The Play of Memory and Imagination in the Arena of Performance: An Attempt to Contextualise the History and Legend of Amar Singh Rathore as taken forward by various Performing Arts

First Six-Monthly Report

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This report attempts to compile and analyse certain aspects that have come to the fore while exploring the various dimensions that emerge from the subject of study. It is true, that Amar Singh as a character has been celebrated in the Folk Performing Arts, like, Nautanki, Khayal and Puppetry. However, that is not all. There are also songs about him and some of the other characters who are part of his narrative. Bards also tell his story and each telling is a distinct version and interpretation of him and his actions. As his presence expands through various cultural expressions of Folklore, it seems necessary to explore the varying dimensions that have enabled this legend construct.

A major challenge and delight in this research has been the discovering of material from various sources, not in one place and a lot by interaction and engaging with artists of various Forms.

Books, that deal with History, Cultural Studies, Folk poetry, Life styles of Marwar and Rajputs, Mughal Court, Braj Bhasha and Folklore have been studied in detail. The N.M.M.L. has provided much material for reading. This has facilitated, thinking, formulating connections with the Legend, Society and Performative Arts.
There have been discussions with artists engaged with Puppetry and Nautanki. Some of them have been preliminary in nature and some fairly exhaustive.

Archival material of some senior artists has been examined and more is in process.

Contact with artists of all the three Forms mentioned in the proposal has been made and a visit to Degana to meet Khayal exponent Bansiji has been planned for early next month.
The Nautanki Text of “Amar Singh Rathor” has been examined with thoroughness and an analysis is included in this report.

Certain Aspects of Performance have been included.

“Amar Singh of Garh Merta”- A rendering in Punjabi has been examined.

More material for thought is likely to emerge and that will fill in more. It may also alter the nature of some observations arrived at so far.

Thus, the report may appear to be tentative. It discusses several themes and there has been an attempt to consolidate and organise them to the extent possible at this stage. However, formalising and finalising of the chapters is in the making. Because the analysis shifts as the range of information expands.

At the time of writing this report, I have come to know that in parts of Haryana, certain communities sing what was termed as ,”Amar Singh ka Saka”-saka, being the last battle of the warrior, where the end is known. This implies that the final act is not just about bravery, but also sacrifice. It also means that the basis of the legend lies deep within the social framework and systems that manifest through the deeds of the individual.
The researcher has also—as part of the present exploration—come to know of a recent phenomena, again in Haryana, where a solo singer, sings and narrates the tale of Amar Singh using the Nautanki text. This is exciting and much ahead of my earlier information. It needs to be understood as it is likely to shed more light on the subject and enrich this research.

**Overview**

The overall purpose of this research is to find connections between the historical-sociological-cultural- and the artistic. This implies also understanding the processes by which they manifest and imbibe each other. A legend becomes a legend because it is made and cultivated by society. Therefore, the attempt has been to examine the various possibilities and directions that open regarding historicity, Legend construct, longevity of the legend, so that the nature of Art forms and processes that are its manifestation, can be examined in that context. The values that the legend could be the carrier of and the social milieu that enables their enforcement are linked to the role that actors and audiences play in extending it. These areas require attention, significant depth and engagement with the cultural, philosophical, aesthetic, literary and performative tradition that the reality around has accumulated over centuries.

What are the elements that make a legend? Who is worthy of this honour? What does society, rather its cultural consciousness seek to emphasize by its sustenance? Amar Singh, the person as he lived, and the hero of the legend may or may not be identical and the protagonist of drama would by necessity of being in performance develop another trajectory, for a performance cannot and is not meant to capture a life
time. But does it need to repeat what happened? Who can know, and how to know what actually happened?

The ambivalence of truth has been a subject of much debate. It has a lot to do with points of views, but it is also about remembrance - what we remember, how we remember, and in the first place choose to remember and it may not be about memory alone, but also of desire - the desire to create someone or something, a fantasy or a notional remembrance, made more real by each repetition.

What would be the distinction between the treatment of a hero of a legend and the central character of what we normally refer to as a historical play? Playwright Indira Parthasarathy says that you do not visit history to create the past but because it is representing what is happening today. Can we say the same for the hero of a legend? For, unlike the character of a historical play, he/she does not stand alone; he/she is not the creation of a single writer but is held by a community; carved by it and soaked in a certain identification held precious by the collective. Of course, as society moves, communities too shed or modify belief systems and this in turn could affect the relationship with the legend and perhaps evolve readings into the layers which probably could lead to tempering of the tale as handled by the Performative Arts.

A study encompassing the telling of a legend by three Performative Forms cannot be complete without locating core areas of the legend as well as the fundamental principles of aesthetics and philosophical concepts integral to each of the Forms. Ideally this study must arrive at a way by which the legend can be placed within the acknowledged context of the Arts. The absence of critical theory pertaining to folk performative arts has emerged as an important subject of discourse in recent times. The latter too as of now is hazy and undefined.
Readings and reflections of the past few months indicate that studies that elicit and draw concepts or formulate on the basis of the streams of Practice are too few and may give the impression that the act of definition is not of intrinsic value to the practitioner. Perhaps the norms of practice were taken for granted and not framed. Perhaps there were deliberations, but not recorded. It was for the critic to delve more. The Rural Performative Arts are celebrated for skill, but that is probably just the beginning of the knowing. Skill, when woven into performance, bases itself on certain principles that are then inbuilt through the structure and design that would come together as a whole.

The Natyashastra remains a constant and stable reference point to view a culture of performance. Many other indicators would be with the practitioners. The study of the past few months has also been a period of preparation, wherein the enquiry of this search has become clearer and while listening would be a major component of field work, certain questions have risen, that may well widen the scope of the intent. Certain areas that this report attempts to analyze are:

1. The Culture, Practice and Necessity of Legend Construction
2. Examining the Interplay of Historicity and Legend
3. Diverse Oral Narratives
4. Analysis of the Performance Texts as Envisaged by the Authors
5. How Actors Perform

Other areas that need to be examined:

1. What the audiences/communities receive retain and carry
2. Musical scores
3. Comparison of the Performative, stylistic and aesthetic handling of the legend by different Forms the study may look at films as well including one in which there is a comic twist.
4. Contextualising the legend within the social framework including gender expectations.
5. Contextualising this legend by juxtaposing it with other legends created by similar or parallel cultural structures.
1. The culture, practice and necessity of legend construction

Does a legend require a historical basis? This is a question that has varying answers from different scholars. While some feel, that it is not imperative for it to be so, there is a clear opinion that suggests that legends generally refer to a certain time period, characters who could have existed in history and a certain geographical reference wherein events could be located.

However, it is broadly accepted that the narrative is a highly romanticized version of happenings and may not be devoid of larger than life portrayals, superhuman deeds and even miracles. the semblance of the real could be coloured by exaggeration. Often, more than a fixed period or an exact date, it is the geography that appears to lend a base to the narrative- names of places, rivers, references to hills that seem to bind the legend and communities of those areas own the story zealously and often with pride and possessiveness. Framing the legend within the semblance of history and geography enable a process of identification and continuity of the legend within specific communities.

Howsoever fictitious may the telling be, it claims a fact as the basis or origin and the rest as a process of the building of it. In fact, the supernatural, is also meant to be treated as an aspect of truth of a bygone era when such happenings were possible. Myths on the other hand, are generally accepted to be creations of the imaginative mind, exploring mysteries of the universe and western scholars generally refer to Greek myths in this context and they could be placed (the happening not the telling of it) in time, before time acquired a date, almost in a measure of timelessness. The myth of Prometheus is often quoted as an example. Its power lies in its exploration of the mysterious or something so fundamental to human existence as the huge leap taken by the discovery of fire.
However, there also seem to be a number of legends whose telling and characters have within them or acquired over a period of time mythical proportions, but containing within them indications of time reference (though not claiming accuracy) and abroad landscape (though actual places mentioned have bleak bearings to existing names). The legend of King Arthur is one such example. It has ignited imagination and continues to do so in the innumerable tellings. In fact, the quest of the holy grail continues to haunt modern day fiction writers and filmmakers.

According to folklore, it was prophesized that Arthur would be the ruler of a united England. Born out of wedlock, he pulls a sword out of stone and is recognized as the true inheritor of his father’s kingdom. The famous Round Table of knights has been woven into several tales and romances of battle and chivalry.

While there seem to be two literary texts that are considered to be authentic versions of the saga, but folklore has added multiple tales around the heroes of king Arthur, keeping the nostalgia and the connection pulsating. The famous British poet Tennyson has drawn on the Arthurian era in many of his poems, including the Lady of Shalott, a woman in a tower, who must not see the world, but through the reflection in the mirror and she abides by it, till a flash of Lancelot (knight of king Arthur) passes by and she breaks the rule!

In Rajasthan, even within the arena of folklore certain distinctions are observed. To the best of this researcher’s information, as of today, the Phad Narrator, and artist, have refrained from either painting or telling the story of Amar Singh Rathore. The reason given (as I remember from a conversation but shall explore and understand more as part of research) is, that the Phad is the space of those tellings whose central characters have acquired the status of a deity Thus is true for Pabuji and Tejaji and by implication that the story of Amar Singh constitutes something else.
There could be other reasons as well, but it does indicate that all stories are not treated as being same and also that not all stories are to be told in an identical manner; implying that each falls into a separate narrative mode or tradition. So, specific narrators tell specific stories. This does not seem to be accidental and to understand the discerning process means to look beyond skill, howsoever compelling the telling might be. Which it is. Because the canvas of the legend is huge—much larger than life or becomes so through the telling.

The blurring of the real and the unreal makes the legend appropriate material for popularity within folklore. At the same time, being part of folklore necessarily enhances or at least increases the nature of this blurring (between the real and non-Real) as popular imagination keeps adding and weaving more as the telling is carried on by multiple tellers at varied platforms. Being part of folklore, implies being part of or being subjected to a process that is ever growing. So it can never become a sealed product, but continues as a circulating pattern, which by the very act of circulation or even repetition cannot be limited to the initial counting. It is customary to add lines, while singing a song. Even while recounting, a recent happening there would be several routes of perception.

Recollection chooses filters and highlights, sometimes knowingly and often without knowing. An accumulation of cultural creations (artefacts as they may be sometimes called) keep moving around and over time acquire meanings that are of value to a region or community. It is not unusual to come across many songs attributed to Kabir or Mira in areas far removed from the areas where the poets lived or travelled (as told by history) and in languages not quite like that of the poets (again as accepted by norms). The lines, however have a validity in the region and are in sync with the overall values the poets may have stood for. This is just by way of example because this phenomena seems to have percolated in all cultures and all passages of folklore.
That is why there is an attempt, particularly, where the analysis of legends is concerned, to trace back the origins and confirm with historicity, an authenticated version of the happenings or the saga of events. This has manifold repercussions and there is an alternate view that looks at all aspects of folklore as part of the cultural composition of a community. This would mean that all tales, stories, legends, fairy tales, parables, proverbs, songs, jokes, metaphors, rituals, mannerisms of addressal be treated as part of the community’s cultural manifestation, generated by it over period of time, through various processes, underlining twists of fortune and various other reasons and factors.

As it is, industrialization and related migration has torn apart the cultural fabric of people who exist at the margins of subsistence. Uprooted and in alien spaces, they have very little to identify with. Moreover, as globalisation spreads and bring with it the formatting of a monoculture, much of the culture of several communities is on the verge of erosion. Any classification or stratification that is divisive of the original and the accepted would accentuate this sense of loss. The accuracy of historicity may have, over time become a smaller consideration, given the other symbolic overturns the legend or saga may have succeeded in communicating and while remembrance may be a factor to begin, the appeal makes it worthy of remembrance. It is thus crucial to focus on the social milieu that cherishes the legend and what it derives from keeping it alive; what it is willing to do to achieve this and have meanings changed over time.

