

MIRRORS ACROSS THE STAGE: HISTORICAL CULTURAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN IRAN AND INDIA AND THEIR ROLE IN THE FORMATION OF THE *SHAH SALIM* PUPPET PLAY

MIR MOHAMMADREZA HEYDARI

Independent Researcher
rheidari2006@gmail.com

Abstract: This article explores the historical and cultural exchanges between Iran and India and their role in shaping the Iranian puppet play known as Shah Salim-bazi. By tracing evidence from the Sasanian period through the Safavid and Mughal courts, it examines how itinerant performers, courtly interactions, and transregional trade contributed to the transmission of performative traditions. A comparative analysis highlights structural parallels between Shah Salim-bazi and the Indian Kathputli tradition, particularly in staging, character types, the role of the narrator, and the integration of live music. Special attention is given to semiotic markers, such as the name “Shah Salim,” reminiscent of Mughal Emperor Jahangir (Salim Mirza), and the comic figure Mubarak, a dark-skinned servant whose accent and marginal status evoke the cultural presence of Indian slaves and performers in Safavid Iran. These elements suggest not only cultural borrowing but also a hybridization shaped by political alliances, migration, and commercial routes across South Asia and Iran. The study argues that Shah Salim-bazi should be understood as a hybrid theatrical form, reflecting both local creativity and intercultural dynamics. Such a reading broadens the historiography of Iranian popular theatre by situating it within wider networks of cultural transmission.

Keywords: Puppet theatre, Shah Salim-bazi, Kathputli, Safavied-Mughal relations, cultural transmission, popular performance, intercultural exchange.

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Introduction

Traditional puppetry across Asia, despite geographical and linguistic differences, often reveals traces of shared patterns or mutual cultural influences. Among these, the popular Iranian puppet theatre known as Shah Salim play (or The Court of Sultan Salim), characterized by its courtly setting, stock characters, and a narrative structure rooted in humor and exaggeration, holds a prominent place in Iran’s performative tradition. Meanwhile, the Kathputli tradition of Rajasthan, India—defined by a similarly stylized stage, episodic storytelling, and a familiar ensemble of characters—displays striking parallels to the Iranian form that are unlikely to be purely coincidental.

This article aims to examine the possibility of influence or theatrical interaction between these two puppet traditions by focusing on the historical background of cultural exchanges between Iran and India. Moving beyond surface-level comparative approaches that emphasize formal similarities, this study traces the historical pathways of theatrical and cultural exchange during key periods such as the Sasanian, Timurid, Safavid, and Mughal dynasties—eras

marked by the migration of artists, courtly interactions, and the circulation of narratives and artistic forms between the two regions.

Within this framework, Shah Salim play is reconsidered not merely as a local theatrical form but as a hybrid product of cultural encounter and indigenous creativity. This article thus seeks to demonstrate how traditional puppet theatre may serve as a mirror reflecting the history, cultural currents, and intercultural contact between civilizations.

Methodology

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines comparative theatrical analysis with a historical investigation of cultural exchanges between Iran and India. The first phase draws upon textual sources on traditional performances in both regions—specifically Iranian khaymeh shab-bazi (traditional string puppetry) and the Kathputli tradition of Rajasthan—to examine and compare their narrative structures, character typologies, staging elements, and the roles of narration and live music.

In the second phase, historical data concerning cultural relations between Iran and the Indian subcontinent during the Sasanian, Timurid, Safavid, and Mughal periods are explored. These eras witnessed artistic and intellectual exchange through the migration of craftsmen, artists, and scholars, as well as through dynastic alliances and courtly interactions. This section draws primarily on historical sources, including chronicles, biographical accounts (tazkirahs), and travelogues.

The analytical framework blends symbolic comparison, historical interpretation, and creative reading, grounded in theories of intercultural performance. The goal is to move beyond superficial similarities and critically assess the possibility of deeper, contextually grounded influences from South Asian performance traditions on the development of the specific Iranian form known as the Shah Salim play.

Findings and analysis

Introducing the Shah Salim play

Among the popular forms of traditional puppetry in **Iran**, the Shah Salim play holds a special place. As a variant of khaymeh shab-bazi—a form of string puppetry performed with the aid of a puppeteer (morshed) and a live musician—it presents a performance within a theatrical space modeled after a royal court, where the characters follow recognizable and archetypal patterns.

