

# Fantasy, Love and Rebellion in Uday Prakash's *Warren Hastings ka Saand*

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## Abstract

This paper examines a long story "Warren Hastings ka Sand" (Warren Hasting's Bull) by modern Hindi writer Uday Prakash. First published in 1996, in *India Today's Sahitya Varshiki* the story brings together elements of fact, fantasy, fiction and imagination to create a narrative that is both playful and subversive. The historical figure of Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of Bengal is the protagonist of the story. The intimate and hidden aspects of Hastings' private life as imagined by the narrator provide the framework to speculate on his rise and fall, at a time when the East India Company along with other European powers as Dutch, French and Portuguese were vying for dominance in the sub-continent in the wake of the decline of the Mughal empire. This paper argues that desire and terror of the 'other' are at the heart of the story leading to a fascinating but ultimately a tragic love story between Hastings and his lover, Chokhi and Hastings and India.

**Keywords:** Exoticism; Fantasy; History; Love; Mysticism.

## Introduction

Uday Prakash's long story<sup>1</sup> "Warren Hastings' Bull" or *Warren Hastings ka Saand* is a story that stretches the limits of imagination by mixing fantasy, fact, and fiction to turn conventional understanding of historical events on their head<sup>2</sup>. It challenges upfront our reading of colonial encounters in India, and makes space for a playful reading of this history in which the entire tradition of South Asia, its mythology, human and 'non-human

1 Hindi literature has a tradition of long stories, for example a collection of stories by Nirmal Verma is simply called *11 Long Stories* or *Gyarah Lambi Kahaniyan*.

2 I presented this essay earlier as a paper, titled "The revenge of the subaltern: Uday Prakash's *Warren Hastings ka Saand*" in an international seminar on *Exploring cultural relocations and hybrid identities* 15-26 Aug, 2009 organised by IRIS in Jaipur.

*natives* play significant roles. The British are presented in the story as forever struggling to take control of an India that is elusive and beyond the known limits of mind. And even when the British succeed intermittently in securing control over it they secure only an arbitrary control of its geographical space and not of its myriad inner worlds. Such a depiction is quite similar to Partha Chatterjee's formulation of the "fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalism in Asia and Africa" (6). This feature, he says "divides the world of social institutions and practices into two domains-the material and the spiritual" (6). The material domain is the domain of the outside and the spiritual of the inner. This analytical framework helps us understand a similar sort of division that takes place in the story. The sovereign autonomy of the inner domain, inhabited by Chokhi and other Indians allows them to resist the coloniser. At the same time a similar sort of schism takes place in the coloniser too. The coloniser is no longer an autonomous superior self. He is no less susceptible to the eclectic influences of an alien world upon him.

Thus, the encounter of the British with India though written in the registers of colonialist fiction about India and replete with clichés about its exoticism and mysticism is reversed in its logic in the story. So that its exoticism and mysticism become its strength designed to keep the invader at an arm's length, to not allow him entry into its deepest mysteries and thus condemn forever the intruder to an exclusion that he can only nervously laugh at, a point elaborately described in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (x to xxxi). This exclusion however is not beyond breach unlike in colonial writings of writers as Rudyard Kipling, M.M Kaye and others and is not predicated on an 'othering' of the other. The 'other' is allowed an entry into one's culture through love and friendship. Neither coercion nor inducement can persuade the beloved to open her heart. Love becomes the only point of entry into an 'alien' culture. It is possible to argue that relations between the English and the Indians were not on the same hostile inter-racial level as they became after 1857's rebellion. Up to this point, as has been argued by William Dalrymple in *White Mughals* that inter-racial personal relationships were quite common and many Europeans took local women as wives and settled down to a life in the subcontinent. The change in colonial attitude and the emergence of colonial racism in the wake of European civilizational self-consciousness of superiority was responsible for this change in outlook. Beginning early 19th century, this change in colonial attitude towards the colonised races was represented by the Anglicists - as opposed to the Orientalists - a category that included the radical reform oriented Utilitarians, such as Thomas Babington Macaulay, James Mill, William Bentick and the Christian missionaries.

