

CHRISTINA OESTERHELD

“Deconstructing” a “Deconstructionist” Urdu
Story: “Ek Kahani, Ganga-Jamni” by
Kaisar Tamkeen

IN THE LAST ISSUE of the *AUS* [#10, 1995], the short story “Ēk Kahānī, Gaṅgā-Jamnī” (a “gaṅgā-jamnī” story), by Kaisar Tamkeen, is presented in the Urdu original. Since it is an exception rather than a rule with the *AUS* to publish Urdu texts in the original, the fact of the publication as such lends the story a certain prominence. I therefore started to read it with quite high expectations. My first reaction was one of shock and repulsion. In the following, more analytical readings of the story I tried to rationalize this first impression, arriving at a much more differentiated evaluation of the story. Because the story is written predominantly in the satirical mode, the analysis turned almost by itself to the rhetorical devices used to generate comic (ironic, sarcastic, satirical) effects: the choice and arrangement of words, the structure of sentences, and the composition of the text as a whole. This analysis had to keep in view the social and intertextual context to make it meaningful. The term “deconstruction” is employed not in the strict terminological sense but denoting the process of dismantling, unmasking, and questioning structures and concepts.

The title of the story immediately evokes a number of images. *Gaṅgā-jamnī* may be translated as “two-colored” or “mixed” and is often used as an attribute of the composite north Indian culture, especially Indo-Muslim culture. At the same time, the words carry with them the picture of the two rivers flowing in the heartland of this very culture. Even when used in the figurative sense, they do not fully lose their original flavor; they somehow “smell” of the Indian soil. The term *gaṅgā-jamnī* has been adopted by many Urdu writers to describe everything that is mixed and syncretistic in a positive sense. The term is thus accorded a high moral, cultural, and emotional value and is closely linked to the

concept of secularism. Added to this emotional and ethical charge is the particular sound structure of the title: with its rhyme and rhythm, created by an inversion of the attributive adjectives, and its euphonic combination of consonants and vowels (partly in alliteration) it possesses a distinct poetic quality very well in line with the positive connotations of the term *gaṅgā-jamnī*.

Throughout the history of modern Urdu literature, the majority of outstanding fiction writers have been proponents of one or another variety of secularism, of a secular outlook on life, meaning roughly that religious beliefs and practices should be regarded as a person's private affair and should not enter public life. The underlying conviction in many cases was a belief in the ultimate oneness or truth of all religions. Sir Syed (1817–1898) had to suffer fierce attacks because he advocated the concept of religion as a strictly personal affair. In one of Urdu's first novels, *Ibnū'l-Vaqt* by Nazir Ahmad (1888), arguments about this concept of religion constitute a major part of the last chapters.

After 1947, a prominent writer like Qurratulain Hyder (b. 1927) repeatedly depicted the syncretistic cultural heritage of India and the syncretism of popular beliefs. In view of communal riots and attempts at cultural division, she stresses the harmony and peace prevailing at shrines where holy men are worshipped by Muslims and Hindus alike. Over the years, this image of the mystic's shrine as a refuge from, and an alternative to, the frictions and conflicts of everyday life developed into a set topos in her works, especially in her novels. While in her first novel *Mērē bhī Ṣanamkhānē* (My Temples, Too; 1948) and in *Āg kā Daryā* (River of Fire; 1959), images of communal harmony at shrines and during religious festivals are set in contrast to the grim reality of violence and hatred as it surfaces in communal outbursts, this aspect of social life in India is completely absent in her latest novels *Gardish-e Raṅg-e Čaman* (The Changing Colors of the Flower Garden; 1987) and *Čāndnī Bēgam* (1990).

A second topos Hyder makes use of in the context of intercommunal relations is that of the communities' neighborly day-to-day coexistence. There are scores of stories about mutual tolerance, even friendship and solidarity between Hindus and Muslims, often written with the all-too-obvious intention of erecting a dam against the tide of communal passion.