The stage setup symbolically reconstructs a royal court, presided over by a king named Shah Salim. The central character is a dark-skinned puppet named Mubarak, known for his humorous tone and playful demeanor. In most episodes, he is portrayed as being in love with a woman named Tayyareh Khanom, and the episodic structure of the play unfolds around this romantic pursuit, often driven by situational comedy. A rival suitor, Pahlevan Panbeh (Cotton Hero), also appears in many versions, vying for the affection of Tayyareh Khanom.

Other supporting characters—including a police chief (darugheh), an executioner, street sweepers, dancers, magicians, and sideshow performers—enter and exit the scene as needed, contributing to various subplots and comic interludes.

The orderly entrances and exits of the characters, the exaggerated reactions of Mubarak, and the integration of live music alongside the morshed's narration create a coherent performance structure. This narrative framework presents a miniature world filled with action, exaggeration, humor, and emotional tension, captivating the audience through a carefully choreographed interplay of elements.

Introducing the Kathputli tradition

Kathputli is one of the most prominent forms of traditional puppetry in northwestern **India**, especially in the region of Rajasthan. The term *Kathputli* derives from two words—*kath* (wood) and *putli* (puppet)—referring to wooden string puppets operated by artists from hereditary performance communities.

The performance takes place in a compact space, often in front of a brightly colored curtain. The stage is stylized to resemble a royal court, and the characters typically include a king, a queen, jesters, female dancers, magicians, and warriors, all reflecting the grandeur of northern Indian courts. The narratives are episodic, comedic, and rooted in folk legends or epic tales. A recurring protagonist in many of these stories is Raja Amar Singh Rathore, a Rajput prince from the kingdom of Nagaur, who lived during the reign of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century (Gründ, 2012).

In these performances, the king is usually portrayed as a serious or sometimes foolish character who becomes the target of humor. Jesters function as agents of comedy and social commentary, while the female dancers offer traditional dance interludes that enhance the visual and musical appeal of the show. A notable aspect of *Kathputli* is its oral transmission across generations, which has allowed the tradition to remain flexible and adaptive to changing social contexts (Gründ, 2012).

Comparative analysis of performative structures

a. Stage design, *mise-en-scène*, and music

In both theatrical traditions—the *Shah Salim play* in Iran and *Kathputli* in India—the structure of the stage plays a crucial role in world-building and the transmission of meaning. In each, we encounter a relatively simple yet highly symbolic performance space that, through visual devices, evokes the atmosphere of a royal court or public square and creates a setting conducive to multilayered storytelling.

In the *Shah Salim play*, the stage is confined to a standing *khaymeh* (tent) with a front curtain. Puppets enter from above the curtain, with the mechanics of their movement and the presence of the *morshed* (puppet master) hidden from the audience. The tent is typically adorned with colorful fabrics and decorative fringes, but it lacks elaborate decoration or scenery. Instead, the voice of the *morshed*, the rhythm of the *tonbak* (goblet drum), and the entrances and exits of the puppets establish the stage's rhythm and structure. The puppets' movements are limited to back-and-forth motion across the stage, but exaggerated gestures and rapid changes in position provide visual variety (Azimpour, 2010).

In *Kathputli*, the stage shares clear similarities with its Iranian counterpart. It usually features a horizontal curtain, with puppets suspended from above, performing against a symbolic backdrop—often depicting a palace, battlefield, or royal court. Although puppet movement is restricted, the vibrant costumes, articulated heads and torsos, and exaggerated rhythmic motions create a dynamic visual experience. The narrator and musician remain behind the curtain, supplying a range of live sounds and effects that complete the atmosphere.

Musically, both traditions rely heavily on percussion instruments. In the *Shah Salim play*, the *tonbak* serves as the primary accompaniment, occasionally joined by simple melodic phrases appropriate to the narrative. In *Kathputli*, traditional small drums like the *dholak*, the jingling sound of *ghungroos* (ankle bells worn by female dancers), and folk singing play a vital role in conveying emotional tone. This music not only provides a sonic backdrop but also enhances dramatic tension and underscores puppet movements. Interestingly, a similar instrument to the *dholak* exists in Iran, known as the *dohol*, suggesting shared or parallel musical roots in both regions.