The authentic versus the accumulated could be an intriguing approach to research. Some scholars suggest that while marking the present, moving backwards would trace the trajectory of change. All performing Arts change and this is a constant feature while operating within the binaries of structure and improvisation. As spaces change, audiences and actors change, the performance too gets redefined. Also, with the flow of time,
no society remains static. Values, expectations, patronage, alter course and narratives re-mould themselves. An actor senses the social breeze by a glimpse of the audience. Recounting the journey to the present then could outline the course. However, this would be based on recollection, and it would depend on what the person who is recollecting chooses to recollect or considers worthy of recollection. Very often fundamentals may be skipped, because the teller may consider them too basic, ordinary or obvious. Of course, there could be small demonstrations, creating windows to the past and these could be insightful.

Several streams of discourse are brewing around the approaches to folklore and the nuances they throw up, are worthy of attention, though for this researcher, they are still nascent, and more study is required. However, as the legend of Amar Singh Rathore is not an ancient one and its time frame falls well within the realm of known history, it would be useful to trace the story from sources that have recorded happenings as facts. Again, this is in the initial stage and as more sources are consulted, more can be said about this area.
2. Examining the interplay of historicity and legend

By most sources, Amar Singh is said to have been born in 1613, to the kingdom of Marwar, the elder son of Mahraja Gaj Singh. He was daring in battle and also by spirit and temperament. He accompanied his father to various battlegrounds and won laurels as a warrior, but perhaps of his headstrong nature (that may not have succeeded in keeping the chieftains together) his father did not choose him to be the heir apparent. That honour went to the second son and Amar was sent in exile. James Tod, an officer in the East India Company (rather Political Agent, a post that was later known by title of Resident) has in his book “Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan” has given a brief biography of Amar Singh, whom he calls Umra Singh. (It may be worth exploring as to which is closer to the actual pronunciation in Marwari. According to James Tod, Amar Singh, reached the court of Shah Jahan, who, accepted the banishment and employed Amar Singh, who by virtue of his skill and gallantry received the title of Rao and as the writer further states-

He repaired to the imperial court; and although the emperor approved and sanctioned his banishment, he employed him. His gallantry soon won him the title of Rao and the Mansab of a leader of three thousand, with the grant of Nagor as an independent domain, to be held directly from the crown. But the same arrogant and uncontrollable spirit which lost him his birth right, brought his days to a tragical conclusion. He absented himself for a fortnight from court, hunting the boar or the tiger, his only recreation. The emperor (Shah Jahan) reprimanded him for neglecting his duties and threatened him with a fine. Amra proudly replied that he had only gone to hunt, and as for a fine, he observed, putting his hand upon his sword, that was his sole wealth.
**Amra, assassinates Salabat Khan.** —The little contrition which this reply evinced determined the king to enforce the fine, and the paymaster-general, Salabat Khan, was sent to Amra’s quarters to demand its payment. It was refused, and the observations made by the Sayyid not suiting the temper of Amra, he unceremoniously desired him to depart. The emperor, thus insulted in the person of his officer, issued a mandate for Amra’s instant appearance. He obeyed, and having reached the Amm-khass, or grand divan, beheld the king, “whose eyes were red with anger,” with Salabat in the act of addressing him. Inflamed with passion at the recollection of the injurious language he had just received, perhaps at the king’s confirmation of his exclusion from Marwar, he unceremoniously passed the Omrahs of five and seven thousand, as if to address the king; when, with a dagger concealed in his sleeve, he stabbed Salabat to the heart. Drawing his sword, he made a blow at the king, which descending on the pillar, shivered the weapon in pieces. The king abandoned his throne and fled to the interior apartments. All was uproar and confusion. Amra continued the work of death, indifferent upon whom his blows fell, and five Mogul chiefs of eminence had fallen, when his brother-in-law, Arjun Gaur, under pretence of cajoling him, inflicted a mortal wound, though he continued to ply his dagger until he expired. To avenge his death, his retainers, headed by Balu Champawat and Bhao Kumpawat, put on their saffron garments, and a fresh carnage ensued within the Lal kila. To use the words of their native bard, “The pillars of Agra bear testimony to their deeds, nor shall they ever be obliterated from the record of time: they made their obeisance to Amra in the mansions of the sun.” The faithful band was cut to pieces; and his wife, the princess of Bundi, came in person and carried away the dead body of Amra, with which she committed herself to the flames. The Bokhara gate by which they gained admission was built up, and henceforward known only as “Amra Singh’s gate”; and in proof of the strong impression made by
this event, it remained closed through centuries, until opened in 1809 by Capt. Geo. Steell, of the Bengal engineers.

Author’s footnote: Salabat Khan Bakhshi, he is called. The office of Bakhshi is not only one of paymaster (as it implies), but of inspection and audit. We can readily imagine, with such levies as he had to muster and pay, his post was more honourable than secure, especially with such a band as was headed by Amra, ready to take offence if the wind but displaced their moustache. The annals declare that Amra had a feud (vair) with Salabat; doubtless for no better reason than that he fulfilled the trust reposed in him by the emperor.

The author does not forget to add that “the Bokhara gate by which they gained admission, was built up, and henceforth known only as “Umra Singh’s Gate” and in proof of the strong impression made by the event, it remained closed through centuries, until opened in 1809 by Capt. Geo. Steell, of the Bengal Engineers. The history of the gate and the episode of its re-opening brings the narrative to the present i.e. to the time when the author penned the book. However, he also makes it a point to add a footnote that speaks of his attitude to popular wisdom and that he did not view it as something to be passed over. The footnote says-

Since these remarks were written, captain Steell related to the author a singular anecdote connected with the above circumstance. While the work of demolition was proceeding, Capt. S. was urgently warned by the natives of the danger he incurred in the operation, from a denunciation on the closing of the gate, that it should thenceforth be guarded by a huge serpent-when, suddenly, the destruction of the gate being nearly completed, a large Cobra-dcapella rushed between his legs, as in fulfillment of the anathema. Capt. S. fortunately escaped without injury.
Clearly, the Captain and the author attached significance to this coincidence. Writing in 1832, almost two centuries after Amar Singh, the author was creating, rather, compiling a history of Rajasthan in English, for a British reader, drawing from all possible sources at his disposal. Oral narratives were by no means excluded nor was the narratives of the bards. And the bards dealt with facts as poetry thus creating elements of narratives. These elements of legends became history when recorded as such. The sequence of Amar Singh’s banishment is highly condensed and poignant. It is as follows-

As soon as the sentence was pronounced, that his birth right was forfeited and assigned to his younger brother, and that he ceased to be a subject of Maroo, the khelat of banishment was brought forth, consisting of sable vestments, in which he was clad; a sable shield was hung upon his back, and a sword of the same hue girded round him; a black horse was then led out, being mounted on which, he was commanded, though not in anger to depart whither he listed beyond the limits of Maroo.

Umra went not alone, numbers of each clan, who had always regarded him as their future lord, voluntarily partook of his exile.

This is clearly the creation of a poet. Etched to be remembered. A visual crafted with words. The headstrong Amar Singh almost stoically accepts his predicament. It is the silence of obedience, that pervades and makes emotion redundant. There is no crease- not even a last look. A sombre moment for him and his countrymen. This is the telling of a bard. Amar Singh rode out of Maroo and entered the realm of folklore. As there does not seem to be any immediate or huge reason for his banishment and as many followed him, he was not unloved by people. The bards sang of him as they sang of other clans and probably parts of those renderings helped to make up this book.
James Tod, born in 1782, was of Scottish origin, his ancestors having been with the King of Scotts. James held those chivalric values in high esteem and probably this was one reason why he considered the Rajputs to be the natural allies of the British and in the spirit of romantic nationalism, saw them as distinct identities. He travelled extensively, studied the geography and topography of western central India, resulting in the development of a map of these parts. James, probably was influenced by the bardic traditions of recounting history of generations as a narrative, because in some ways this would be similar to the clan poets of Scottish highlanders. The well-known Scottish poet, Sir Walter Scott was (born in 1771) was his contemporary. Bardic poetry interested him and he could draw material from it for his book. In the introduction to Volume1. of “Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan,” James mentions a number of sources that he has drawn upon. In relation to Marwar, he mentions among others, the following: -

Of Marwar, there were the Vijaya Vilas, The Surya Prakas, and Khyat or Legends, besides detached fragments of reigns.

He also mentions drawing from “Chand Raesa” and “Prithviraj Raesa”

He mentions records by Abulfazal, and various Jain sources. To trace back the Rajput lineage (chatis Kulas) to antiquity, he used philological references and mentions the Puranas and Brahmanas. In order to connect the Rathores to Kanauj, he has referred to edicts and at other places also used references to other archaeological sites.

One of the persons, whom he met and consulted regularly, was the Jain Muni, Yati Gyanchandra. Recently a manuscript of Jaisamand Prashasti has been located at the Royal Asiatic Library, London. This is the work of Yati Gyanchandra, who translated the original masterpiece by Ranchodji Bhatt and gives details pertaining to the Jaisamand Lake, very similar to ‘Raj Prashasti’, also by Ranchodji which is said to be inscribed on marble
The transcript of “Jaisamand Prashasti” was probably prepared at the behest of James Tod, who took it with him and as he was Librarian at the mentioned library, (for 2 years) handed it to them. James Tod seems to have been a minute observer and an acute listener, who painstakingly drew on several resources.

However, of the bard and their method of history keeping, he has a lot to say. Quoting from him:

The heroic poems of India constitute another resource for history. Bards may be regarded as the primitive historians of mankind. Before, fiction began to engross the attention of the poets, .... the functions of the bard were doubtless employed in recording real events, and in commemorating real personages...The poets are the chief, though not the sole, historians of western India, neither is there any deficiency of them...to compensate for their magniloquence and obscurity, their pen is free; the despotism of the Rajput princes does not extend to the Poet’s lay, which flows unconfined except by the shackles of the chand bhujanga or serpentine stanza...there is a sort of understanding between the bard and the prince, a barter of solid pudding against empty praise whereby the fidelity of the poet chronicler is somewhat impaired...Still, however, these chroniclers utter truths, sometimes most unpalatable to their masters. When offended or actuated by a virtuous indignation against immorality, they are fearless of consequences...many a resolution has sunk under the lash of their satire, which has condemned to eternal ridicule names that might otherwise have escaped notoriety. the Vish, or poison of the bard, is more dreaded by the Rajput than the steel of the foe....

One more reason why the author has so much faith in oral testimony is, in his words-
The absence of all mystery or reserve with regard to public affairs in the Rajput principalities, in which every individual takes an interest from the noble to the porter at the city gates, is of great advantage to the chronicler of events...When matters of the state rendered it imperative to observe secrecy, the Rana of Mewar rejoined, “this is Chaumukha raj, Eklinga the sovereign, I, his vicegerent; in him I trust, and have no secrets from my children.”

A material drawback that...bardic histories...confined almost exclusively to the martial exploits of their heroes and to the rangranbhum or the field of slaughter. Writing for the amusement of a war like race, the authors disregard civil matters and the arts and pursuits of peaceful life; love and war are their favourite themes.... Again, the bard, enters too deeply into the intrigues as well as the levities of the court to...pronounce a sober judgement upon its acts...nevertheless, although open to these objections, the works of the native bards afford many valuable data, in facts, incidents, religious opinions and traits of manners; many of which, being carelessly introduced, are thence to be regarded as the least suspicious kind of historical evidence....”

The Bard is the keeper of history and this history becomes poetry. This is what he communicates and carries forward. Each time he remembers, he sings the tale and collective memory repeats along.. He is also the keeper and creator of folklore, because he is actively engaged with the art of song and recitation based on happenings and narrated to an audience. The Bard also remembers and recites the narrations made by his forefathers and thus extends the tradition of recitation and singing along with history.