In Abdussamad's (b. 1952) novel *Dō Gaz Zamīn* (Two Yards of Land; 1988), the concept of the secular Indian state is not questioned, either. The author does depict growing communal tension and discrimination against Muslims, but as a remedy or solution he urges Indian Muslims to

make use of the rights granted by the secular Indian constitution. He seems to be quite optimistic about the possibility of securing a place for Muslims in India within the given constitutional and political framework.

Neither author discusses the concept of Indian secularism or the secular Indian state as such; both rather hold the corrupt political setup responsible for deficiencies in the implementation and functioning of the secular concept (see the treatment of the Congress Party's Muslim politics after 1947 in *Dō Gaz Zamīn*).

Let us now look at the story by Kaisar Tamkeen. It runs like this: In an urban lower middle-class neighborhood inhabited by Muslims and Hindus, some naughty Hindu boys have trained a monkey to mimic and ridicule the Muslim folk. Provoked by some erotic lyrics sung in front of his door, an elderly Muslim (Mirza Bedar Bakht) rushes out of his house. Instead of getting hold of the singer, he runs into the mischievous monkey and kills it on the spot. A riot ensues in which the officials support the Hindu inhabitants of the locality. Many Muslims are killed, one Hindu boy is wounded. All the Muslim houses are burned down. Official reports speak only of two killed Pakistani infiltrators. After the rubble is cleared, a *mushā'ira* is organized to propagate and celebrate communal harmony and national unity.

The story is divided into three numbered parts. In these three parts, the myth of a *gaṅgā-jamni* culture is deconstructed on three levels: first, on the level of day-to-day experience, secondly on the level of community-state relations, and lastly on the level of literary and intellectual discourse. These three levels do not, however, completely coincide with the three parts of the story. Part 1, the longest part, is restricted to the first and second levels. References to the second level are found in part 2 as well. The third level is dealt with in parts 2 and 3.

Part 1 opens with Mirza Bedar Bakht getting infuriated by a love song sung immediately in front of his house. From the very first scene, the stage is set for the drama to develop. After the short dialogue between the Mirza and the invisible singer, the author presents a quite detailed description of the setting: a lane inhabited in its lower part by respectable but poor Muslim families. He makes use of all the typical images (indeed, sometimes stereotypes) of this lower middle-class Muslim environment: veiled women (*sayyidānīs*) carrying bunches of children, poor artisans, dilapidated houses. Women pawn their last little piece of jewelry at the Hindu (!) grocer's to get a small amount of adulterated flour or pulse. The contrast between a claim to high social status (*sayyids* and *mirzās*—that is, mughals—are the two most respected groups among

Muslims) and abject poverty is established in all clarity. Mirza Bedar Bakht himself seems to have turned his back to all practical affairs: he “is writing an important record of our times” (p. 320) while the family is surviving on the last remnants of its former wealth. To add insult to injury, Muslim gentlemen are ridiculed by the monkey who has been trained for the purpose by Hindu boys (the sons of *sunārs*). The Hindus living in the upper part of the lane are well-to-do goldsmiths and shopkeepers. A line is drawn between deprived Muslims on the one hand, and better-off and in many ways (to be elaborated later in the story) dominant Hindus on the other hand. So we are well prepared for Mirza Bedar Bakht’s outburst of anger when he runs into the nasty monkey. All his deprivation and frustration find an outlet when he kills the animal. This act of violence leads to the riot, but only after the Mirza starts to shout dirty abuses and refers to his being a “*mughal bačča*” (p. 322). The allusion to Mughal times is a very important clue to the self-image of Indian Muslims (at least of the upper strata) and of their role in Indian history as it is seen and projected by non-Muslims, especially Hindus. We find pride in the former rule over India on the side of the Muslims and a continued feeling of humiliation due to this “foreign” rule on the side of the Hindus. In reaction to the Mirza’s “Mughal grandeur” (*mughalīya ān bān*), the Hindu boys enter the fight with their own battle-cries *Har har Mahādēv*, *Jai Hanūmān kī*, and *Bhārat mātā kī jai*. They rally to defend “Mother India” against her enemies, the Muslims. The killed monkey is identified with the god Hanuman. When the Hindu boys throw shoes and cow dung on objects of Shī’a worship, religious fervor (*jōsh-e īmān*) is aroused in a Shī’a Muslim who cries out *Yā ‘Alī!* and stabs the Hindu offender. Finally, knives turn up in the hands of the Hindus which had “incidentally” just been distributed among the Hindu youths by the local chairman of the Congress Party. Now the fight takes a deadly turn.