Despite their seemingly modest visual staging, both performances are built upon complex systems of symbolism, spatial control, and audience expectation. Emerging from oral and folk traditions, they construct theatrical and fantastical worlds that resonate deeply with communal imagination.

b. Characters and stock types

One of the most striking aspects in the comparison between the Shah Salim play and Kathputli is their reliance on recurring, typified characters, which serve to create a familiar and predictable system for the audience. In both traditions, the puppets do not represent specific individuals, but rather exaggerated embodiments of social, moral, or political roles that have become stabilized across generations.

In the Shah Salim play, the central and defining character is Mubarak—a puppet with dark skin, large eyes, and a sharp, satirical tongue. He is the only Black figure in the performance and occupies a dual role: both as a critic of authority and as the main driver of the narrative. His speech and behavior toward others suggest a self-appointed mastery over the puppet theatre itself (Azimpour, 2010, p. 367). Mubarak engages in a romantic and often ironic relationship with Tayyareh Khanom, which forms the basis for most of the episodic storylines. Other characters appear or disappear depending on the story, but are always defined in relation to Mubarak or the king.

Conversely, Kathputli also presents a cast of recognizable types. The most prominent is the local king or raja, often portrayed as inept or passive. Alongside him is a clown or narrator figure known as Bhatt, who advances the narrative, provides musical accompaniment, and often delivers social critiques through humorous commentary. Female dancers, soldiers, and occasionally clerics also appear in these performances, but—similar to the Shah Salim play—their roles are largely symbolic or theatrical rather than realistic.

The similarity between Mubarak and the clown figure in Kathputli—in terms of their centrality, free speech, and their ability to satirize power through humor—is one of the most crucial points of connection between the two traditions. Both characters, when juxtaposed with royal or official figures, create a structural opposition in which the logic of authority is challenged by the logic of comedy. This contrast not only brings a dynamic and lively tone to the performance, but also generates a form of “social drama” that, beyond entertainment, carries instructive or critical potential.

c. Narrator and narrative structure

In both Shah Salim play and Kathputli traditions, the presence of a central narrator positioned offstage plays a crucial role in structuring the performance. This narrator is not only the facilitator of the story but also the connector of all performative elements—narration, music, and puppet action.

In Iranian Kheimh Shab Bazi, the puppeteer speaks through a device called a Safir, a reed whistle held in the mouth, producing a shrill and almost

unintelligible voice for the puppets (Gharibpour, 2012). Bahram Beyzaei describes the performance in more detail:

The performer, who manipulated the puppets and was known as *ostad* [master], spoke and sang in place of the puppets with the help of his assistant. To do this, he held a small whistle called *Safir* in his mouth, making the voice high-pitched and thin. A principal musician, usually playing the *Zarb* (goblet drum), *tar*, or *Kamancheh*, would sit in front of the stage, narrate, sing, and converse with the puppets. This person was called *morshed* [guide/master]. In fact, the development of the plot followed the arrangements previously agreed upon between the *ostad* and the *morshed*. (Beyzaei, 2001, pp. 104–105)

The *morshed* articulates the puppets' lines and occasionally addresses the audience directly. He may even physically enter the performance, massaging or punishing Mubarak with his hand. In this sense, the *morshed* functions as an omniscient narrator—he not only delivers the dialogues but also sets the rhythm of humor and dramatic action through his vocal performance. His presence is inseparably tied to traditional live music, typically including the *tonbak* and *kamancheh* (spiked fiddle). In some versions, the *morshed* is portrayed as being closer to Mubarak, sometimes assuming a moral or guiding role in the narrative.

In the *Kathputli* tradition, the role of narrator is performed by members of the *Bhatt* community—the hereditary custodians of the art. Seated in front of the stage, they recount the story using folk melodies, songs, and the rhythmic sounds of the *dholak* and *ghungroo* (Gründ, 2012).

In the *Rajasthani* context, the *Bhatt* is also a guardian of epic and folk tales, and his role goes beyond puppetry. He is a cultural memory keeper and oral historian of the community. The similarity between the Iranian *morshed* and the Indian *Bhatt*—in terms of their performative structure, multifaceted role, vocal mastery, and close relationship with traditional music—marks an important point of convergence between these two traditions. Both narrators, through their simultaneous embodiment of multiple roles, craft performative worlds that, despite their simplicity of means, are rich in execution and deeply rooted in cultural heritage.

d. Structural similarities and differences in puppets and puppeteering techniques

One of the most important features of traditional puppet theatre is the relationship between the puppet's body, its movement, and the invisible body of the puppeteer. In each theatrical tradition, this relationship is defined through specific methods of puppet-making and performance, which carry distinct cultural and aesthetic implications. A comparison between the puppets used in Kathputli and those in the Shah Salim Play reveals both overlapping elements and meaningful differences.