James Tod is open and generous in attributing significance to Indian sources as well as way of life. While this gave him insights that many would have missed, his efforts also met with criticism and hostility along
with laurels and appreciation. One of his severest critics, was James Mill, who wrote “A History of British India” which took almost 12 years to complete. The author used documents and did not visit India. His book was meant to be a detached account and to counter those writers who were so enamoured by the subcontinent to have lost all objectivity and common sense. He saw India as being in “a semi barbarous age” and inferior to the British civilization. Mill was guided more by the principles of Utility, while Tod was more of an idealist who would have liked the British administrative system in India to be tempered with magnanimity foresight and continuing with traditions that had got ingrained in the culture of the land, even pertaining to administration, despite changes in dynasties. Commenting on Shahjahan’s act of passing on Nagore to Amar Singh’s son, the author does not mince words in advising his own people to learn from such acts. He writes-

It may be useful to record such facts by the way of contrast with...the present paramount powers of India should any of its tributary princes defy them as Umra did. . Even those despots borrowed a lesson of mercy from the Rajpoot system which does not deem treason hereditary nor attaints a whole line for the fault of one unworthy link. Shahjahan, instead of visiting the sins of the father on the son, installed him in the fief of Nagore.... But perhaps we have not hitherto dared to imitate the examples set us by the Moghul and even by the Mahratha; not having sufficient hold of the affections of the subjected to venture to be merciful; and thence our vengeance, like the bolt of heaven, sears the very heart of our enemies. Witness the many chieftains ejected from their possessions; from the unhallowed league against the rohillas, to that last act of destruction in Bhurtpoor, where as arbitrators we acted the part of the lion in the fable.... if we are only to regulate our political actions by the apprehension of danger, it must one day recoil upon us in awful retribution. Our system is filled with evil to the governed where a fit
of bile in ephemeral political agents, may engender a quarrel leading to the overthrow of a dominion of ages.

This lesson learnt from Indian Polity in 1832—exactly a quarter century before the annexation of Oudh and the Explosion of 1857.

James Tod drew lessons of governance from practices that had prevailed in this country before the advent of the East India Company. That he was not heeded as Mill was, is apparent with the course of future events. But what more could be extracted from the happening at the Red Fort of Agra in Shahjahan’s time and how other people estimated the personality of Amar Singh is still a matter of interest. The reference to Amar Singh in this book is concise and captivating. It also seems to delineate, the drama, irony and tragedy of the turn of events. However, it does not cover the complete life span of Amar Singh, his life at Nagore and relationship with the community. It does not mention Ballu Champavat, who, apparently was one of the loyalists who partook of his banishment and tried to put up a fight for the last remains. It also does not touch upon other battles, particularly, the one between Nagore and Bikaner (wherein Nagore lost) and which has given birth to the popular metaphor “Matere ki Raad”.

There is also no mention of the Pathaan and other characters who emerge in other tellings of the story. A study of these areas would bring forth his relationship with farming and pastoral management, so crucial to the life pattern of Rajasthan. Equally important is to view the role of Rajput clans like Mohils and Bhattis. It is also worth mentioning that one of the early Sufis to come to India, Sultan Tarkin made his way to Nagore. Also the shrine of Hazrat Hamid-ud-din (connected to the Chishtiya order of Ajmer) is also in this same city and part of the cultural ethos that came to Amar Singh.
It is quite evident that more information is yet required. The Khyets (Khyaats) of Jodhpur and Marwar that James Todd lists in his sources, have been quoted by many authors, including those writing in contemporary times. However, there seem to be some overlaps and mismatching of dates that need to be verified. The history of the Champavats, the chronicles of Nagaur, Ajmer and Bikaner would also shed more light. There are some books that have anecdotes, like the story of Anara, (wife of a nawab, with whom the Maharaja of Jodhpur had a liaison) and who impressed by the respectful behaviour of Jaswant Singh, second son of the Maharaja, requested the latter to bestow his inheritance on him as Amar Singh would be able to fend for himself and the Maharaja having given his word proceeded to act on it further. While the date of banishment seems to be widely accepted as 13 (Baisakh) April, there are diverse views regarding the year, the route to Shahjahan’s court and whether he met the emperor independently or was introduced by his father.

Prof. Satish Chandra in his book, ”Medieval India-From Sultanat To The Mughals” writes about the inheritance issue of Marwar. While, it is a broad observation, he gives the instance of Amar Singh as an example-

“There were no definite principles regulating the succession in Marwar. According to Jahangir, the rule of primogeniture did not obtain among the Rathors, the son whose mother was the special favourite of the father being nominated to the ‘gaddi’. Accordingly, in 1638, Maharaj Gaj Singh had set aside the elder son, Amar Singh, and nominated Jaswant Singh. The nomination was accepted by Shah Jahan although Jaswant Singh was only a minor, whereas Amar Singh had performed useful service against both Khan-i-Jahan Lodi and Juhar Singh in the Deccan, and had risen to the rank of 3000/2500. Amar Singh was granted the appendage of Nagor which had been earlier held by Rao Sur Singh of Bikaner. During the minority of Jaswant Singh, Marwar was administered
by an imperial nominee, Mahesh Das Rathor, no objection being raised to this from any side.”

This also clarifies the stature and calibre of Amar Singh. It also explains the relationship between the Mughal court at Agra and the Rajput princely states. The states accepted the supremacy of Mughal rule and the court at Agra allowed them to function as per their norms, acknowledging and respecting their customs, while maintaining the privilege of advise and interference if considered necessary.

It also reveals that Amar Singh did not look back to the homeland that had banished him and made no claims of inheritance.

(It also helps to understand the rivalry between Nagaur and Bikaner. While Amar Singh was at Agra, a battle over the watermelon farmland had taken place between Nagaur and Bikaner. According to other sources, Amar Singh wanted leave to return to Nagaur so as to alter this damage, but Salavat Khan who was on close terms with Bikaner would not permit it. Hence a strain of animosity existed between them.)

Medieval courts were known for their intrigue and rivalries. This is probably true for all empires and centres of power, control and wealth. The court of Shah Jahan also would have its share of under currents and cross currents. However, the extreme to which Amar Singh pushed the events and that too in the Royal court, is a subject that would find its way to the wandering bard.

Niccolao Manucci, a Venetian traveller who came to India as a young lad during Shah Jahan’s reign and stayed on to see the reign of Aurangzeb, has recounted the period in -Storia Do Mogor-or Mogul India (Translated with introduction and notes by William Irvine). In this he has written about the things he saw and heard about. He also served at the Mughal court.
Although, he came after the incident involving Amar Singh and Salavat Khan, he has written about it. Rather, it is what was recounted to him. Again, this writing is a product of listening- but, significantly, he came to know of the incident just a few years after it happened, and many people who had witnessed it, would have been alive.

Two incidents are placed one after the other. The first one involves Feda-e-Khan and Shah Jahan. The emperor, it seems, was in the habit of getting up early and gathering fruit with his favourite pages. One morning he had Feda-e-Khan for company. Niccolo writes-

“Gathering the best of fruit, Shahjahan, placed them in the hands of Feda-e-Khan and when about to enter the door of the harem, he asked for them. Feda-e-Khan made excuses and said that his majesty had given nothing to him.Shahjahan was displeased and said to him: I gave you the fruit and you have the temerity to deny it?

Feda-e-Khan then gave the fruit saying, “Your majesty observes the petty theft I committed and overlooks the large amount of more than thirty thousand that every day is robbed by the wazir?”

Shahjahan replied quietly, “I know it well and much do I desire to punish him, abhorring all thieves, but sometimes it is necessary to dissemble in order to be well served.”

In the next line, the incident concerning Amar Singh begins-

“At the court of Shahjahan was a great Hindu prince, called Amarsinh(Amar Singh)-that is to say, ”Lion-minded.” For several weeks he had failed to attend court. It is the practice for the Hindu princes and commanders to encamp with their tents for twenty four hours every week below the royal fortress.”
This goes well with the seven days leave granted by the emperor in the Nautanki text-implifying he could skip one attendance camp and present himself on the next.

It is also worth mentioning that in Manucci’s version, the fight takes place between Wazir Khan and Amar Singh. However, Manucci was not a witness to the incident and writes what came to him by word of mouth. He has referred to Amar Singh as a “great prince” and seen his name as meaning Lion minded, a terminology that is complimentary.)

When he did come to court-

“the wazir(Wazir Khan), who was very fond of him, went up quietly to him, and asked him why he had not come to court and performed his duties. Amar Singh, with his face all aflame, made no answer; thereupon the wazir said to him some words which are offensive among the Rajputs-that is to say, “May you be-, you villain!”

Hardly had Wazir Khan pronounced the words, when Amar Singh, laying hold of his dagger, plunged it into the wazir’s breast, and he fell dead in the royal presence. There stood Amar Singh, with the dagger still in his hand, looking at the king. All were in consternation at such an act, but Shshjahan dissembled, and rising, retired into the privacy of his harem without uttering a word. But he made sign for them to kill Amar Singh, as was done. The officers then present leapt upon him, and with his dagger he wounded six of them. The cavalry and infantry of Amar Singh who were outside the fortress, on learning the death of their lord, made use of their weapons, killing and decapitating whomsoever they encountered, getting away in safety. King Shahjahan afterwards granted the dignities of Amar Singh to his younger brother, named Jaswant Singh

While the name mentioned here is of Wazir Khan, the footnote mentions Salabat khan by name-
Rao Amar Singh, eldest son of Rajah Gaj Singh, Rathor, of Marwar (Jodhpur), killed Salabat Khan, Roshan Zamir, Bakhshi, in “darbar” on the last day of Jamada 1. 1054H. (August 5, 1644) and was himself slain...

(The Nautanki text also treats Salabat Khan as the wazir. It also talks of the king retiring to the harem, as is also the case here.)

(However, according to this version, the battle takes place immediately. The legend from Punjab also maintains this sequence of events. There are other versions that differ.)

That this incident is preceded by the one in the garden indicates aspects of Wazir Khan that are not complimentary to him. The emperor lets it pass as he seems to pass by the happening in the court. The job is done by mere indication. The smooth functioning of a power centre!

It is very interesting that the same book has a sketch of four people and an elephant fight, presented below.
The Translator’s note says-

"Illustration No.X1.bis.-The description placed opposite the picture in the volumeO.D.45, reserve, says it represents Shahjahan and his four sons,
along with a shaven Hindu prince named Amar Singh standing in front, and alongside of him, Wazir Khan, then the chief minister....”

There is also a more finished version of the same in the book. However, the sketch and the comment that goes with it is interesting because it has the three main players of our text together and also refers to them by their specific names.
3. Diverse Oral Narratives

Amar Singh is briefly mentioned in history-here and there. Written history, rather official history is the privilege of the few; the rulers or the victors. But the ruled who often do not win also have a way to remember those who are dear and daring. There lives in their heart a Robin Hood; Sultana Daku; Amar Singh Rathor; Mangal Pandey...an endless list of names; people who seem ordinary, suddenly do something extra-ordinary; their daring startles the complacency of a system and even if they do not see victory, they give the world something to remember. They are not perfect; have many faults, but that does not reduce the significance of their act-often a single act-bigger than the person. his quality may be his undoing. Like Amar Singh, who is naive and trusting, cheated by someone close. As was Siraj-ud-dulah; and many more. And also something similar each one has in personal memory. These characters are remembered not just with awe and admiration, but also fondness. They may be rude, clumsy, boastful; and yet beyond!

Braj Bhasha had gained popularity by the 17th Century and any traces or references to Amar Singh would give an idea of early constructs. There is poetry on Veer Singh Bundela of Orchcha and this may be seen by way of comparison /point of view. References closer to the incident might be different in perception as compared to later narratives. “Amar Singh Ka Saka,”is listed in some books as part of Braj cultural expression. The relevant text has to be located.

It is quite evident that the story of Amar Singh is not the story of one person alone; it brings in several characters and each one represents some aspect of social and psychological playing, in the midst of which Amar Singh acts (reacts)in a way that shakes the organized order. It is difficult, at the outset, to mark that point of connection which could have propelled society to take the story forward. James Tod saw in it, a lesson of generous pragmatism, but by no means does he advocate the
emulation of the behaviour of Amar Singh. Such characters do not need endorsement. They glow and burn by virtue of their fiery temperament. In Milton’s “Paradise Lost” Satan may be condemned, but the poet’s ink gives him a shine.

The bard as a companion is a dangerous phenomenon. It lures the person into taking on challenges more so to be judged by the observer and through him by posterity. There can be no persuasive conciliatry negotiation with the personal conscience. The bard as the chronicler is the conscience. For that presence messages expectation and is also the eager messenger to eternity. The bard talks not just of battle, but also sings out the names of those who were in it. To be on the bard’s lips is not just an honour, but an extension beyond mortal life. It takes existence beyond time and space-the virtual vaporizes/dictates the material.