So far, the events have developed within the locality, that is, on the first level of intercommunity experience—with the exception of the knives provided by the Congress politician. The picture presented by the author is far from the harmony suggested by the title of his story. In a dispassionate voice he reports the escalation of differences into hatred and finally into deadly confrontation. What started as a more or less innocent (a question open to interpretation) pastime of some youngsters eventually lays bare hidden misunderstandings, reservations, and prejudices. As an example of neighborly goodwill, only one Hindu potter is mentioned among the people trying to calm Mirza Bedar Bakht down. Otherwise, the battlefield is clearly drawn along religious lines.

The police force sent to the spot takes the side of the Hindus and starts pulling down the Muslims' trousers and loincloths and beating them up. This is the second reference to outside support for the Hindus of the locality. Seeing that their work has been taken over by the police, the Hindu boys start to set fire to Muslim shops and houses. In the afternoon, the news report on the national radio (*Ākāshvāni*) speaks of trouble created by Pakistani infiltrators, two of whom have been killed in the riot. The next day, the killed monkey is worshipped and given money offerings in burned-down Silver Lane. Symbolic of the Muslims' humiliation and surrender is a scene depicted in one sentence: "Zuhur the tobacco vendor carefully placed a whole hundred-rupee note at the side of the monkey's head, folded his hands reverently, and returned murmuring prayers" (p. 323). Part 1 of the story ends with a feast of milk mixed with hemp, arranged by the province's Congress Party Chairman for the "brave" police *javāns*.

The working of a riot is depicted in a credible way, with psychological factors hinted at in two ways: by describing the living conditions of the Muslims with their deprivations and frustrations, and by a few clue words with rich, highly charged connotations, as for instance *shartf*, *sayyid*, *mirzā*, or *mughal*. In the beginning, the Muslims are represented not only as victims, but in the persons of Mirza Bedar Bakht and the Shī'a Ali Jani Karbalai as agents involved in the escalation of the riot. The heavy support their Hindu opponents get from political quarters (the local Congress Party chief) and from the state machinery (the police force), however, puts them in a losing position. In the end the Muslims of the neighborhood have to suffer losses of life and property completely out of proportion. The image of the Congress Party as a defender of Muslim rights, and of the secular Indian state as safeguarding the rights of the minorities, are completely demolished. The act of "Hindu" worship by a Muslim mentioned above can be understood as a cynical reversal of the atmosphere of religious syncretism alluded to by the title of the story. Under the circumstances prevailing in his locality, the Muslim Zuhur has to show repentance and even devotion for a Hindu god in order to reduce the hostility and feelings of revenge of his Hindu neighbors and to secure his survival among the majority community.

The setting of the scene and the background information on both Mirza Bedar Bakht as well as the atmosphere prevailing in the neighborhood cover about two-thirds of the first part of the story. The ground for the ensuing battle is thus well prepared. As soon as the fatal confrontation starts, the pace of the narrative changes as if to keep up with the speed of

the action presented. The course of events is reported in straightforward chronological narration by an impersonal narrator; only some background information is given in flashbacks. The sentences are mostly short, and the language is colloquial, flavored by a good deal of idioms, completely free of any pathos. There are no direct intrusions or comments by the narrator/author. And yet the reader cannot fail to notice an ironical and increasingly sarcastic tone. This is achieved by a particular combination of words and expressions.

