Hindi critic R. S. McGregor had not read carefully enough when he concluded that *Chandrakāntā* does not have modern aspects (1970: 156). Of course it does, but as I have argued, they are subtle. The problem for us when we study Indian novels of this time is that, as Frederic Jameson correctly but somewhat misleadingly argues, “we sense, between ourselves and the alien text, the presence of another reader, the Other reader... so different from ourselves” (Jameson 1986: 66). This is misleading because it is too easy to wrap up this

difference in a rhetoric of progress, that is, believing that we have attained modernity and the poor Third World reader has not. Instead we should understand that contemporary Western fiction in India was decidedly non-canonical and so the Indian sense of what British literature was must be seen as fundamentally divergent from our experience with the canon of nineteenth century novels. Indian readers English works either in English or in translation were reading at the margins of the Western tradition but rather than being marginalized they were able to achieve a great deal: Khatrī, in writing *Chandrakāntā*, managed to transplant a traditional Urdu genre into Hindi and almost single-handedly created a Hindi reading public.

## Appendix: Translation of Khatri's Preface [*bhūmikā*] to the First Edition

Today there are quite a lot of Hindi novels that in some ways address political affairs; such matters are also made apparent in courtly histories, but in the courts the *aiyārs* (tricksters) also served, [and they] were jacks-of-all-trades, that is they change their faces [i.e. use disguises], know a great deal about medications, play music, run [quickly], wield weapons, do spies' work, and so on – they know all these things. When kings fought then these people used their trickery without shedding blood [and] by destroying the enemy forces' spirits they brought the war to a close. That was how essential these people were. Today *bahurūpiyās* display these very same *aiyārī* skills.<sup>23</sup> But these people do not have all of [the *aiyārs*'] qualities, only changing their faces, and that is not useful. I have not yet seen a description of these *aiyārs* in Hindi books. If Hindi readers would have a look at this entertaining [story], it would be useful on several levels. The most important use is this: Someone who reads such books will not quickly fall for such a trick. When I wrote this novel called *Chandrakāntā*, I was thinking about all these things. In this book the circumstances of Naugaṛh and Vijaygaṛh, two kingdoms in the hills, have been told. At first, relations between the two kingdoms were good but then they were ruined by the wickedness of a Vizier's son; the prince of Naugaṛh, Birendra Singh, fell in love with the princess of Vijaygaṛh, Chandrakāntā, causing problems; the son of the official of the court of Vijaygaṛh [i.e. the Vizier's son mentioned above], Krūr Singh, was ruined by his king Jai Singh and he went to Chunār

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<sup>23</sup> See footnote 16 above.

and told that city's king, Shivadatta Singh, about Chandrakanta and he [Shivadatta Singh] fell madly in love with her, etc. In the midst of this, *aiyārī* too makes a good appearance and since these are kingdoms in the mountains, mountain streams, grottos, and desolate forests, and beautiful, indeed fascinating, valleys have also been described well.

Until now I have never written a book; this is my first inception<sup>24</sup> therefore if any sort of mistake or omission has come into this then it would be no surprise [*tājjub*] and for that reason I beg your indulgence [*kṣamā*], moreover it would be a great kindness to me if you send me a letter making known my omissions because this book is very large and furthermore is being reprinted; by knowing the omissions they will be taken care of in the other volumes.

Āṣāḥ 1994 [=June or July 1887]  
Devakīnandan Khatrī

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<sup>24</sup> Literally “*śrīgaṇeś*” or “Lord Ganesh” whose name is invoked by Hindus at the commencement of an activity. Here the god's name serves as a metonym for the beginning itself.

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