There is another popular version that gives a twist to the tale. According to this, Amar Singh manages to escape from the court after striking down Salavat Khan (on his horse, that some say, which jumped over the Bokhara Gate). On reaching his house, he made further plans. Meanwhile, an award was announced on his head. His brother in law (wife’s brother) slyly convinced him to come for a secret meeting with the emperor. Amar Singh agreed in trust. Arjun Gaur, the brother in law, brought him to a low gate through which Amar Singh could not go without lowering his head and as that did not suit his temperament, he refused. Arjun Gaur suggested, that he entered backwards (almost lying, but head outwards and feet in first). As Amar Singh was adjusting his position, Gaur Killed him with a sword. Though, caught unawares, Amar Singh managed to tear Gaur’s ear apart. As news spread, Amar Singh’s wives prepared for Sati, but the corpse had to be retrieved for last rites. Ballu Champavat, goaded by his wife, decided to lead the fight (in some versions, the Rana of Udaipur, gifted him a white horse) and with his followers entered the Fort through the Bokhara Gate, and leaving his followers to fight the
soldiers, he went to retrieve the corpse and pushing the gifted horse over the gate, himself escaped with the corpse from another route. As the last rites were performed, he kept the soldiers at bay till he succumbed.

There is an anecdote, that Ballu Champavat joined Amar Singh in banishment, but when the latter asked him to look after his sheep, he refused and left him. “He won’t tend the sheep, but tend an army,” Amar Singh, it seems, mocked—a mockery that the friend made true.

Other Versions have a Pathan, Narshhawaz, and Amar Singh’s nephew (son of Jaswant Singh) as the leaders of the last battle. In others it is the Pathan’s son, who also becomes the nephew’s friend and confidant.

It is quite clear that there are several versions, story lines, with little twists here and there. The task is not to make preferences, but to see what these twists bring to the narrative and how they could be indicative of shifts in interpretation.

The names of those consumed by combat are made real by the bard’s record and listings. Their families and villages are mentioned. Then, with this awareness, this tale seems strange and gory. It is entrenched in blood and battle—and battle not far removed in the battlefield, but in the highest office of a kingdom, on roof tops and entry gates of a palace in use. It is not a story marked by sophistication, orderly mannerisms, delicate courtship or sweet and gentle settings. Instead of the splendour of the Mughal court, we are led into a quarrelsome world of cunning, intrigue and pettiness. Violence explodes. Intense emotions, quick impulses and high passion create life that is at an edge. This is countered by strong bonds of friendship, loyalty and generosity. Characters are full and real. It would be interesting to see where this saga would be placed within the paradigms of Indian classicism. Or as it emerges from the realm of folklore, it should be contextualised therein. Perhaps, the two
streams stand as being complimentary—not necessarily identical—to each other.

For example, how would Amar Singh be viewed as a hero? Which attributes and qualities would make him one? There is an indication in Tod’s telling that his headstrong nature led to his fall. Treating an attribute as a tragic flaw, could well be an outsider’s perception. The tripartite entanglement of Desi, Parampara and Videsi that contemporary historiographers have been discussing, seems to resound here, even as one is trying to critically look at some of the elements of this legend. Because it is not just an assumption that every creation (oral or as a text) is born within a tradition, whose existing paradigms affect the shaping of that work. It may fall in line, reinforcing the paradigm or shift from it, expanding the earlier position, modifying it or building a new one. Placing the legend within the stream of a reference will not only give a clearer understanding of this particular narrative, but also of its intent and positioning in relation to the rest. It could be part of the current, angular to it, parallel or even opposite. This cultural space, in most cases would rest on the social, and if not would be a conscious disassociation, again reflecting on the dynamics between society and the process of culture making, including with the culture maker/promoter/patron.

Amar Singh Rathore: When the Hero is Not the Victor

The little that can be seen of Amar Singh, makes him appear as a complex character. He is headstrong and so is banished? An Ivanhoe, who loses favour with the father (though not for so clear a reason as the Scottish hero) and so must bear the taboo. A son not valued by the father generally does not gain esteem and engages with the world with a disadvantage. Amar Singh does not fight with Jodhpur or his younger
brother. This is unlike the relationship between Prithviraj Chauhan and Jayachand, where the father’s preference for the latter, led to an animosity, that caused much warfare. As some scholars trace the lineage of Rathores to Kannauj. Amar Singh does not replay the traits of his ancestors. He just does not look back. In fact, by losing the title of Maharaja, he has to fend like a commoner-and outside the area of his birth. With the skill of the sword and the sword by his girdle, he seeks employment, and makes no attempt to galvanise support to gain back his deprived ownership. He is a warrior, but in the service of the emperor He is not afraid of battle but does not fight for himself. This is a peculiar trait. Not uncommon. It is the fortitude that towers above the humiliation He slashes one kind of selfhood, in this case, the one derived from birth, to reinvent another.

This man who has been turbaned in black, seems to possess a strange power. And yet he is an employee, has friends, is quarrelsome and vulnerable. He wins many battles, but in his absence Nagaur loses to Bikaner This is a defeat he cannot contend with; a battle, he must reopen. He is warm to people, but also rude, and loses a friend when the latter refuses to tend to the sheep he is fond of. One version of the tale has him winning a friend by sharing the last glass of water that he had, when crossing the desert.

In short, he is very real and identifiable, not the neat profiled hero that needs a Vidushak to be understood by the masses. Even the greatness associated with a knight on a mission like king Arthur does not define him. Amar seems the antithesis of so many such acclaimed or delineated heroes-a character that might later develop in narratives as the anti-hero. He does cause an upheaval. But he is not the victor.

This legend of Amar Singh is such that the hero is not the victor. It sounds strange, but plausible. A culture born out of the insecurities of small holdings and tiny kingdoms constantly at war with each other,
cannot belittle the readiness for combat even when, and perhaps specially, when the consequences are known beforehand. The hero, then is the one who is ready for the sacrifice. To be sacrificed. Victory is elusive, and the power of the victor yields history, glorified by virtue and righteousness. The others need to weave their narratives and carry them. For them more than victory, the combat is the moment of selfhood, of assertion of remembrance. The celebration is of the Daring.

“Sar Kata Sakte Hain, Par Sar Jhuka Sakte Nahin”. Each time this comes to the lips of anyone there is an Amar Singh lurking somewhere. This line can be interpreted in a thousand ways and so can the sudden startling action of Amar Singh. Every village treasures its heroes; some have songs too. (much later, 1857, threw up people, men and women who fought and lost. They were not victors. Yet they remain heroes) This is not just about foreign invasion, but incessant warfare that was a way of life. The legend of Ala-Udal is the story of two brothers committed to the kingdom of Mahoba, of Bundelkhand. Udal dies in battle against Prithviraj Chauhan. and Ala, when close to victory renounces it.

Yes, Folklore has carried forth narratives of those who were not victors. Is it to keep up their memory or because this was closer to people’s own experience? Studying this legend, in comparison to other similar narratives from folklore would probably help to contextualise it in the cultural milieu. Besides, an expansion of this study could attempt to understand the thematic nature of folk narratives, that is not necessarily a shadow of previously handled subjects, but has emerged from experience, howsoever metaphorical the treatment.

As the cultural landscape widens, images of the volatile Amar Singh, seem like the whirling of a dust storm, that rise with a gusto, envelop many and then are traceless-for to even look for its direction is to be naive. The disquiet needs to be absorbed to settle. Yet performers have tried to hold this energy on stage, not binding it, but letting it flow,
The legend from Punjab

The story of Amar Singh has travelled to many places and in different forms and colours. K.C. Temple in his book, "Legends of the Punjab" has a version that has the following title-
“Amar Singh of Garh Merta”

Merta? Not Nagaur? Not Jodhpur?

The title holds attention. Not because it is wrong, But because it is correct somewhere. When, banished from Jodhpur, Amar Singh came to Merta via and stayed with for several months. It is from here that he began his second journey into the world. According to some sources, any communication with the family was through the Merta chieftain, Raj singhji Kumpavat.

It further says-

“As Told by a Bard from the Kapurthala State.”

The editor’s introductory remark says-

“(the following is the bardic version of a startling incident at the court of the Emperor Shahjahan, which once created an immense sensation.)
“Startling” aptly describes the nature of the event. It is the reason for remembrance. It is also, as the editor says, the sensation in the memory - in the act of evoking the memory. The narrative is like a ballad, racy and intense, rich in colour and effused with the energy of the characters. Hadia or Hadi Rani is very close to the portrayal in the portrayal as it emerges in the initial scene of the Nautanki at hand. The language of the bard is earthy and poetic; its simplicity is charged with directness; mincing neither words nor thoughts. That Bard gives a preface in prose and he mentions the fine of seven lakhs in this as is the case in the Nautanki text. (However the leave for marriage is not mentioned. Hadia and Amar Singh seem married for long and warmly settled and comfortable with each other.)

The preface says- “Shahjahan Badshah se ahitkaron ne chughali khai ke,”Raja Amar Singh muddat se apke salaam ko nahin aaya jis pe Shahjahan ne hukum diya ke“sat lakh ke dastak jave.”

{People who did not wish Amar Singh well complained of his absence; consequently, the emperor announced a fine of seven lakhs}

When Amar Singh gets to know this, he asks his wife for his weapons so he could go to court.

“Rani, mera tarkash la de, zarri da, gende di dhar.”

She replies-

Sheesh bharun sharab da,piala mera hath.
Bhar bhar piala piwandi karti mushtak
Pe le Raja Amar Singh,na ho udas.
Rang mahilon sej bicchawndi kar le do baat”
No time to go to court—past midnight. Pour you a drink, in the cup of my hand; Be not upset, Raja Amar Singh; let’s talk awhile.

As Amar Singh cannot tune into her, she curses her luck for the husband he is. She says—

Mar jaa meri mata jinhen Hadi jai! Mar jaan tai aur chachi jinhen god khilai!

{Die my mother who gave birth to Hadi! Die my aunts in whose lap I grew up!}

The anguish of these lines turns to a taunt when she says—

Mar jave nai aur brahmin jine ne kari sagai Main beti Rajput di chakar gal lai!

{May the barber brahmin die who got me engaged—me a daughter of a Rajput married to a man in service!}

The tonality and arguments are very similar to the Nautanki text. She also offers her jewellery, “Enough to keep them well for four months”. But the open and warm hearted Hadia cannot keep Amar Singh back and he rides away on his horse.

(In this version, he does not go empty handed, but carries some mohurs for the emperor).

At the court Shahjahan asks Salavat khan to keep him at bay. Salavat khan does so and taunts Amar Singh by saying—Teri baat dige Darbar mein; main khara sidhare—

{Your standing in court has fallen}
Amar Singh is not rebuffed. Says- “Amar Singh digaye na dige; jaise parbat bharī.”

{Amar Singh does not fall even when pushed; like a huge mountain.}

Salavat Khan is more insulting and says with disdain- “Hatke khara ganwarriar!” and “Kya kare ganwar!”

{stay away boor!}

This is what Amar Singh is unable to swallow-

“Ganwar kahe se khijta bharta hankare
Aj keha ganwariar, kal dega gari
Parson uun banh pakarke kadh de kachahari baahar!”

{Today you call me boor; tomorrow you shall abuse and day after hold my arm and throw me out of court!}

The Bard says- Jabbel kadhi misri nikali do dhari
Mare Salabat Khan di ja khili pari
Lagi mard de hath na rahī voh dhari

{At this point he took out his double-edged sword and tears through Salabat Khan.}

“Ehle apne sat lakh Salabat piare!”

{here take your seven lakhs Salabat dear!}

Kingsmen look on and say-
“Bhala kiya Amar Singh Salabat maare!”

{Well done Amar Singh—that you’ve done away with Salabat!}

However Shahjahan asks the nobles not to let Amar Singh escape and leaves. Amar Singh moves to Shahjahan—

“Dilli de Badshah hun darwaza kyun bhere?” {why does the king of Delhi shut his door?} He had come in good faith.

(As no date for the origin of the Bard’s version is given, this reference of Dilli instead of Agra, indicates the existence of the Delhi Fort.)

The nobles surround him and the might of their swords is tested. The Bard mentions Kishan Das (also mentioned in other sources) along with many others who fought that day and lost with Amar Singh.