The name of the main character of the first part, Mirza Bedar Bakht, itself virtually invites an ironic interpretation: with its literal meaning “victorious” or “fortunate” or “born under a lucky star,” the contrast to the Mirza’s actual living conditions could hardly be more striking. A second contrast is added to characterize his personality: His claim to a noble *mughal* descent is not matched by any great deeds in his own life, his only and lethal heroic act being the killing of the monkey. Instead of trying to ameliorate his family’s lot he busies himself building castles in the air, leaving the maintenance of the family to the womenfolk. Several expressions used with reference to the Mirza reveal the author’s ironic detachment: he is an “expert on both the worlds” (*‘ālim-e daurān aur fāzil-e ajāl*) and acts with “Mughal grandeur” when confronted with a monkey aping him. These elevated words do not fit the mediocre context, thereby creating a comic effect. Similarly, the religious slogans raised by both parties sound quite ridiculous in view of the very profane background of the riot.

Another instance of ironic incongruence is the use of the word *jādū’ī* (magical) to explain the way in which knives suddenly turn up in the hands of the Hindu boys, when it is related in the following clause that they had been supplied by a Congress politician only a few days before “to combat Pakistani spies” (p. 322). This passage alludes to the common prejudice against Indian Muslims as Pakistani agents. The same motif is repeated in the national news report. The reader of the story will, of course, realize the absurdity of these allegations. Not incidentally, the Hindi name of the radio broadcast service, *Ākāshvānī*, is retained throughout the text. It symbolizes the state-controlled radio following a fixed pattern in reporting communal conflicts. At the same time, the Sanskrit word *Ākāshvānī* may create an amusing effect among Urdu speakers, as many Sanskrit Hindi words do. It also unmasks the station as a mouthpiece of the “others”—the dominating Hindu majority. In one case, the author makes excessive use of an adjective with an ironic meaning: the “brave” (*bahādur*) police *javāns* are mentioned three times in close

succession, thus diminishing the effect of the device considerably.

As a whole, the riot itself is reported in a rather light vein due to the narrative's colloquialisms, its irony and sarcasm. The reader may feel quite uneasy about this treatment of an obviously tragic event. Is it black humor or is it cynicism? It does run counter to our expectations regarding the treatment of such a serious subject, thus constituting a provoking incongruence (*inaptum*).

Part 2 starts with a shift in perspective. A new character, the story writer Tahsin Baji alias Suraiya Shahla Naz, is introduced. Her perspective is presented in third-person narration, in direct and indirect interior monologue, and some background information is given from an impersonal perspective. At the same time, there is a shift from action to reflection. Tahsin Baji, "the standard bearer of *gaṅgā-jamnī* values in Urdu literature" (p. 323), has watched the whole riot. Puzzled by the obvious contradiction between her own observations and the official news report, she decides to write a novel instead of a short story about the riot, which will enable her to create the proper "balance." The English word "balance" is used throughout the text with only one exception as a slip of the tongue: Tahsin Baji in one sentence of an indirect interior monologue (*style indirect libre*) uses the Urdu equivalent *tavazzun*, only to add "excuse me, balance" (p. 324). Here a concept comes under attack according to which all texts dealing with communal unrest, religious affairs, etc. should maintain a "balance" between the parties concerned. This principle of an artificial balance is adhered to in the media controlled by the state, irrespective of the actual "balance" (or rather "imbalance") of forces. Moreover, this was one of the postulates of the Progressives' literary canon in dealing with communalism, especially after 1947. The proponents of this postulate usually argue that it is meant to keep communal feelings low and to prevent the fueling of communal hatred or revenge. In practice, as the present story shows, it does injustice to the victims. As a result, reports of police atrocities on the Muslim minority, for instance, have become the monopoly of a particular section of the Urdu press, harping on the sad state of the Muslim community, thus further alienating Indian Muslims.

In the following passage it is reported how the editor of a Hindi journal criticizes the Hindu boys of Silver Lane who instigated the riot. A Muslim professor of Arabic is so delighted by this critical comment that he lets the son of the Hindi editor pass his examination in Arabic with a 100% result. The son is awarded a gold medal and the father a post with the Indian embassy in Cairo.