The protagonist of the story Hastings is only seventeen years of age when he first arrives in India in 1750 and encounters a world that is both fascinating and frightening. His fascination and fear of this 'other' civilization leads him to immerse himself in its music, languages, literary traditions and to encounters of intimate kind. As a result, he develops a deep friendship with a 'native' *baul* singer, Buntu, and falls in love with a 'native' girl, Chokhi, a gardener employed in his household.

The first half of the story deals with Hastings youthful romance with India as alien world, its culture, religions and peoples and the second half with his appointment as the Governor General of Bengal in 1772. The story also highlights his role in consolidating the hold of East India Company on Bengal, the excesses of his regime and lapses in his personal conduct that eventually lead to his impeachment on charges of corruption and moral conduct and thereafter his acquittal. Nicholas B. Dirks deals with the corruption in the tenure of Warren Hastings at length in his book *The Scandal of Empire: India and the creation of Imperial Britain*. In the book he argues the trial of Hastings that lasted between 1786 and 1795, was not just about the "excess of scandal as fascinating as it is, so much as it is about the constitutive character of scandal for empire" (31). Similarly, William Dalrymple in his 2019 book *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the east India Company* argues that Hastings was a noted Indophile, who during his youth fought hard against the looting of Bengal by his colleagues" (xix).

A point brought home in Prakash's story much earlier in 1996, for structurally the story is based on the timeline of historical events in the Indian Subcontinent in the eighteenth century and Hastings personal life as it unfolds in the backdrop of the decline of the Mughal Empire and the slow but sure rise of the East India Company and his own role as an officer of the company.

The chief characters in the story other than Hastings are: Buntu, Chokhi, and a Tibetan bull. Prakash makes use of certain "real paintings" commissioned by Hastings himself to reinterpret Hastings life. These paintings on display in various museums in India and England become the entry point for some fantastic speculations in the story. These paintings are also used to highlight the inner life of Hastings as it unfolds in India and in England.

### **Love in an Alien Land**

Hastings, the protagonist's high point in the story, the narrator claims is not his appointment as the Governor General of Bengal, but his sense

of wonder at the country he inhabits. Hastings' friendship with Buntu, a young *Baul* singer from the village of the Bengali poet, Jayadev allows him an entry into the world of bhakti poetry and the cult of Krishna. His love affair with Chokhi, a young Bengali trapeze artist employed as a gardener in his Bungalow deepens his wonder and fascination with the country he is occupying. The basis for this extraordinary love story as the narrator tells us in a fantastic account is the painting by John Zoffany at display in the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta:

In the Victoria Memorial of Calcutta there is still a painting in which Warren Hastings is standing with his wife under a banyan tree. In Warren Hastings's right hand are a baton and a hat. With his left hand he is holding his wife's hand. In the background of the painting is Calcutta. In the same painting, behind Hastings wife stands a Bengali girl. ... In her left hand, she is holding Hastings's wife's hat...

If you look closely at the picture you find that between Warren Hastings and the girl is a barely contained, deep and mystifying relationship. You will then sense that Warren Hastings is simultaneously trying to hide that relationship and also reassuring his wife by holding her hand. Gradually then you discover that this is the reason why the girl in the picture and Hastings are holding hats, even though Hastings wife's hands are unoccupied.

The painting will now unlock for you its symbolic meaning and you will discern that the painting is an attempt by John Zoffany to highlight the relationship between Hastings and that dark girl. Both the girl and Hastings are trying to hide that relationship by holding on to the hats. Zoffany has succeeded in his endeavour because he has been able to capture the expression of that girl and Hastings. In fact, if you look more closely you will find that both Hastings and that Bengali girl are looking at each other in a state of trance and standing between them is Hastings wife in an imperial gown. That tall, decked up woman in the centre is merely a presence in that painting; a British symbol, just like the elephants in the background of the painting are a symbol of India. She too is merely present there. (My translation,84)

Prakash turns around the generally understood logic of the painting that Hastings is seen sad in the painting because his wife Amelia was soon to leave for England and reinterprets it as a forbidden tale of desire between