Ram Singh is waiting outside and when he gets the news he is dejected—

“Mere dhari rahin do palke, ghar jao kahar:
Apne mahalon so raho, ‘jis se piari nar.
Mere dhore woh rahe bandhe talwar.”

{The two palanquins stand in vain; go home bearers: Go home those who have dear wives; Come with me, those who are bound to the sword.”}

And with that they attacked the fort, “Darwaze tore kile de kuhare naal” and breaking down the gate entered with his band of warriors; swords clanged and blood flowed like the water of the Ganges that coloured their robes; In the frenzied fight Ram Singh emerged victorious, though with a band reduced by half.
At home, Hadia eagerly awaits her warrior.—“Meri bandi daur; mahilon sej bichha de, thori post ghol. Age Raja Amar Singh Rathor!”

{Run my maid, Spread the bed in the palace, be ready with opium, as Amar Singh comes.}

Unche charke dekhdi bandi nadan.

The maid climbs up, but can see no “Doman di joran na lal rabab-khali tarkash bajdi, dal ghende dhal.” (no drums nor red lutes; quiver rattles empty and the yellow shield with crowd)

“Sab chizan dikhli dindi hain, magar Raja nahin dikhda.”

{I see all things, but do not see the Raja}

The Rani, however insists, “Mera Raja bara bahadur hai!” {My man is very brave}

(What love and pride and hope in this articulation at this desperate moment!)

When she learns the truth, she asks the maid to remove her “singar” and fears that—

“Badshah mainu pakarke din se be-dn karega, aur aur chakki piswakar dand dilwa dega. Us bipta se bihtar hai, ke ap hi mar jaun.”

{The king will drag me and despoil me of my faith and set me to grind grain. Better to die than such an existence!}

And taking a sword struck her neck.
When the king heard this, he was remorseful and gave the land of Amar Singh to his men.

The narrative of the Bard is swift and short almost as quick as this incident that happens in a flicker. It is livid with emotion and vivid with the visuals. Words gush out, like the blood gushing like the fountain in the tale. There is no respite and when Hadia says, “Run my maid, spread the bed,” the eagerness of life springs forth—but in vain; it is through the urgency of activity, we feel the inactivity that has already set in. The rapidity of the piece prevents it from becoming sentimental, but when the maid says, “no drums nor lutes ; I see all things, but do not see the raja”, the Bard tells us of life becoming non-life.

**Looking at Nautanki**

Amar Singh Rathore is a much-performed piece and it would not be possible to count the number of times it has been played. Natha Ram Gaur, the playwright, has created a text that has become part of folklore, and the couplets are passed on as if they were always part of an oral tradition and continue to be so.

While beginning the work on this project, it was necessary to go through the text. Asking leading performers of Nautanki for a copy, did not yield one, as they did not possess any. This was surprising, as this is an ongoing show. But they know the text; the lines, the musical score, the drama. They remember it all. And it is by remembering the listening of others that they learnt it! The memory of a performance instils the performance in them so as to enable them to perform. They extend what inspired them, pulled them into performing. At the basis could be their perception, and in the extension could be their own skill and talent.
However, Shri Bhagwan Das Morwal very generously gave me his copy. His novel “Sur Banjaran” based on the life of a Nautanki performer, traces the journey of Nautanki through various phases of the past several decades. It also mentions several performances of, “Amar Singh Rathore, “ which makes the popularity of this Nautanki more than evident.

The hard-bound book has the Nautanki of Amar Singh Rathore in two parts. Both are full texts, separate and complete in themselves, but the second focusses on the next generation.

Amar Singh Rathore Artharth (meaning) Banka Beer(part1) Amar Singh urf Ram Singh ka Byah(part 2)

The First Part is widely performed and popular as a performance. It is acclaimed for its poetry as also for the performative challenges it renders. It is also based broadly on well-known elements of the legend and thus the narrative draws substance which gives it inherent strength and structural cohesiveness.

Interaction with the Nautanki artists will tell more about the second part. While, “Amar Singh Rathor” is a significant landmark of Nautanki, the second has not made a mark of its presence.
4. Analysis of the Performance texts as envisaged by the authors

Text Analysis of the Nautanki “Amar Singh Rathor”

One of the noticeable features of this Nautanki script is, that there are no acts or scene divisions. The Nautanki reads in a seamless flow of narrative performance, interspersed with the active involvement of the Narrator, Kavi as he is referred to, implying that he is more than the conventional Ranga or sutradhar. Kavi or poet, suggests the writer himself and his unique voice and presence. The Kavi connects the units and as this is frequent, it seems that he is throughout on stage, for often he speaks(sings) even in between the characters’ interaction and execution of action. He is witness and more than witness, because he consciously sets the tonality of performance, supportive for the actor and indicative for the audience as well. He not only narrates, but also comments on what is happening, echoes some of the phrases used by the characters and contributes to the emotion, besides setting a perspective with which the narrative is to be seen. Such emphasis on the “Telling” of the story is rare and has been set forth with intent.

1. The opening is the invocation to the deities.
2. This is followed by an added invocation steeped in gratitude for Queen Elizabeth and seeking blessings for her and her rule.

The lines are-
Elizabeth Dvitiye (second) empress, good gracious strong. Prayer this ours is, may you live long long.
Chaubola-May you live long long, rule beneficient continue Fortunate we are all, having queen good like you Under English sovereigns we received blessings new new All of them had do good to us in their view.

Couplet-Your gracious majesty. Of the same dynasty Your nature too kind.

Long rule we yours sincerely we pray combined.

It is interesting to note how in a traditional metre, another language is framed. Apart from this, one wonders at this dedication and its purpose. Queen Elizbeth2. ascended the throne of England in1952, by which India had gained Independence and ceased to be a colony-unless the poet had the Commonwealth in view. Had Elizabeth 2. not been specified one could have assumed that Elizabeth 1. was being alluded to, although her reign ended in 1603, almost 25 years before Shahjahan ascended his. Could it be that the writer was trying to make the audience curious as to why a monarch ought to be blessed?

Shri Morwal has taken note of this sequence in his novel, “Sur Banjaran”,wherein he states that this piece was a delight for the comedian and he by playing and by making fun of the lines, instilled the irony into the audience. It was to meant to be played with exaggeration - so that the mockery would be evident. But why the British Monarch? Probably to trace a thread of oppressive rule by all foreign monarchs that that connects back to Shahjahan and yet reverberates in the collective memory of the audience.

This is an innovative device that bridges historical space taking the audience from the present to a recent and and somewhat familiar past to further back into centuries away, also allowing the audience too carry their point of view from the contemporary to a lesser familiar distance.
2. Kavi gives a brief background of Amar Singh who is a sipahsalar, stationed at Agra, whilst his brother, Jaswant Singh looks after the affairs at Nagaur. The text then moves straight into the seed moment from which the conflict is to take off. In Shah Jahan’s court, Amar requests for leave of absence as he has to bring his bride from Bundi. The emperor is reluctant, because exigencies arise in the empire for which Amar Singh may be required, but accepts his ‘arzi’ and permits seven days leave.

The dramatic craft of the writing lies in keeping its focus on the central thread, viz, the happenings at the Agra court. It overlooks the biographical detail of Amar Singh’s banishment from Jodhpur and losing his kingdom to Jaswant Singh.

There is also no mention of the fact, that Bundi had refused a matrimonial alliance with Akbar and that Shah Jahan as Khurram had sought shelter there when he was out of favour with Jahangir and that he had been welcomed warmly.

(Bundi along with Kota, constituted the Hada territory, which was also the most fertile region in the desert land and it is from the land that that the identity of Hadi Rani is carved and she is addressed as such.)

Also, Salavat Khan is not a participant in this conversation, implying Amar Singh’s closeness with the emperor and that he had the status to over-rule the concerned officer.

History merely states that Amar Singh was an absentee from court, ie, not present in the set tent outside the Fort, as was the required norm and practice in those days.
(some say it was because of a hunting expedition)

That the “gauna” was the reason, is part of folk and oral tradition.
It may be interesting to mention here, that Rani Laxmijiji Chudawat of Deogarh writing in contemporary times states that the journey from Deogarh to Chittor, which is barely 200km would (with elephants, camels and horses) take 4-5 days. The seven day leave period to cover the distance from Agra to Bundi and back, is realistically very demanding. However, seven has a reverberation in folk narration and here denotes a fixed time period, not indefinite.

3. The next sequence takes a leap into the barren desert, widespread and waterless—the marusthal, or the space of the dead (maru+sthal). Here, Narshhawaz Pathan is choking with thirst and happens to meet Amar Singh returning with his newly wed wife. Amar Singh, too has a long way to go, but shares a bowl (katori) of water with him. Deeply touched, the Pathan pledges his friendship and life to Amar Singh, for this bowl of water has saved his. Moved, by this expression of gratitude, Amar Singh also seals their friendship by the customary exchange of turbans.

This sequence at one level carries within it the earthiness of existence and at another transcends the story as it shifts into the lifeless bleached desert landscape, devoid of colour and crowd—a stark surface—three strangers and thirst that binds them. Thirst in the arid desert means desperation. But the man does not snatch the water; he asks for it and Amar Singh also shares it; he does not give him all for that would make him a daani. Here, they remain equal in togetherness and dignity. In this deserted space, trust is born; friendship blossoms and commitment for life is ritualised.

It goes to the playwright’s credit that he has created this moment in the entirety of starkness. There are no accompanying servants, maids, singers or palanquin carriers accompanying the bride and bridegroom. All three characters are shorn of glitter and exist as human beings with basic needs like water. It is also poignant that Amar Singh does not enquire about the
Pathan’s credentials before sharing the water—it is done in the spirit of open brotherhood.

Many writers have talked of the Pathans as being the remnants of soldiers left from Sher Shah Suri’s army when he encroached into the desert. His comment that, ”for a handful of sand, I would have lost a kingdom,” is often quoted even in conversations. The Pathans in the area, were considered to be people who survived by taking away cattle.

In the popular Folk narratives of both Pabuji and Tejaji, the central protagonists confront the Pathans and retrieve the cattle, though losing their lives in the process. This animosity towards the Pathan is absent in the sequence between Amar Singh and Narashhawaz. Amar Singh does not ask him - who are you - what are you doing here - how did you get here etc. A thirst man is a thirsty man. He gets what he needs. No questions asked. Away from the world, something quiet and beautiful transpires like an oasis unlike the intrigue of the court and the fury of the battle which the audience is about to encounter.

This is a great moment in folklore, because that is where it comes from. Khayal and Kathputli narratives also have similar sequence, though the placing in those Forms could be different. Therefore, this construct of the folk mind is very special, because it transcends its own narratives. In an unassuming way, it strikes a different chord, as the sand obliterates the markings on its surface. For, this scene, in the middle of nowhere could not be anywhere else.

4. Kavi tells us that Amar Singh moves to Agra to be with his wife, while he is missed in the court. In the following unit, Salavat (mentioned mostly as Salabat in other books) Khan, the Mir Bakshi or the Controller of Military Accounts takes up the issue of Amar Singh’s absence with the emperor who initially is dismissive, then reasons with the officer, that
Amar Singh being a courageous warrior is an indispensable asset and must be only gently reprimanded, for a lion must get the due he deserves. Salavat Khan insists on the imposition of fine, a lakh for a day, no less. The king is aware, that Amar Singh gets easily offended and a “mard” (male) of his stature must be humoured. Salavat mocks at these reasons for preferential treatment as if only a Rajput could possess these qualities and not the others. Salavat Khan’s malice is quite evident, his tone derogatory of Amar Singh and his play of arguments manipulates the emperor who then agrees with him and Ram Singh, who is the nephew of Amar Singh is called to convey this order to the latter, viz, to immediately present himself with the fine of seven lakhs, as he has overstayed his leave by a week.

This unit is also an interesting debate between the emperor’s need for the support of the Rajputs and the Mir Bakshi’s insistence on the rule book.

5. Amar Singh lies alone when Ram Singh enters and explains the royal ultimatum. Amar Singh feels insulted and wishes that Ram Singh had behaved as a lion and avenged this insult, while Ram Singh says that he was quiet for the sake of his uncle and that he is ready to go back and challenge with the sword. However, Amar Singh chooses that role for himself. He asks for his armour, horse and gets ready to leave, when Hadi Rani enters and tries to stop him, “go if you must, but wait till it is morning.”