Part 2 of the story thus deconstructs the myth of a *gaṅgā-jamnī* culture on the discursive level. Tahsin Baji, who is understood to be the “standard-bearer of *gaṅgā-jamnī* values in Urdu literature” (whether this is her own self-image or a publicly accepted perception is not specified), gives in to the official notion of “balance” and fails to be true to what she has seen with her own eyes. Her husband is even ready to sacrifice the Urdu script. The three Muslim characters mentioned in this short part are all utterly corrupt and fall in line with the official viewpoint. Where a critical assessment of the Hindus’ involvement in the riot is made, it too turns out to be part of a deal to gain personal advantages.

In this part, again, the author uses a wide range of rhetorical devices, but above all irony in its different shades. Tahsin Baji is ridiculed by her pompous name, repeated in full in the narrative several times. Moreover, as a spectator from a safe place she is projected as a person physically not touched by the events, personally out of danger. Nevertheless, she decides not to write about the obvious “imbalance” she has observed but to construct instead a “balanced” novel. In this way, she is denied the moral credibility she herself claims as the “standard-bearer of *gaṅgā-jamnī* values.” The incongruence between image and reality creates a strong sarcastic effect. In addition to this, the use of typically Hindi expressions in her interior monologue reveals the degree of her involvement in, and identification with, the official discourse. The most striking example of this is the word *dēsh-sēvak* (servant of the country) used for the people countering the attack of the “Pakistani infiltrators.” (Out of loyalty to the state, she does not even think of questioning the official version.)

The episode concerning the critical comment by the editor of a Hindi journal consists of two short paragraphs in straightforward narration. While in the first paragraph the fact of its publication and the gist of its contents are reported, the second paragraph describes the favored results for the editor and his son. No further comment is needed—the second paragraph completely reverses the impact of the first.

Part 3 forms a kind of epilogue. Every trace of the riot—that is of the destroyed Muslim houses—has been removed. A number of Urdu poets, some of them Hindus, with very fanciful names, organize a *mushā’ira* to celebrate the victory of national solidarity (*qaumī yakjihatī*, p. 325). Considering what had happened in Silver Lane, the fact as such turns the whole event into a farce. But as if this would not be sufficient, the *mushā’ira* itself and its participants are depicted in a most ridiculing manner. A poet by the name Bepayan Samandari (!) recites an elegy (*marṣiya*) on the death of the monkey and bestows the merit (*ṣavāb*) of all his read-

ings of the Qur'ān on the soul of the deceased. Satire is carried to an extreme here.

In the last two paragraphs of the story another facet of the concept of a *gaṅgā-jamni* culture is pulled to pieces: the openmindedness and tolerance of the syncretistic Indian culture as compared with the monolithic, intolerant “Islamic” culture of Pakistan. The falseness of the impression of unity and harmony celebrated by the *mushā'ira* has well been unmasked by the preceding events and the reactions to them. Therefore, the praise of the Indian situation by exiled Pakistani poets intensifies the contrast between official image and reality.

With a final stroke, the author denounces the gathering as amoral (or at least as encouraging an amoral conduct): One of the female Muslim participants sits on the lap of a Sikh male and smokes—a picture of total moral decay! But then, what would you expect from people like this? Here it seems the author gets quite close to those critics of secularism who identify it with atheism and amorality straight away.

Viewed as a whole, the analyzed text presents itself as a very bitter, sharp, even desperate political and social satire. In the first part of the story a realistic treatment prevails with increasing streaks of irony and sarcasm. In parts 2 and 3, the tone gets increasingly bitter, even cynical. At some places, the author, to my mind, carries his derision of characters too far. Exaggeration and hyperbole are legitimate devices of the satirical mode. And yet, for the aesthetic effect of a text, often less is more (as in other spheres of life), a fact that has been stressed also by Urdu authors of the classical tradition.