In Kathputli performances, the puppets are typically made of lightweight wood and have hollow bodies. The head, arms, and sometimes knees are movable and are connected to the puppeteer's hands via strings controlled from above the stage. The costumes are extravagant, often made from shiny, mirror-embroidered Rajasthani fabrics, giving the puppets a highly theatrical appearance. The puppets lack legs, and the lower part of their bodies is covered by long skirts that make their swinging motions appear more natural. Movements are mostly swinging, rotating, or pounding gestures, and gain expressive meaning through the accompaniment of percussion-based music and narration by a voice artist, who is often a member of a hereditary performing family (Gründ, 2012).

Puppets in the Shah Salim Play have been crafted from various materials over different periods. In earlier versions, like their Indian counterparts, the heads were made of wood, and the costumes—aligned with Iranian attire—were fashioned from cloth. In later years, heads made of porcelain or even plastic became common (Azimpour, 2010, p. 250). These puppets are also operated by strings, though usually only the head and torso are movable. A notable aspect is the distinctive facial design – especially the dark-skinned face and perpetual smile of Mubarak, which simultaneously signify protest and humor. The costumes are typically more modest and crafted from inexpensive textiles. Unlike Kathputli, movements in the Shah Salim Play rely less on rotation and more on theatrical gestures or exaggerated movements of the head and hands.

While both traditions use string manipulation from above the stage, differences in puppet body design, range of motion, and musical style give each its own unique identity. These differences stem not only from technical choices but also from the distinct cultural worldviews and performative goals underlying each tradition.

e. Theme and narrative: humor, love, and social critique

Traditional puppet performances, in any culture, are not merely tools of entertainment but serve as mirrors reflecting values, norms, and social critiques. In both Shah Salim Play and Kathputli, humorous, emotional, and at times critical narratives are presented in episodic formats featuring familiar stock characters.

In the Iranian Shah Salim Play, the story usually revolves around the romantic escapades of Mubarak and a woman who is often named Tayyareh Khanom. The narrative begins with Mubarak entering the royal court, where the king and other characters are present. Using his sharp tongue and improvisational wit, Mubarak challenges structures of power, social inequality, or the incompetence of symbolic authorities. Nevertheless, the main plot typically focuses on Mubarak's emotional struggles, his failed attempts at love, and his comically exaggerated efforts to attain union with his beloved. These stories are largely improvised, responsive to the audience, and guided by morshed theatrical memory.

In contrast, Kathputli narratives are often drawn from local legends, myths, or folk tales, commonly involving kings, jesters, dancers, or warriors. The stories are episodic, straightforward, and laced with humor. Occasionally, historical or mythological events are reenacted, yet always with exaggeration, dramatization, and performative suspense. Humor is a central element in this tradition as well, though it tends to be less personal and more aligned with symbolic structures of authority or general morality.

In both traditions, the role of peripheral characters—such as jesters, dancers, or servants—is vital in generating comic moments and creating a sense of performative distancing. These characters often represent the lower social strata or the voice of ordinary people, who, within the royal court setting, mock the ruling systems through humor and ridiculous behavior.

Although Shah Salim Play and Kathputli emerged in distinct cultural contexts, both rely on popular storytelling to address more complex social concerns. This expression is made possible not through direct criticism, but via puppetry, metaphor, and comedy—a form of “conservative satire” that, while cautionary, avoids offending power and thus manages to persist even within royal or authoritative frameworks.

Historical and performative relations between Iran and India

a. The Sasanian era and the presence of nomadic performers in Iran

The structural and narrative similarities between the Iranian puppet theatre known as Shah Salim Play and the Kathputli tradition of India raise fundamental questions about the origins of these parallels. Are these resemblances purely coincidental, or do they stem from historical exchanges between the two cultures? To address this question, one must return to the deep past of cultural relations between Iran and India—relations that, across various periods from the Sasanian era to the Safavid and Mughal dynasties, opened multifaceted channels for artistic, linguistic, and narrative exchanges. In the following section, these historical

pathways are examined to shed light on the formation of shared elements in the two performance traditions.