It is indeed ironical, that a popular character like her has no personal name and is known by the Hada kingdom that was her father’s. She tries to seduce him, take him to the bed that awaits their mutual pleasure and offers him her necklace worth nine lakhs and more. But for Amar Singh, it is not a matter of money, but of the humiliation that this royal command has caused. And as a Rajput, he is always prepared for combat. Hadi Rani does not give up and tries to lure him with the assertion of a demanding
wife. She is far removed from the conventional stereotype of shy demure, newly wed, and is in many ways similar to the portrait of Rani Hadia in the Kapurthala Bard’s version of the same narrative, although there she does not come across as a new bride; the two seem a well settled domestic couple.

She wants him to quit the ‘chakri’ that does not let them enjoy their togetherness. She treats his being an employee with disdain, perhaps only in the context of the moment, because it was customarily acceptable for a Rajput to be pledged in service, as long as it was on mutually agreed terms and conditions suited to his honour. She then curses all - though playfully - to those who arranged this match, right from the barber, priest and brother in law, Jaswant Singh, who married her to Amar Singh’s sword.

(Interestingly, in some historical accounts, it is Jaswant Singh who was engaged to the Hada household. By this indication here, the playwright combines history with popularly accepted notions.)

When, the Rani remains adamant in preventing his departure, Amar Singh threatens to hit her with a hunter. This is probably a whip, which would be in his hand if he was preparing to mount his horse. The whipping of the horse is a metaphor that occurs in folklore narratives of Rajasthan, particularly in moments when the protagonist faces the dilemma between the wedlock ritual and the call for battle. (the horse is treated as an extension of the character).

Seeing Amar Singh’s determination, the Rani leaves all ploy and reveals what she has sensed - that she fears for his safety and consequently of her life deprived of him. Amar Singh tells her that he will return and as morning streams in, he sets to go, but he confirms to Ram Singh that he
goes with the awareness that this could be a day of no return and he ie Ram Singh should help the Rani handle her widowhood.

It is this awareness that makes his act an act of daring; the one who is at a point from where there is no looking back. Kavi narrates the act of getting ready—and this may be treated as a ritual.

6. And as Kavi narrates, Amar Singh enters the court where Salavat Khan mocks at Amar Singh who retaliates, taking out his sword, and at that point, the emperor adds another 50,000 to the fine for misconduct. As Salavat Khan taunts Amar Singh further, calling him a “ganwaar” (boor) and after an exchange of retaliations, Amar Singh slays him with his sword, then and there. He claims, that that is the payment of the fine and for the new addition, he is ready to pay it in a similar fashion.

As the action is also narrated by the Kavi, and it is not clear how it would be enacted— with emotionally charged fervour, or as an illustrative act. The emperor quits the space, and goes into the Queen’s chamber, where the Kavi follows him and the story moves on.

A killing in the court is a monumental act and has few parallels in theatre, ‘Julius Ceaser’ being one and hence the question of aesthetics emerges for to show this act in itself is a deviation from a general convention.

This incident is recorded in history and recounted in several oral versions. One is rendered in a popular couplet quoted in “Marwar Ka Itihas” Part2:

un mukh te gagyo kahiyo, inn kar layi kataar.
vaar kahann paayo nahin, jamdadh ho gayi paar.
(As he barely uttered “g” to say the word “ganvaar”, Amar Singh took out the sword and before he could say , “vaar” i.e complete the word, the sword was through his chest.)

In the Punjabi narrative of the legend, Amar Singh takes this insult of being called a boor (ganvaar) to a logical development. He says, “today you call me a boor: tomorrow you will abuse me and day after keep me out of the kachheri (court)”, thus articulating both the inference of the word and the layered insecurity, he stabs Salavat Khan.

By most accounts, Amar Singh is overpowered at the King’s indication and slayed there itself. “The Oriental Biographical Dictionary” by Thomas William Beale (Asiatic Society 1881 - original from Oxford University) sums up Amar Singh as-

“Amar Singh, son of Gaj Singh, a Rajput chief, of the title, Rithor. He killed Salabat Khan, Mir Bakhshi in the 17th year of Shah Jahan’s reign, in the presence of the emperor on Thursday evening, the 25th of July, 1644; 0.5.30th Jamadi1, 1054H; and was by order of the emperor pursued and cut to pieces after a gallant defence near one of the gates of the Fort of Agra, which is to this day called Amar Singh Darwaza or Amar Singh gate.”

The narrative of the legend by the Bard of Kapurthala also maintains this cycle of events.

However, the Performing Arts, including Kathputli and Khayal, have another trajectory of sequences that are unfolded as the performance progresses.

7. As mentioned earlier, the emperor enters the queen’s chamber and shares the news with her and she breaks down, for Salavat was her brother.
8. Outside Amar Singh creates mayhem supported by his barber, Kishna (also mentioned in the Punjabi narrative) and as narrated by the Kavi, more fighting and killing takes place; the courtiers are afraid.

9. Amar Singh challenges the might of the emperor and manages to escape.

10. The emperor then asks his courtiers if any one of them is lion enough to capture Amar Singh and bring him to the king. He offers promotion and twelve villages as reward. When all are quiet, Arjun Gaur, vows to tread where the rest feared and bring Amar Singh to him. In most accounts Arjun Gaur, brother in law of Amar Singh (brother of his earlier wife, Gaurji) is mentioned as his assassin.

11. An elated Arjun Gaur shares the change of tide in his fortunes, for he could thus rise and fulfill his ambitions. His wife opposes him for it is unethical to desert a person of the family and secondly, because of the power of Amar Singh for before him its best to keep the head low; to raise it is to have the head beheaded from the torso. Arjun Singh wishes to live with head high or no head, for that be end of all worry.

   This play on the word head is a way by which the playwright is preparing us for the metaphor that is to follow and be the doom of Amar Singh.

   This scene, in some ways is reminiscent of Mandodri advising Ravana not to stray from the right path, but the character of the wife develops no further. Significantly, she has no name.

12. Amar Singh and Ram Singh plan the future course of action. Amar Singh is aware, that having killed Salavat Khan, he is now at war with the emperor himself. Ram Singh offers to prepare a unit with the best soldiers. Arjun Singh arrives there and congratulates Amar Singh on his
heroic deed that has restored the pride of all Rajputs and scared the others. He offers an invitation from the emperor to negotiate a compromise. Amar Singh refuses, but Hadi Rani prevails on him to favour peace. He agrees. After he agrees, Arjun asks him to leave his sword behind, as they are going for negotiation. He has to comply—having given his word. A sneeze is heard, that scares Hadi Rani. She entrusts him to brother Arjun Gaur and implores him to take care of his well being, while at the same time giving a small knife to Amar Singh that can be concealed in the pocket.

This is a moment in the family set with lies and deceit, while trust is swaddled in mistrust. The writer treats Arjun Gaur as Hadi Rani’s brother— as Amar Singh’s constant reference to the bond between a brother and sister indicates. Most accounts, however, place him to be the brother of Amar Singh’s earlier wife.

This scene is an absolute contrast with the desert sequence where strangers meet and then open their arms and bond for life. Here a family member comes to destroy the other.

The small knife is also a significant contrast to the earlier use of sword, and denotes the altered stature of Amar Singh—from an open challenger to a dealer of secrecy. He is not comfortable with the situation, but goes on, because he has agreed to go.

13. As Kavi tells us, Arjun Gaur tries to think of a plan to do away with Amar Singh. He suggests that they go through the window as no one must see them. Amar Singh refuses, because for this he would have to lower his head and as a Rajput he could not bow his head. Arjun suggests that he then place his feet in first. As Amar Singh follows this instruction, Arjun Gaur stabs him from the back. Even after being fatally wounded, Amar Singh hits at Arjun and cuts off his nose.
14. An elated Arjun Gaur goes to the emperor to break the news of his success and receive the reward. The emperor, though is filled with anger and remorse that a warrior like Amar Singh should be killed by treason. He refuses to view the body as this was not victory won in battle. As a reward to Arjun, he has his moustache cropped up, face blackened and sent astride on a donkey’s back.

In some versions, instead of the window, Amar Singh is asked to enter through a low gate, and he being exceptionally tall, would be required to bend his head which would imply bowing before the enemy and so was unacceptable. So, he was asked to enter with his feet going in first and head facing outwards. He is nevertheless killed in the process by Arjun Gaur.

While in this piece, the emperor humiliates Arjun Gaur, in several versions he has him slayed him, for a man prone to deceit cannot be trusted or applauded.

15. The emperor then plans to have the body brought in and announce that a burial would be provided for Amar Singh, because he wants to see if any Rajput would come forward to claim his mortal remains, and if so would be worthy enough to replace the deceased. If none would dare to come, then he would take this body to the Rani so she could become a sati.

This thought of the emperor makes him appear benign at heart. At the same time, the ensuing series of battles acquire the nature of a game.

In the legend from Punjab, the mortal remains are claimed by Ram Singh in an immediate battle and taken with the returning empty palanquin. The Rani sends for a sword and slashes her head, fearing that now, by virtue
of being the wife of the vanquished, she would be made captive and made the emperor’s slave—an existence she rejects. The emperor, on receiving this news, is so moved, that he returns Nagaur to the family of Amar Singh. No further battle is mentioned.

16. In the Nautanki, the news of the happening reaches the naumahala that is cast in doom. The Rani prepares for Sati, but for that she must be consumed by the same pyre with which the husband is lit. Ram Singh wants to lead the fight, but he is too small and the only heir of the Rathors. She then sends a letter to Ballu Singh, a childhood friend of Amar Singh and of the same clan, but with whom Amar Singh had strained relations.

According to various sources, Ballu Champawat was one of the few loyal supporters who left Jodhpur with Amar Singh when he was banished and later looked after the affairs at Nagaur. However, once when asked to pay heed to the sheep as they were being taken by wolves, Ballu Champavat refused saying that that was the shepherd’s job, not his. It is said that Amar Singh had retorted that he (Ballu) will heed the Mughal army and not the sheep! Ballu then left his service.

17. Now, when the letter came from Hadi Rani, Ballu Singh reacts with indifference. “Uninvited for weddings and feasts, now to lose my head we are of the same clan!” he retorts.

18. The letter bearer conveys these reactions to the Rani who loses heart, but then sends Ram Singh with a letter to Narashhawaz—the man with whom turbans had been exchanged.

19. Narashhawaz also pales with the content of the letter. His son Nabirasool asks him the reason. Narashhawaz is torn between his loyalty to Amar Singh who saved his life and the emperor, whose employee he currently is “Yaar to sahaj banana; magar mushkil hai nibhana”. The son
suggests that he resign from the employment and then be free to follow
the calling of his heart.

20. Narashhawaz takes Nabirasool with him to meet the emperor and
settle all accounts so that he could leave instantly with his entire unit.
“istifa dakhil karoon shehanshah huzoor, ab yeh naku karna hame na
manzoor”.

The emperor is taken aback for this is the time he needs the Pathan
team, pre-empting the revolt of the Rajputs. However both father and son
want the resignation to be accepted, willingly or unwillingly. The king
complies, but with bitterness.

This sequence does highlight the mercenary nature that structured the
army—and the fragility of the empire resting on armed power; with the
emperor dependent on loyal soldier units—which Amar Singh provided.

21. After resigning the two go to Naumahala and console Hadi Rani whose
intent that Amar Singh gets a proper funeral seems synonymous with her
desire to be a sati, for his mortal remains need to be freed.

22. The battle ensues. Dalel Khan and Narashhawaz confront each other—
the former accusing the latter of being a’neech mard’ who is “hamdard of
a Hindu’. However others join in and Narashhawaz is killed.

23. Nabirasool conveys this news to the Rani, who is dejected and feels she
ought to swallow a diamond and die, but Nabirasool is adamant on
continuing the battle.

24. Ballu Singh’s wife asks the maid to serve him food in vessels of iron.
When he reacts, being used to silver and gold, she scolds the maid for
serving him in a metal he fears. When Ballu protests, she counters by
saying that if he was not afraid of metal, he would have been in battle to get the remains of Amar Singh.