We tried to find out what kind of concept the author deconstructs in his text and how he does it. Now the question arises whether he thereby constructs any other concept in its place, or whether his is a completely negative, destructive attitude. On the face of it, there is only destruction and derision. In the first part, the author indirectly shows some feeling of sympathy for the miserable Muslims of Silver Lane, but in the parts to come there is only disgust for the false, corrupt, and complacent representatives of the establishment of “syncretistic culture.” Here the author is fully in line with the kind of satire long traditional in Urdu. (It is also quite likely that his satire is a key story with many of the names alluding to well-known members of the literary scene. These allusions are, however, less interesting for an outside reader.) The story is, above all, a piece of fierce social criticism intended to provoke a reconsideration of established conceptions of the “secular” Indian state and society. What intrigues me is that at many places the author seems to share attitudes

propagated by forces hostile to any form of secularism (see, for instance, the end of the story). Besides, satire as a form of social criticism indirectly implies certain underlying values, deviation from which constitutes the aim of the attack. What are the values we could derive from Kaisar Tamkeen's satire? Maybe a realistic attitude to the condition of ordinary Muslims in India, truthfulness, the courage to voice unpopular criticism? Does he not, however, also help to perpetuate the concept of an eternal enmity and confrontation between Hindus and Muslims—between “us” and “the others,” one of the basic concepts of Hindu chauvinists and certain Muslim leaders alike? I have to confess that I feel embarrassed by the general tone of the story.

The text could be contextualized in different directions. One could be the context of other contemporary Urdu short stories on the subject of communalism and secularism. It would also be interesting to place the story in the context of the current discourse on secularism in India taking place in the press as well as in scholarly publications.¹ For the time being, let us turn to its immediate context only. Its publication in No. 10 of the *AUS* seems not to be incidental. This issue of the *AUS* includes a number of contributions on the status and future etc. of Urdu in India. For the most part they do not deal with language problems only, but with the overall situation of Muslims, especially Muslim intellectuals, in India. Some of the statements made coincide with the tenor of Kaisar Tamkeen's story. In an interview with S.R. Faruqi, conducted by Ather Farouqi, references are made to the strange attempt of the Progressive writers to keep Urdu alive after Independence by changing its script (pp. 162–63). S.R. Faruqi sharply criticizes the apologetic and opportunistic stance of many Muslim intellectuals regarding the use of Urdu, a criticism mirrored in many ways in the story. Ather Farouqi puts it even more strongly: “Now, of course, just about every Urduwallah has hitched up with one government-funded institution or another, thus cashing in for himself and, in the bargain, rooting out Urdu at the behest of the government” (p. 167). Substitute “secular values” for “Urdu” and you get the attitude described by Tamkeen. Furthermore, S.R. Faruqi laments the growing linguistic laxity in Urdu under the influence of Hindi, giving the newly coined *ghusbēṭhyā* (infiltrator) as an example (p. 168). (Developments of a similar kind can probably be observed in most

¹See, for instance, Partha Chatterjee, “Religious Minorities and the Secular State: Reflections of an Indian Impass,” in *Public Culture* 8 (1995), pp. 11–39.

languages as a result of the growing influence of the mass media.) The use of this and similar Hindi words and expressions by the characters of the story amply illustrates this point. S.R. Faruqi's general remarks about the lack of any linguistic standard for Hindi, on the other hand, reveal the same "superiority complex" of an Urduwallah as does the ironic use of Hindi words by Kaisar Tamkeen.

Finally, let me quote the last sentences of a short article by C.M. Naim on the situation of the Urdu writer in India. Naim refers to some of the recent riots and says: "So, you return home and write a story, in Urdu. For writing in Urdu in India is now definitely a political act. It may not empower you much, but it still lets you assert the fact of your existence. You authorize yourself. In a time of plagues, that is enough" (p. 125).

"Ēk Kahānī, Gaṅgā-Jamnī" is a highly political story. To publish it in the *AUS* was no less a political act. □