Chokhi and Hastings. Not only because she is the dark native but also because there's a huge class difference between them. This fantasy of a romantic encounter with the 'other' springs simultaneously from a deeply held terror and desire, which as Homi Bhabha tells us is at the heart of all colonial enterprise. Prakash's reading of the painting is a reworking of the colonial logic of the darker races being attracted to the fairer ones, as McBryde the Superintendent of Police in *A Passage to India* so famously put forth (194). The truth however is always in the way of racial prejudice. In *Passage*, it is Adela who finally accepts that it was she who was attracted to Aziz and that Aziz never entered the cave. Similarly in Prakash's story too, it is Hastings who is seen falling in love with Chokhi despite her dark colour. Chokhi, of course is not just a young, beautiful Indian woman, she is India herself with her myriad mysteries and charms. Hastings is shown as indulging in erotic games with her to bring alive the erotic art of Miniature style of painting. He is shown as Krishna indulging in *raas-leela* with Chokhi, his Radha. In a yet another sequence he is seen painting Chokhi's breast with a peacock feather, decorating her with various jewels, flowers and colours, and in an amorous act on a swing. In enacting these classic poses from miniature paintings Hastings not only gives expression to his sexual fantasies but also attempts to overcome the inhibitions and repressions of English society.

Similarly, in Buntu's company Hastings attempts to explore the profound in the religion of the other. He is particularly attracted to the Bhakti tradition of Krishna and takes to wearing *dhoti, kurta*, playing flute and herding cows. He imagines himself a Krishna, Buntu, his Sakha and Chokhi as his Radha. He attempts not only to read the Gita and the *Srimadbhagwat*, but also travels to Mathura and Brindaban in search of Krishna. Hastings' character in the story has overtones of a yet another Indologist William Jones. The eclectic interest of both Jones and Hastings in Indian languages, culture and civilization is reflected in the enthusiasm with which Hastings embraces everything Indian in his youth. He learns 'native' languages, takes to wearing native costumes, invites scholars from abroad to read and interpret ancient texts, and explores the length and breadth of India in order to understand its spirit.

Mysticism and eroticism the two most hackneyed categories of Orientalism are used here not to romanticise the East, or simply to create a fascination for the exotic and the erotic, but to highlight the subversive attractions of a culture that is unabashed in its celebration of sexuality, and a tacit acknowledgment of the need for fantasy in day to day existence. It is in the death of Chokhi, his beloved that Hastings' fantasy world collapses

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and he turns into a corrupt, conniving, middle-aged man.

The death of Chokhi and the entry of his wife, who as the narrator tells us, is from England, where the age of reason and industrialization had made inroads into the soul of man. She, we are told cannot bear to see her husband turn native and decides to set him on the path of wealth and corruption of the spirit. Strangely enough in holding Hastings' wife responsible for the change in Hastings the man, Prakash endorses the logic of Forster's *Passage to India*, where as Hamidullah tells us "I give any Englishman two years, be he Turton or Burton. It is only a difference of a letter. And I give any Englishwoman six months" (6) and indeed in Anglo-Indian fiction, women were often held responsible for the rift in relations between British men and Indian men. But it is also true historically that once India became a colony under the British Crown, relations with native women were frowned upon and that British women arrived in hordes to India to marry young British civil servants and army officers, as indeed Adela does in *A Passage to India*.

In Prakash's story, Chokhi is not only Radha, Hastings' beloved but also India with all her alluring charms, a fantasy world, his wife is England, practical, logical, methodical, governed by scientific reason. The schism between love and reason creates in the figure of Hastings a schizophrenic: on the one hand a pioneer in the field of Indology and on the other a plunderer of India's resources, and one who created a system of governance that ensured a continuous pillage of India for the next two hundred years. This schizophrenia is not only at the centre of Hastings' story but also at the heart of colonialism; and is also the extension of the schism that is at the heart of European concept of the 'self' and the 'other'.