“Though born a kshatriya, has picked no family trait” She demands that she be given the armour instead, while he, on whom the male creation is wasted, should be the woman at home, watching how the fight goes. Hit by these words, Ballu Singh puts on the armour and presents himself at the naumahala.

25. Ram Singh respectfully welcomes him and Ballu letting bygones be bygones, prepares for battle. He talks of the role the Rajputs have played in the building of the empire and that the same energy and power would be seen again. Inspired by his words Nabirasool also adds his unit to the battle.

26. As Kavi tell us, these warriors enter the Fort, and a fierce battle ensues. The emperor himself bears witness and sends in more forces. Ballu Singh reaches where the mortal remains lie and is about to have them picked, when he is further attacked; tired and wounded as he was, injured further, he collapses.

According to several oral tellings and “Champavat ka Itihas” as quoted by Himmat Singh Rathor in his book “Veervar Amar Singh Rathor”, it was Ballu Champawat who brought the mortal remains. As he was surrounded by the Mughal Army, jumped off the fort wall and was able to fulfill the task. This narrative also states that the battle continued up to satisthal, where Ballu Champavat continued the fight saying to the Rani, “you go and I follow - let Amar Singh know how I heed the army.” According to this version, it is here that he succumbed.

27. In the Nautanki, the news of Ballu’s collapse spells doom. “doob jayega Rathoron ka naam; Balleji bhi yudh mein aa gaye kaam.”
Then Ram Singh and Nabirasool take on the task on themselves, giving example of Luv Kush who as children showed their power. The Rani too wants to join the battle, but they request her not to. 
(In Tod’s version ,the Rani of Bundi, herself entered Fort and took the remains.)

28. The joint Pathan and Rajput units enter the Fort and fight several officers who feel that the young lads will be no match, but prove to be. The emperor views the battle closely.
“Ram Singh Rajput sher Nagauri ka jaya hai
Na ladne ki umar kamar so tegh bandh aaya hai.”

30. The battle heats up. Ram Singh orders that their side should spread all over. Kishna Nai and Nabirasool follow so. Ram Singh comes face to face with Badul Khan. The exchange between them is racy, one being fom Kabul, the other Nagaur. However, Ram Singh is able to reach the mortal remains.

31. At this point, the emperor intervenes. He accedes victory to Ram Singh and Nabirasool, granting Ram Singh the position of Sipah Salar,held by his uncle and post of Shahbaaz to Nabirasool. He mourns the loss of his capable officer, Amar Singh:
“Afsos sad afsos ha mein to daga se lut gaya
Banka Sipah Salar mera tha so jag se uth gaya”

32. In the naumahala, preparations are on for Sati. Ram Singh wants to sit close to his uncle and Rani, for there would be no meeting hence.
“ab juda hogi hamse to kuch der mein;paas apne zara tu bithale hame.”

The desire for calmness and momentary sense of togetherness, that is to dissolve forever, bears the irony of the situation. This is probably the only
pause in the incessant hue and cry of the battle. The only silence. And this peace is stillness before it all slides into nothingness.
The desert, that thirsts for coziness in the midst of strife. The young Ram Singh is trying to hold onto something which has fled or is fleeting by! It is Rani who tells him that this is where all relations end, though what for him is the clay of Amar Singh is her ‘shringar’ as that is to be her destiny soon.

33. At this point the Kavi says, that Jaswant Singh brings a bimaan to travel to the Satisthal and that crowds come to see the spectacle-tamasha- of the act.

34. The Rani is set for sati- implying that the mortal remains of Amar Singh receive the proper ritual as per custom.

“Ak din moi byah pati, sang laye nij dham.
Aaj pati ke sang men mein jaaoon sur dham.”

35. The Kavi closes the performance, saying that the Rani ascended Heaven and may all here be blessed and live long.

Observations

The text at hand is complex and layered with cultural inferences; it is also steeped in the history of the medieval period and carries within it the turmoil of a generation that saw its life as measure for values like honour, valour and integrity- where the individual was contained within a code, and every act was a movement guided by it.

This text has a historical event at its core; many of the characters are related to that event. Apart from that, the writer has drawn from various
other oral narratives and created a piece for performance on the popular Nautanki stage.

The subject is grim and it is probably the Form that gives it the zest which can carry the sound and fury that the core entails. At the same time, by creating the window scene, where Amar Singh refuses to lower his head, the metaphor that characterised the man has been illustrated by a performative enactment of the idiom - with its irony - as a trusting Amar Singh walks into the trap designed for his paradigm. This makes a performance of the metaphor itself. It also creates a distance for the viewer, generating suspense and some humour in the telling just as a twist in the tale is imminent. It seems literal and at the same time an idiom pushed to the extreme; and hence does not shed its logic. The very fact that a performance is a selective and aesthetic arrangement makes this action a symbolic enactment of a trait - that in the grammar of another genre be seen as a tragic flaw; in folk lore a cherished and celebrated attribute of identity.

The text handles a historically sensitive period and examines the relationship of the Rajput chieftains at the Mughal court. The contribution of the Rajputs, the awareness of the emperor in maintaining the correct etiquette in handling them and the inter dependence of both is given space. Altered diplomacy shatters peace.

For a Musical to attempt such a debate is a difficult task, specially as Nautanki must also address from the popular stage. The writer has taken care to prevent the text from becoming a divide between black and white treatment of two communities. The friendship between Amar Singh and Narashhawaz extends as a close bond the next generation, even after the two have passed away. That bonding has found its roots. Largely because it is born of the awareness and memory of kindness in the desert. That has a hold tighter than family ties. Arjun Gaur, a close relative kills Amar
Singh with deceit for his personal ambition, while, Narashhawaz, a stranger sacrifices his life for an oral declaration of friendship. The emperor is also overall benign and holds Amar Singh in high regard and even though manipulated, restores balance by handing Nagaur to the family of Amar Singh. Salavat Khan emerges as the one with malice, but he too works through the attendance register. (One of the sources mentions that the ruler of Bikaner which was at constant war with Nagaur, had Salavat Khan on his side and so Salavat had this attitude towards Amar Singh.) Intrigue was a way of life in practically all medieval courts. However, it cannot be denied that the strain between the ruler and the ruled does surface and that for the ruled dignity is a sensitive issue; one that makes or mars their survival. Many kingdoms claim Rajput lineage, but not all Rajputs were kings. They entered into service contracts on mutually agreed conditions. Moreover, Amar Singh as an upright general had proved his worth, as the emperor himself acknowledges, and so when officially punished, it was bound to create a furore within him and in his peers. The text does capture many shades and even while accommodating the medieval court maneuverings, keeps the intrinsic social fabric in view, with its contradictions, strengths and inherent togetherness. That the conclusive and victorious battle is fought by jointly by Nabirasool and Ram Singh speaks a lot.

The structure of the Nautanki is such that it seems to have two parts. The first is an almost clear uphill diagonal that leads to the killing of Amar Singh. The second part is the movement of the plot to the final act of Sati.

While the first seems to be a relentless thrust of units moving towards a main objective, the second seems to move in loops having several episodes strung together around Hadi Rani’s attempt to find support to confront the emperor. Rather than one action, there are three battles and so the tempo seems to be constructed more as a narration of sequences
leading to the conclusive moment, while in the first part constitutes a
dramatic construct. Picking up the threads after a major action creates
this plateau effect from where the action gradually develops momentum.
However, the heightened emotion and passion that fills the first part, now
gives space to telling the stories of other characters connected with Amar
Singh. This connection provides the basis for their stature and view
points. The story and the drama wrangle through the illustrativeness.
New characters are introduced-Nabirasool, Ballu Singh and his wife, the
maidservant and several generals who fight on behalf of the Emperor. The
action seems stretched out while in terms of actual time, it is
compressed within a couple of days. We also learn of more details, viz,
that Narashhawaz was on a contract with the emperor and had to resolve
his moral dilemma of torn loyalties. Ballu Singh had to overcome the
hurt of a personal quarrel in the larger interest of what qualified as
correctness. In all this, the youngsters, Ram Singh and Nabirasool
emerge as the eager and upright soldiers who wish to prove their worth.
This thread does knit the second half with cohesiveness, making battle
and triumph a matter of suspense. The emperor becomes isolated in his
splendor. The game played by the set of rules laid by him is played
within the Fort where he stands somewhere, high above the action, as
spectator and judge. His statement restores harmony as Nagaur goes
back to Amar Singh’s family and as both the youngsters receive official
positions, the second generation is installed: continuity is maintained. In
this world of battle and politics, the domesticity of Ballu Singh’s wife
creates an interesting contrast as we see the warrior, in circumstances,
both ordinary and extra-ordinary. Hadi Rani’s vow to be a Sati, is the act
of a veerangana, attempting to bring the narrative of Amar Singh to an
appropriate closure.

This is a grim sequence of events, which to be rendered musically is a
challenge. The language, however, has a sharpness and rusticity that
enables the carrying of the sequences with a zest—the zest that
characterizes the Folk; it is this flavour in the writing that rebounces into the performance with a splash of energy; the verbal exchange in battle and the well rhymed couplets keep up a racy tempo, holding the pathos, but not allowing it to drown the other elements. Words like, naukri, register, court, kachhari, arzi, istifa, jurmaana, repeatedly used, bring it into the frame of everyday experience of present times. Even in a crisis the characters respond with spirited robustness. A rough translation of Hadi Rani’s lines on knowing about the fine could be:

A lakh per day my dear is a fine so slight
When a moment more dearer, dearer, dwindles in the night
Dwindles in the night and you talk of going from here’
Come, let our hearts blossom full, to hell with the messenger
Of nine crores is this necklace of mine,
A string of pearls to pay fourteen days fine.

There is an air of abundance—an open and commanding disposition.

Shah jahan talks of Amar Singh to Salavat Khan:

You say one thing and I think another,
Bitter and tough by nature is Amar Singh Rathor
Amar Singh Rathor when of the fine he hears,
Being of Rajput clan, the dignity he does bear,
May go out of hand for he knows no fear,
Will hit or be hit for of life he has no care

In this brief statement the understanding of the king is revealed.

Amar Singh, to the queen, after having battled with royal two platoons after slaying Salavat Khan:
How now my queen, the sight you see makes thy heart go sore;
Now on His Majesty do paint a coat of colour some more.
Coat of colour some more for what was today so less,
Two platoons charging, by the order of His Highness.
More now, let me see the bravehearts, who all are men,
With Rajput strain in me, I crave for the outcome then!
Better than Rustam; Let the bravest come;
Your Lordship call him now
And test the muscle that Amar Singh shall show!

There is bravado as lustily he challenges the royal authority. It is in the theatrical performance that the daring can be so celebrated, with gusto and recklessness.

When he plans with Ram Singh for further combat, there is an element of preparation:

Yesterday in full court, Salavat Khan I did slay,
Seven lakhs by the sword, I settled this way
Settled this way and morrow has more for my mettle
Another half a lakh of fine I yet have to settle
With petty pennies will I pay Shah jahan’s debt,
For this weapon to clang, I threw the gauntlet.
You aimed high yesterday. Wanting to come my way;
Now fulfill your desire
Come along and let your hands show their ire!

There is bravado, but this spirit is what will see him through the ordeal ahead. It is not bluff, as he is aware of the consequences of what he says (but of course this is the language of performance wherein the author too gains credit for showmanship.) This playing through the situations also
goes hand in hand with the characters who are at home with these situations and used to handling them with ease.

The situations shift fast and each shift alters the energy zone. The sequences, except for a few are crafted not as complete scenes, but as units of action that keeps the core of the moment alive.

The shifting ground of battle and the sinking mood at the naumahala of Amar Singh does linger the desperation, but is probably meant to charge the final battle with purpose. The visitors who are on their side must sound the trumpet of battle. Just as the neighing and jumping of a horse, make slight of the whip, so does the flamboyance of the language carry the situation astride. It also broadens the stature of the characters with a robustness that delights in combat. This is a subject that dwells in the core of Nautanki; the Nakara has been an instrument of the battlefield; guarding Forts and heralding the war cry. Such a content takes it close to its original mettle.