In fact, Iran and India, as neighboring and ancient civilizations in Asia, have long maintained deep cultural, linguistic, and ritual connections. Both lands stem from the Indo-European cultural sphere, and in their mythological roots, cosmological concepts, and ritual structures, one finds striking similarities that point to a common heritage in prehistoric times. Still, Iran and India followed divergent historical trajectories from antiquity onward.

Iran, from the Median and Achaemenid periods to the Sasanian Empire, developed centralized political structures, unified imperial systems, and bureaucratic administrations. In contrast, ancient India mostly followed regional political and cultural models that emphasized linguistic and ritual diversity. This divergence continued after the advent of Islam: Iran became one of the cultural centres of the Islamic world, while India, following the spread of Buddhist and Hindu traditions, ultimately came under the rule of various Islamic dynasties (from the Ghaznavids to the Mughals).

Despite these differences, the connection between Iran and India was never severed. Trade routes—including the eastern branches of the Silk Road and maritime paths along Iran's southern coast—enabled the transmission of goods, religion, language, rituals, and art. Merchants, pilgrims, artists, and mystics were the agents of this exchange, and through their movement, artistic traditions also traveled between the two lands.

Among these, theatre—owing to its mobile, communal, and multimedia nature—emerged as one of the most prominent manifestations of this exchange. The oldest extant sources on such connections indicate that during the Sasanian period (224–651 CE), the last great pre-Islamic Iranian empire, a group of Indian entertainers and performers—referred to as *luri* or *luli* (terms later associated with itinerant performers or “Gypsies”)—came to Iran, bringing with them ritual and performative traditions from South Asia.

According to Persian historical and literary narratives, Bahram V of the Sasanian dynasty—known as Bahram Gur—requested the king of India to send musicians and entertainers to Iran. In response, the Indian monarch dispatched twelve thousand performers, both men and women, among whom were the *Luri*, whose descendants are said to still exist today. One account recounts:

Bahram Gur ruled for twenty-three years... During his reign, justice and fairness exceeded that of all his ancestors. No king was ever more joy-loving or braver than he. Never before had the people of the realm lived in such merriment and musical delight as in his time. He was always

informed of the affairs of the world, and none suffered hardship or grief—except that men drank wine without musicians to accompany them. So he ordered a letter to be written to the king of the Indians, requesting *kusan*—a Pahlavi word meaning minstrel. From India came twelve thousand entertainers, men and women, including the Luri, who still survive among us. He gave them instruments and beasts of burden so that they might freely perform for the people and bring joy into their lives. (Anonymous, 1939, p. 69)

Linguistic and ethnographic evidence suggests that the Luris most likely originated from the region now known as Rajasthan. Historically, the Luris were members of a social caste traditionally engaged in itinerant music and dance. Following the fall of the Sasanian Empire, these groups continued their westward migrations well into the 11th century CE, entering Islamic territories. Their recurring appearance in Persian poetry and literature reflects their lasting presence in the cultural memory of the region.

According to the historical narratives discussed earlier, Bahram Gur issued a decree stating that “people should work for half the day and spend the other half in leisure—eating, drinking, and merrymaking—and that wine should not be consumed without the presence of musicians and Luris entertainers” (Isfahani 1988, p. 52). As a result, the demand for performers became so high that common people could no longer afford their services. One day, Bahram noticed a group of people who did not appear to be enjoying themselves and asked why. They replied: “We sought entertainers, but none could be found for less than a hundred dirhams.” (Ibid., p. 53)

Disturbed by this, Bahram called for pen and paper and sent a letter to the king of India—named Shengal or Shengar in different accounts—requesting skilled musicians. Some sources claim this request was made in exchange for war reparations. The story of the arrival of these performers appears in various historical sources, including *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi, with only minor variations, suggesting a common Sasanian origin and a narrative likely rooted in historical reality (Ferdowsi, 2003, vol. 2, p. 1408).