Prakash's story in fact, could be read as a conflict between two different systems of thought. Where Chokhi, Buntu, Abdul Kadir and others belong to a tradition that does not view man as the ultimate culmination of biological evolution and therefore not the measure of all things; Hastings and other Europeans on the other hand belong to a tradition where the 'other' is a reminder of the "inalienable entity external to oneself" (Verma11-27). The European can only come to terms with the other by either subjugating her or destroying her. Thus the desire of the British to know India and the associated paraphernalia that accompany such a process of knowing: cartography, ethnography, anthropology etc. lead to a greater alienation between the ruler and ruled. Chokhi rightly accuses Hastings of subjugating India by designing means of naming and mapping it. Her refusal to bear the child of such a person is not a fear of miscegenation

but a rejection of Hastings and his race, so completely narcissistic that it regards itself as the highest embodiment of nature and by corollary of human civilization.

### **When Fantasy Overwhelms**

Hastings loves Chokhi but only as an extension of his fantasy world, a world he cannot accommodate in his waking hours. But, fantasy is more real than mundane reality. This he realizes only later as the collapse of his fantasy world brings him to the shores of reality, where reason and crass materialism are the only consolations for having sold one's soul to the devil. The love between Chokhi and Hastings however is not a story of un-equals but a story where the beloved is not a naïve 'native'. She is not a passive agent acted upon by a colonial authority. It is Chokhi, who as she herself says, is the one who has "pleasured herself with Hastings" and on finding out that he has made a map of India on a piece of paper decides to kill herself, and their unborn child right in front of Hastings eyes. The revolt of Chokhi is not the revolt of an individual; the forces of history are as much at work as is the destiny of a nation, where cattle with proper nouns are implicated in the scheme of things.

Chokhi as the confidential report on her informs the masters of the East India Company in England is none other than the orphaned daughter of Mohan Lal, the subaltern hero of the battle of Palassey in 1757. Mohan Lal along with Meer Madaan two subalterns from the army of Nawab Si-arajudaulla are said to have refused all inducements of the Company and together fought to death the corrupt forces of the company. Similarly his daughter Chokhi, unaware of her parentage too decides to kill herself in protest over the mapping of India. She asks Hastings:

'Is it true that you have made a map of our country on a piece of paper?

Hastings replies: of course, what is so strange about it? It was important to do it.'

Chokhi says: 'this is not right. Do you think that no one before you thought it important enough...

...the map of this country was not made by others not because they could not make one but because they loved this country and did not wish to destroy it. In our community when we want to kill someone we make a flour doll of that person and cut him to piec-

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es. As the doll is cut into pieces so is the person.... You are doing the same, we all know that you foreigners will trample this map under the hoofs of horses, you will imprison it, you will shoot it, and when you leave, you will handover this map to one of your slaves who will do the same' (88).

Chokhi transforms from Radha into Durga the warrior goddess, aware of her powers and ready to take action. She is not scared to kill the unrighteous. She however spares Hastings for she is in love with him. But after the death of Chokhi, Hastings is as good as dead for he cannot deal with the emptiness that follows the collapse of his fantasy world. In Hastings' spiritual death the contradiction that is at the heart of the European notion of 'other' is highlighted more. The European 'self' requires the presence of the 'other' to validate his identity. The death of the 'other' in this case, of Chokhi is also the metaphoric death of India as the beloved. India the beloved is supplanted by India the colony, not a place to learn from but a place to instruct and rampage.

The India of Prakash however resists such colonization. 'The spirit of history' that the Europeans felt was only running its course in the form of colonization of ancient, and dark continents across the globe, is given a chase by a bull of divine lineage. The eponymous bull of the story has come to Hastings from Samuel Turner, the English Traveller to Tibet. Turner, the narrator tells, us during his long stay in Tibet used to have a recurring nightmare in which a bull came charging towards him. The head Lama of the monastery, where Turner was staying interprets the dream and tells Turner that the bull is none other than Nandi, the mount of Shiva, and that the bull was asking Turner to leave Tibet. As a penance for upsetting the gods of the Himalayas Turner is asked by the Lama to render service to such a bull and gifts him the exact same Bull of his dreams. Turner in turn gifts the Bull to Hastings, who gladly accepts the gift for he had a great love of Indian cattle, the narrator tells us.