This Nautanki also deviates from conventional aesthetics, by depicting a series of killings depicted on stage, besides the act of Sati and three battles, centred around the objective of bringing back the mortal remains of a rebel chieftain. This opens or contributes to the discourse on the aesthetic trajectory chartered by the Folk Traditions. This is an important aspect and will be dealt with in more detail with inputs from Performance scholars and the experts of the other Forms, ie; Khayal and Puppetry.

The Nautanki has four women characters and none have a personal name; Begm, Bahu of Arjun Gaur and wife of Ballu Singh and Hadi Rani-known by her parental kingdom. Hadi Rani is pivotal to the action and is charged with emotion, playing shringar and pathos to the brink of valour. Arjun Gaur’s wife disagrees with her husband and expresses her opinion; Ballu Singh’s wife maneuvers her husband into agreeing with her, the
Begum too has her view and yet they appear peripheral to this world of war and politics. It goes to the credit of the writer that their portrayal is at variance with each other. In many edited versions, they cease to exist for they are a bit off the main line of action. Hadi Rani represents the woman who would love to live, but is prepared to go through the act of sati, almost as a predestined ritual. This is her battlefield, but where the end is known. This action when seen along with the male preparedness for becoming the sacrifice, completes the picture of a community. Amar Singh represents both the power and helplessness of the enigmatic masculine code. He fights for honour, but to keep the honour of a promise obeys Arjun Gaur; his vow to not bow his head, makes him lose it. The word becomes the code. The code goes beyond a lifetime. Amar Singh probably knew it—that he would be a character in a story. The code will ensure that the story is told. Even though he is not a victor, he has added value to the code by making it worthy of sacrifice.

The Nautanki and the legend emerge out of a patriarchal hegemony where individuals and individual traits are at the service, not just of the immediate family, but clan and community. The values and code that the clan upholds, represents or lives by mark the frame. The customs are patterned rules meant to be observed. It is this frame that defines the logic of the action, the gender roles and qualities of personality. Pride and dignity then are also not individual concerns, but owned by the clan or community. Settling scores by duels has been a world wide phenomena. That world may be obsolete, but it does generate amazement. It was in the medieval age and should be placed in that context before being judged. But theatre thrives only in the present and this boundary of time assumes greater significance on the popular stage, for the power of performance speaks directly to people today.
5. How Actors Perform

Performance Notes (as taken from Nautanki exponent, Krishna Mathur)

Krishnaji has been associated with the Nautanki stage for almost five decades, which includes twenty five years of active and rigorous practice as actor, director and group coordinator. She started with Hindustan Theatre company (doing dramas), then moved to Bharat Theatre (Performing Company that did both Drama and Nautanki and mostly toured in the east and north-east). In 1964, she performed Amar Singh Rathor and Satya Harishchandra in Hathras and has ever since been associated with the performance culture of the Braj area. According to her, ‘Amar Singh Rathor’ is one of the most popular Nautankis performed regularly by multiple groups, in the northern belt and has also been successful in places like Assam, where she has performed. It was an essential component of all tours apart from stand alone shows. It was also part of Bharat Theatre repertoire, where the performance utilised curtains for location changes and lights for effects and focus. She calculates that for about twenty five years she was performing for eight months (excluding the monsoons) in a year and would have performed “Amar Singh Rathor” more than a hundred times annually and she still performs it whenever the occasion arises. She is unable to count the number of times she has performed this Nautanki, but gives the number, 2,500 as a conservative estimate.

As mentioned earlier, in Bharat Theatre, the curtains would be pulled up and down so that the scenes could be performed in rapid succession. In the Nautanki, the bare stage lets the action flow without hindrance. For the window scene, the former had a window cut in the curtain, while in Nautanki, platforms would be arranged close to the wings, so that an
impression of height is created and when he is hit from behind, the action is visible and he falls with his head on stage. For the Sati scene, in Bharat Theatre, logs of wood with kerosene poured on them would be arranged on stage. A transparent thread would be tied above to an old coin (the one with a hole in the middle).

Through the hole, a lit matchstick would be slid down by a technician at the appropriate time and the fire would seem to light on its own, whilst the actress stood behind it. This created the magical illusion of the fire being lit on its own adding to Hadi Rani’s act of being sati. When the flames rose, the actor left, seeming to disappear. In Nautanki, there was no magic and it relied only on music to evoke the required impact. Even the battle scenes were short as singer actors would not be generally, well trained in martial arts.

(This does not seem devoid of danger. But another show proved to be more dangerous. That was “Nagin”. In one sequence, while the actor sang and danced on stage, two supporters would blow fire from both sides, taking turns, one after the other. (They would hold a mashaal and blow kerosene through it, so that the flames would come in dancing. When the flame came from right the actor moved left and vice versa.) Once, they both blew in the flames together, and the actor received burns.)

In most performances, after being hit by Arjun Gaur, Amar Singh would sing the last lines, choking and stuttering, to continue the impact of being stabbed. Similarly, Arjun Gaur, after being hit at the nose by a knife thrown at him by Amar Singh would sing his lines (to the king) with a nasal tinge. It made him appear silly and foolish.

Salavat Khan would be acted in a way to give the impression that the man is seeming to be what he is not; pretending to be more than what he actually is. In Bharat Theatre, the characterization was handled with
sophistication, creating a pretentious persona. In Nautanki often this would be achieved by humour, generally through the actors’ improvisations. For example, when he would call Amar Singh a Ganwaar, he would add a line- “hum kehte hain chawal ,cha-wal-aurs ye kehte hain chanwari(as rice is referred to in the village)bataye yeh koi boli hai!”

This is close to a sequence in “Sultana Daku“ when after being robbed, the seth and the munshi argue about the amount stolen as they report the matter to the police. One says “75,000”and the other “paun lakh”(quarter less than a lakh).They argue incessantly ,not realizing that they mean the same thing, till the policeman shouts at them. The rusticity of the humour would form a connection with the audience, as the shows were in villages. Salavat mocks at their boli and they laugh at him! Shah Jahan, in the Begum’s chamber, may also appear un-kingly at that moment, but gains his grace and stature in the unit when he refuses to award Arjun Gaur as he killed by deceit and not by valour. This shift in characterization makes the bonding of the audience flexible and alert. There is no attempt to make the tragic appear grand-and perhaps by making the characters vulnerable in portrayal, they become more endearing and stay longer -inspiring not awe always-but charming with the flavours of life.

The Court scene in both instances had a throne for the king and a chair for Salavat. In Nautanki, it could just be the throne. There were no additional courtiers when Amar Singh enters. There could be some guards. In the Company Theatre there was a backdrop of the court. The performance seems to focus on steering the action and dispense with elaboration.

The success of the Nautanki, according to Krishnaji, lies in its rich depiction of emotions-there is veer rasa; karuna rasa; shringaar; vatsalya.It is a tale of sacrifice and brotherhood which generates a
powerful flow of emotions, that engages the audience. Besides, the range of emotions also brings a diversity to the singing. For example, a “daud” in shringar would be articulated in a manner that makes the words small; In “veer” articulated in a stable and strong manner and in “karuna” the raag takes over. Even though the metre may be same, but the rendering does not get monotonous. The artists of course need to match up to the situations and music and when that happens the success of the performance seems certain. The other aspect that connects with the audience is the language of the text, particularly in the Hindi belt.(in the east the emotions and acting matter more).The couplets are such that often the last words are offered by the audience in unison. For example when Hadi Rani stops Amar Singh words like “chin chin cheeje raat” would come from the audience. When Ram Singh ends the first line with “Ratharon ka naam”, the audience can guess that the second line will end with “kaam” and is ready to say it. The Nautanki also provides space for improvisation and keeping with the times. The actor often humours the audience, but also has to fight with it-specially when the turnout is in large numbers. For example, when Hadi Rani curses her parents for marrying her to an employee, Krishnaji replaced the text with a folk song-

mere bhag bigad gaye bikhul hi,
jane kaun uday bhayo paap,
bitaria biyahe di chakar ko’
pade bijuria nai baaman pe
Hadi mukh bhar de saraap
yahan bitiya ko dukh hi dukh dard hain
jane kaun uday bhayo paap
(My misfortune to be married to a servant-may lightning fall on the barber-brahmin who fixed this match) The meaning is very close to the original text and the folk song probably expands the intent.
Similarly, when Amar Singh goes to court, in some groups an actress while performing the aarti may bring in a film song, like, “O pavan veg se udne wale ghode.....”
(Such an incorporation within the narrative seems an interesting device to keep pace with the mind of the audience. Of course, there is room for discussion.)

When the news comes that Amar Singh has been done away with, a sequence of bangle breaking may be added by some groups and here a song with pathos or a bhajan of Meerabai may find place—the song that goes with the mood of the situation and also has a portion in the rhythm that goes with the action.

In a performance by Atul Yaduvanshi, Amar Singh is shown teaching sword fighting to Ram Singh to enhance the bonding. Evidently, it is the performance that carries the tale and performers who make the night.

**Text and Editing**

According to Krishnaji, most groups do not have the published book. Bharat Theatre had a typed copy, based on the book, but with whatever editing thought to be necessary. Even when the duration of the performance was for six hours (9p.m. to 2 a.m.) editing was deemed to be part of the process. However, in Braj where once, the audience too seemed to remember the couplets, it was difficult to randomly edit, for they would yell, “It’s cut! They’ve cut it!”
However, it emerged in our discussion, that often the second vandana (the one in English) is edited, even though it is meant to be handled with humour and would give space to the comedian.

The narration of the Kavi is edited-rather it is often completely removed. According to Krishnaji, the scenes are self explanatory; rather removing the Kavi’s narration adds to the interest and suspense. The role also does not seem to interest the actors, who prefer playing characters. (This however, alters the structure of the writing, from narrative to action driven drama. As the narrator was also adding a viewpoint and contributing towards heightening the emotion, his absence would probably reduce the intensity. On second thoughts, it seems that the breaks between the scenes (entries-exits included) while loosening the grip of the action, also provides breathing space between the units. In a way this probably helps in the assimilation of the happenings. Rather than carrying the audience in the flow of emotion, this creates a distance whereby the story translates into a series of happenings).

The scene in which Amar Singh seeks leave to go to Bundi is retained. The desert sequence and the bonding between Amar Singh and Narashhawaz is also kept as it is. So are the next few scenes (Salavat Khan enticing the emperor against Amar Singh; Ram Singh telling this to Amar Singh; the latter feeling upset and insulted) The sequence between Hadi Rani and Amar Singh remains a popular moment, but certain parts are shortened. Instead of two couplets one may suffice.

In the court scene, Shah Jahan sometimes leaves after imposing additional fine and Amar Singh and Salavat continue-probably the involvement of the audience filling in for the court.

The king in the Begum’s chamber seems to be optional-and if retained, is reduced. The same can be said for the next few sequences, but the scene
between Arjun Gaur and his wife is generally edited. The sequence till the first part concludes with Hadi Rani’s vow to be a sati is more or less maintained with minor editing.

Ballu Singh’s response is kept short. Letter writing to Narashhawaz is either edited or kept brief. The father and son sequence between Narashhawaz and Nabi Rasool is generally retained in brief, but the unit in which they resign from the army is edited and so is often their meeting with Hadi Rani. The first battle takes place. Most verbal exchanges during battle are edited. Narashhawaz falls.

Nabirasool meets Hadi Rani. If the scene between Ballu Singh and his wife is to be edited, then Ballu Singh could enter here and the next battle ensues. Else the scene with the wife can lead to the second battle. Again, the battle is without much exchange and Ballu Singh falls.

Hadi Rani is dissuaded from going to battle by Nabirasool and Ram Singh and the two as Luv and Kush go to war. The third battle ends with the emperor granting them victory and giving them the posts they deserve.

Most performances treat this as the concluding moment and the units leading to the sati act are by and large edited.

The editing seems necessary to compress performance time; to enable managing the show with a small group and other practical considerations. Above all, it is about keeping the show going in contemporary times. The content is so arranged that the audience can follow a clear line of action while relating with the emotion and absorbing the music.

An interesting development is the emergence of the Folk artist, who uses the Nautanki text as a base, to create a solo telling of the story. This
appears to be a recent phenomena and the nature of the performance opens another dimension of the circulating legend.