By royal command, this group was dispersed throughout Iran and tasked with bringing joy to the people through music and performance, earning their livelihood through art. Historical sources suggest that the descendants of these Lulis continued to live in various regions of Iran, especially in the southern and western provinces. Importantly, the Lulis were not merely musicians and singers; they carried with them an entire mobile performance culture. They were renowned for acrobatics, tightrope walking, animal shows, and other forms of popular

entertainment. However, the extent to which they were familiar with puppet theatre remains uncertain. One of the rare textual references to this is a verse by Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209 CE), who describes these *Lulis* as puppet players:

He gathered six thousand masters of craft / Musicians, dancers, and
puppet performers / Drawn from the sawād of every city, / Dispersed
them across the land, each to a region, / So that wherever their tents
were pitched, / The people would be cheered and they would delight in
turn. (Nizami Ganjavi, 1993, p. 674)

In this context, *sawād*—a classical Persian term that typically denotes fertile black soil—refers instead to dark-skinned peoples, likely of Indian or Rajasthani origin, many of whom were historically associated with itinerant artistry or servile roles. This reading is crucial in tracing the physical and symbolic lineage of the black-faced puppet character Mubarak in Iranian Shah Salim play, whose dark complexion may reflect the racial memory of these early Indian performers.

Although, given the chronological gap between these two periods and Nizami's general fondness for using theatrical metaphors, this poem cannot serve as definitive evidence for the introduction of puppet theatre to Iran via the *Lulis*, it nevertheless suggests that the *Lulis* were carriers of non-scripted, oral, and improvisational forms of performance rooted in South Asian cultures. The performative, ritualistic, and itinerant nature of their art indicates a predisposition toward the use of puppets or performative objects. In northern India, traditions of puppetry—including Kathputli itself—date back many centuries, and thus it is not far-fetched to imagine that rudimentary forms of string-puppet performance or object-based theatre may have been transmitted from India to Iran during this very era.

b. The Safavids, the Mughals, and Courtly Exchanges

Following the fall of the Sasanian Empire and the advent of Islam, references to stabilized forms of puppetry continue to appear in official texts—an indication that certain aspects of this performative culture may have endured across centuries in Iran. Among the more explicit sources that refer to object-based or puppet-like performances—beyond the numerous poetic instances where puppetry terminology appears—we find notable accounts from the gatherings (*majāles*) of the great Iranian Sufi mystic, Shaykh Abu Sa'īd Abu'l-Khayr (967–1049 CE). One such account reads:

It is said that one day, as the Shaykh was passing by, he saw a group of *la'bat-bāzān* (puppet or fantasy performers) playing make-believe and beating their daff drums. The Shaykh instructed his servant to invite them to the *khānaqāh* that evening. That night, they came to the *khānaqāh*, closed off the curtain, and began their performance. They brought out, one by one, troops of bakers, butchers, blacksmiths, scholars, reciters of the Qur'an, and Sufis. Each group had their own verse or skit. They asked for money and performed songs with the *qawwāls*. And lastly, they brought out the Sufis. (Abū Sa'īd Abū'l-Khayr, 2012, p. 174)

Regardless of the specificities of such anecdotes, it is during the Safavid era (1501–1736 CE) that we witness a broad revival of puppetry traditions in Iran. It seems that various forms of puppetry may have reached a peak during this period. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, the French traveler, provides an account of a performance in Isfahan that clearly describes a *shadow play*—perhaps the last such reference in Persian historical sources:

Toward evening, puppeteers enclose a square space with curtains and present their puppets behind a very thin screen, so that what is seen are only shadows. These shadows form thousands of amusing scenes. When the show ends, they request something from the audience, and each person gives whatever they wish. (Tavernier, 1954, p. 51)

In addition to shadow plays, reports from this period also describe *glove puppetry*. Adam Olearius, the German scholar who visited the court of Shah Safi between 1633 and 1636 CE on behalf of Frederick III, Duke of Holstein, makes mention of a performance style now known in Iran as *khom-bāzī*. According to his account—cited by Willem Floor—the puppeteer entered a long cloak which was held up by a wooden structure so that his shoulders and head appeared elevated. The cloak became a mobile booth, within which the performer manipulated hand puppets (Floor, 2020, p. 85).