The source of this fantastic conjecture is a yet another painting recently auctioned by the Sotheby, and said to be in an art collector's private collection. In the painting as the narrator tells us, is the mansion called Pyroli House, where Hastings had stayed during the impeachment case against him. In Pyroli House, Hastings we are told maintained a menagerie of exotic animals. There is a fascinating description of the painting in the story:

In the house of one art lover in England is a painting of that Berkshire Bungalow where Hastings lived with his wife for the dura-



tion of the time when he was facing an impeachment. The name of that Bungalow was Pyroli Hall.

We do not know who made that painting, In the painting, is a lawn, where are visible two sheep, in the middle of the lawn is a Greek sculpture. In the painting are a Brahmini Cow and a bull. The bull is sitting while the cow is standing.

In the centre of the painting is an English stableman astride a magnificent black horse with a white dog at his heels. If you examine the painting carefully you will notice that the horse is refusing to move forward. His head is turned away and his body is stiff with resistance, the dog at his heels is growling and is springing towards the left of the frame.

And in the left side of the painting, in a wooden cage is trapped in iron chains, a tall, dark stallion. This dark, mysterious stallion livid with anger is standing with his horns pointing towards the precincts of the Bungalow. If you continue looking at the painting of this anonymous painter for a while you will experience a strange fear and excitement.

You will not be able to avert your eyes even for a second from that corner where that fuming bull is kept captive with iron chains inside a wooden cage. It is because of this enraged stallion that the magnificent horse is refusing to move and the accompanying dog is so agitated. And from the lower side of the right frame of the painting the Brahmini cow and a bull are looking lovingly and imploringly at the Tibetan Bull. Samuel Turner gave this bull to Hastings after the latter's return from Tibet. Turner had acquired many mysterious manuscripts from the Lamas of Tibet.

But Samuel Turner during his stay with the Lamas in Tibet had started suffering epileptic strokes and typhomania. He suffered nightmares and often saw a huge black bull with blue fire swishing out of his nostrils rushing towards him from the snow covered cliffs of the Himalayas.

Turner started feeling that he would never be able to leave Tibet. And that he would die in the snow-laden mountains of Tibet. But he felt that mysterious, scary bull would continue to run amok even after his death.

He met the oldest Lama of a Buddhist monastery. The Lama already knew everything. He only smiled through the bright sun reflecting on his baldhead and the countless wrinkles on his face. In the end he said, "that bull is Nandi, the mount of the Hindu god Pashupati. There is nothing to fear. Leave Tibet. He does not want to see you here.

When Samuel Turner was returning then that old Lama presented this bull to Turner and asked him to look after it and serve it. This act he said would cure him of his diseases.

Samuel Turner returned from Tibet but his life was so full of journeys and travels that it was impossible for him to keep the stallion with him all the time. He knew of Governor General Warren Hastings' love of Indian cattle, and decided to gift the Tibetan bull to him, thinking in his palace the bull would be taken care of. (92)

This mythologizing of Samuel Turner's travels and the gift of the Bull by the Lama is in keeping with the Puranic traditions of the subcontinent, where the external events are only one aspect of the story. There are multiple narratives that try to convey the varied interpretations of events. Turner's stay in Tibet, his dreams of Nandi, the Lama's solution to his nightmares and headaches weave an intricate tapestry thereby creating an alternative sense of engaging with history at the level of symbols, meanings, textures, and story telling. Thereby attempting to structure the chaos unleashed by colonial forces in the subcontinent in the nineteenth century.