With the fall of the Sasanian Empire and the advent of Islam, references to puppet performance continue to appear in Persian literary and historical sources. This enduring presence suggests that some aspects of performative culture may have survived the centuries. Among the most notable early Islamic references is a narrative from the gatherings of Sheikh Abu Sa'īd Abū al-Khayr (967–1049), the celebrated Iranian mystic, which recounts:

It is said that one day as he passed by a group of la'bat-bāzān (puppeteers), who were performing pantomimes and beating drums, the sheikh asked his servant to invite them to the khānaqāh that night. They came and closed the curtains, and the samā' began. One by one, different tradespeople were introduced: bakers, butchers, blacksmiths, scholars, reciters of the Qur'an, and Sufis. Each group performed separately, accompanied by musicians, asking for money. Finally, the Sufis were brought out. (Abū al-Khayr 1391/2012, p. 174)

Although explicit references to string puppetry appear infrequently in early Safavid textual sources, this does not necessarily indicate its absence. Rather, it suggests that other forms—such as cloak-based booth performances—were more prominently described by observers. Reports by European travelers and diplomats from the later Safavid period document a variety of puppet practices, indicating that the broader environment of popular performance remained vibrant. These accounts do not contradict the possibility that string puppetry—particularly in forms shaped through Indo-Persian cultural exchange—re-emerged or developed further during the Safavid era.

That said, extensive contact between Indians and Iranians likely provided fertile ground for the renewed diffusion of string-based performance. The political and commercial ties between the Safavids and Mughals were especially robust. The founder of the Mughal Empire, Zāhīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur, initially sought support from Shah Ismail I of Iran in his campaigns to reclaim territories in Turkestan, Central Asia, and present-day Afghanistan. When these plans failed, he turned toward India and established the Mughal dynasty.

His son Humāyūn developed even closer ties with the Iranian court. After losing his throne to Sher Shah Suri in 1540, he sought refuge at the court of Shah Ṭahmāsp I, where he remained for fifteen years. His arrival was met with royal hospitality, an event later depicted in a celebrated mural at the Chehel Sotoun Palace in Isfahan (see Fig. 1). Upon his return to India, Shah Ṭahmāsp dispatched an army to assist him in reclaiming his rule (see Fig. 2).



Figure 1. Audience of Humayun with Shah Tahmasp
© Chehel Sotoun Palace, Isfahan



Figure 2. Shah Tahmasp and Humayun
Folios from an unidentified illustrated Persian manuscript;
digital reproduction, original source unknown.

Additional records also attest to the presence of numerous Indian princes and dignitaries who resided in Iran with their retinues. Raphaël du Mans offers a colorful account of one such moment in Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Square:

In 1659 CE [1069 AH], a bizarre incident occurred when the elephant of an Indian man entered the square and toppled a puppeteer's stage and pavilion with its trunk, hurling them toward a villager who was sitting on a pile of hay. The whole event became a spectacle in itself, generating far more laughter and amusement than the original puppet performance. The disheveled puppeteer and his stage flew through the air like something caught in a spider's web. Flailing like a trapped fish, he eventually fell to the ground, jumped up, and ran off—much to the delight of the audience. (Du Mans, 1980, p. 214; cited in Āzhand, 2019, p. 110)

These Indian elites became deeply acquainted with Iranian art and culture during their stay. As a direct result of this exposure, Humāyūn declared Persian the official language of the Mughal court upon his return, and a wave of Iranian architects, poets, and artists emigrated to India. As Chardin notes:

The courts of the Muslim kings of India—especially in Golconda and Bijapur—were entirely occupied by Iranians. Once an Iranian settled in India, he would summon his relatives and friends, and they would eagerly journey toward the wealth and prosperity that awaited them. (Chardin 1335/1956, vol. 4, pp. 21–22)

Traces of Cultural Transmission

Beyond structural similarities in dramaturgy and stage design, certain names and character traits in the Iranian puppet play *Shāh Salīm* play clearly reflect cultural transmission or borrowing from Mughal Indian traditions. The first indication is the title of the play itself: *Shāh Salīm*. While various interpretations have been proposed regarding the identity of this character—including suggestions that he represents Sultan Salim II of the Ottoman Empire, whose religious disputes with the Safavids led to major wars between the two empires—it seems highly unlikely that the figure of *Shāh Salīm*, who typically appears as a kind and just ruler, laughing at the jests of his Black servant *Mubārak*, fulfilling the wishes of his entourage, forgiving sinners and villains, and ultimately granting *Mubārak*

his wish to marry Ṭayyāreh Khānom (Ṣeddīq 1383 [2004], p. 40–43), could represent an Ottoman sultan.