### **Rebellion of the Beasts with Proper Nouns**

It is no surprise that the bull that chased Turner away from Tibet is also the bull that launched the first revolt for freedom from colonial rule in India, and was perhaps gifted by the Lama for precisely this purpose. The yarn of Turner's story is connected to Hastings' story just as in a myth. The cattle in the story are presented as sentient beings, incapable of speech but not of understanding. That the cattle are a part of the household in India and respond like humans to events around them fills Hastings with wonder and leads him to exclaim 'they have proper nouns.' In the story, one of the paintings Hastings commissioned Oziyas Humphrey and John Thomas Setan, famous painters from England to paint him and Chokhi, as Krishna and Radha, a cow is seen standing in the background. The narrator tells us it is Hastings' love for Indian cattle that despite his wife's protest he takes along with him five Brahmini cows and the bull that Turner

had gifted him, to England at the end of his tenure in India.

In England however, as the narrator informs us:

England was an Industrialised nation. Factories and machines had changed the life of the people there. Science, commerce, production, business, wars, import, export, labour, salary, interest, banking, buying, selling debt, capital, profit etc.. were the main causes which were not only the foundation of human life but also the reasons that governed life there. And these Indian cows and bulls? There were no forests for them to jump around here... No cowherd to play the flute to them, neither grand fathers nor children to fool around with and indulge in a playful tussle with. ... the cow was not at the centre of the rural life here. There were no festivals associated with her here. The cow was only a commodity for the market...the Brahmani cows could not continue living a life so alien and so claustrophobic and began to die... The calf that you see sitting with the cow in one corner of the painting is the offspring of the cow in the picture and the raging black bull in the other corner of the painting...(93).

The death of the calf becomes the reason for the Bull to declare a war on all members of the Pyroli house. The bull attacks Hastings who is returning home to Pyroli House at the end of the impeachment proceedings. The royal carriage in which Hastings is returning is broken into tiny pieces by the raging bull. The horse that was pulling the carriage, a grand symbol of British empire too is killed by the bull. The bull it seems is saying, your compatriots may have cleared you of the impeachment but I indict you for the death of my family and the fate of my nation. A platoon of imperial army is called in to bring the raging bull under control. That night, the narrator says, the bull was shot to death by the imperial army. He goes on to say, there was so much fat in the body of that bull that one of the staff from Pyroli Hall, secretly sold it to a leather factory in Devonport. From the factory, the narrator tells us that lard reached the ammunition store in Woolwich from where it reached Barrackpore army cantonment; and exactly 62 years later in 1857 in Barrackpore army cantonment, the lard of that bull greased the first shot fired by Mangal Pandey at an English officer.

The first bullet that was fired in the first war of independence in 1857 greased with the lard of the bull contained the fuse that ignited the fire of independence across India. The cow that bore the calf and the bull that

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sired the calf are the narrator tells us none other than the reincarnation of Chokhi and Nandakumar. Nandkumaris said to have sent documentary evidence of Hastings' corruption to East India Company and was executed by Hastings.

## **Conclusion**

The playful weaving of fantasy, fact, imagination, dream and history in this story brings respite from the obsessive and defeating teleology of colonialism. It opens up a space for playfully interpreting and engaging with history and historical personages. In doing so it recognizes the limits of realistic fiction in dealing with a past weighed down by unrecoverable histories. At the same time it also bemoans the fact that a different trajectory of love and of respect for an alien culture could have created different discourses for civilizational exchanges. In doing so the story also offers as Ghirardi says an "unusual perspective from which to view the figure of the British Governor but also engages his readers in an explicit reflection on the meaning and the presence of the past in our own reality" (Ghirardi 35).

However, in my opinion Prakash's story goes beyond reflection on the meaning and presence of the past, it attempts to offer a dialogic possibility between two different cultures and offers us a wonder in terms of how this conflicted trajectory of civilizational clash could have been avoided had the imperialistic attitude not overwhelmed the Indophilic approach of enquiry and assimilation. The story is also significant in its thrust on how the imperial attitude not only undermined the colonised but the coloniser as well. So much so that the coloniser himself could not escape the schism enforced upon his psyche by the forces of capitalism and imperialism.

The story's great triumph is in structuring the story of Hastings Life in India via a mythological structure of creating a story within a story, and showing how the unveiling of one layer opens up yet another layer and complicates our understanding of both our past and present. At the same time it does not create the binary of man and beast as separate entities rather it underlines the fundamental unity of the entire universe.

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