Rather, the name bears a striking resemblance to Salīm Mirzā, the son of Mughal emperor Akbar, who later ruled as Jahāngīr. Choosing such a name within Iranian puppet theatre—especially given the wide-ranging political and cultural ties between the Safavid and Mughal courts—is unlikely to be purely coincidental. Although the narrative of the play has no direct connection with Jahāngīr’s biography, the connotations of the name—evoking royalty, empire, and performative authority—strengthen the case for Mughal influence.

Another significant marker is the character of Mubārak, the comedic and central jester figure in Shāh Salīm play. Mubārak is usually portrayed with dark skin, a distinctive accent, and humorous behavior. Scholars have argued that this character was inspired by Indian Luli or enslaved individuals who were brought to Iran during the Safavid era. His unusual speech and accent further suggest that Mubārak embodies an “Other”—a cultural hybrid reflecting the encounter between Iranian and Indian traditions. In the Kathputli tradition of North India, similarly, comic characters often exhibit ethnic or regional traits used to enhance humor or social critique. During the Safavid-Mughal period, cultural exchanges were reinforced not only by political alliances but also through flourishing trade.

Pietro della Valle (1586–1652), an Italian traveler who visited Iran during the reign of Shah ‘Abbās I, notes the presence of dark-skinned Indian dancers in caravanserais who performed for Indian merchants (della Valle 1370 [1991], p. 70–71). The very fact that these merchants were numerous enough to attract dedicated entertainers is noteworthy. Even more striking is the description of these dancers as dark-skinned.

At the time, the slave trade was one of the most common commercial activities. Many enslaved individuals—both male and female—were brought from India and Africa to Iran via the Persian Gulf, and were often employed in the households of the elite. These individuals were frequently given names such as Mubārak, Bashārat, or Fīrūz, and their imperfect Persian, due to limited fluency, created comedic moments. Over time, these real-life figures found their way into Iranian popular theatre—particularly ruḥowzī and traditional khaymeh-shab-bāzi—as characters like Mubārak and Bashārat (Zekrī 1398 [2019], p. 94).

These semiotic elements—be it the royal name or the “Otherness” of Mubārak—collectively form a layer of cultural memory that, though not directly documented, strongly suggests the enduring impact of Indian performative rituals on the development of puppetry in Iran.

Conclusion

Puppet theatre—particularly in its popular and traditional forms—often carries traces of intercultural contact and transregional exchange. On the one hand, it relies on deeply rooted local traditions; on the other, its flexibility in absorbing foreign elements reflects a broader cultural dynamism. In this article, through a comparative study of the Iranian puppet tradition of Shāh Salīm play and the Kathputli tradition of India, as well as an analysis of historical contexts such as Sasanian, Safavid, and Mughal relations, we have identified signs of influence or, at the very least, performative interaction between these two theatrical worlds.

Structural similarities in staging, character composition, the presence of a morshed or narrator, and live music—alongside thematic overlaps in moral critique, satire, and situational humor—provide grounds for positing a historical impact. Furthermore, semiotic cues in the name of the play (Shāh Salīm) and in the characteristics of Mubārak—particularly his dark skin, distinctive accent, and marginal narrative status—point to a layer of cultural memory that strengthens the possibility of an Indian origin for certain features.

Overall, Shāh Salīm play may be seen as a hybrid product—not solely shaped within internal cultural boundaries, but formed in meaningful, if subtle, relation to the theatrical world of South Asia. Such a reading not only deepens our understanding of the roots of Iranian popular theatre but also underscores the need to reconsider dominant historiographies of the performing arts—histories that have often overlooked “unofficial” channels of transmission such as oral traditions, cultural migrations, and street performances.

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Mir Mohammadreza Heydari is an independent researcher and writer from Iran, specializing in the history of theatre. His research focuses on the study of theatre in Iran and the Islamic world, examining the connections between indigenous, ritual, and popular performance traditions and broader cultural and social developments. He has authored works on the history of theatre and on the analysis of performative traditions within Iranian and Islamic contexts. His main academic interest lies in theatre historiography, cultural transmission and exchange, and reinterpreting the role of performance in the historical and cultural memory of Eastern societies.