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## Introduction to *Tilism-e Hoshruba*

IMAGINE A TALL MOUNTAIN reaching into the skies; at the foot of it a large army of readers is gathered—you among them. You hear a loud, thunderous beat. It's me on kettledrums. From where you stand in the crowd you can barely see me. But you hear the beat loud and clear—what with all the mountain acoustics, and also because I strike the drums very loudly.

You and all the others are gathered for a long, perilous campaign. On the other side of the mountain lies the land of an all-powerful tale—the one you must conquer. It has consumed whole generations of readers before you. And like all great tales, it is still hungry—ravenous, in fact—for more. You may not return from this campaign, or you may come back so hardened you may never look at stories in quite the same way again. But these are not the only challenges.

The path leading to the heart of this tale is through a dark terrain laid with archaic language and craggy metaphors, strewn with ornate word puzzles that are a challenge to solve. Not many have gone across in the last hundred years. But the tale will not die or be forgotten. It only gets hungrier and hungrier for readers. In the night, when people open up their bedside books, it roars with a terrible challenge, “Are there any who are my match?”

Should you now wish to listen, here's the story of this tale. It speaks of what this tale is, where it came from, and who created it. By telling you this story, I do not mean to delay you. By all means, advance and come back to me later, or never, if you like that better. I, for one, never read “introductions” first. I believe stories should be read without pompous fellows like me interrupting readers. I give this information by way of anecdote only because the account of this tale's origins is a fantasy in itself and, like you, I too am fond of a good story.

Know then, that from 1883–1893 in Lucknow, India, two rival storytellers, Syed Muhammad Husain Jah and Ahmed Husain Qamar, wrote a fantasy in the Urdu language whose equal has not been heard before or

since. It was called and *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* and it was over eight thousand pages long. This tale had been passed down to them—or so everyone thought—from storytellers going back hundreds of years.

But in truth, the *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* was a monstrously elaborate literary hoax perpetrated by a small, tightly-knit group of storytellers from an earlier generation. How long it had been in preparation is not known. A story of such magnitude must have been in the making for many years. We know at least two generations of storytellers who were involved in the enterprise. The names of several men who propagated it most actively in their time have come down to us.

By the time *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* appeared in print, everyone believed that it belonged to the cycle of tales of *The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza*, which could be traced back in India to the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605).

*The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza* originated in Arabia in the seventh century to commemorate the brave deeds of Prophet Muhammad's uncle, Amir Hamza. In the course of its travels in the Middle East and Central Asia, this story incorporated many local fictions and histories and became an entirely fictitious legend. Then, sometime between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, *The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza* found its way to India.

Emperor Akbar took a particular liking to this tale. He not only enjoyed its narration, but in 1562 he also commissioned an illustrated album of the legend. It took fifteen years to complete and is considered the most ambitious project ever undertaken by the royal Mughal studio. Each of its fourteen hundred, large-sized illustrations depicted one episode and was accompanied by mnemonic text in Persian—the court language—to aid the storyteller. Only ten per cent of these illustrations survived, but the royal patronage popularized the story and the Indian storytellers developed it into an oral tale franchise.

Oral tales had been told in India for thousands of years. Ultimately, every story tells of some event, but what storytellers choose to tell of the event and how they approach it is determined by the genre in which it is told. *The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza* was told in India in the *dāstān* genre, which is of Persian origin. However, over hundreds of years, a distinctive Indo-Islamic *dāstān* emerged in India that was informed by the cultural universe in which it developed.

In the nineteenth century, three hundred years after *The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza* found a foothold in the Mughal Empire, it was narrated in the Urdu language in two different *dāstān* traditions. The first was a short legend, which recounted all the events preceding Amir Hamza's birth: the

adventures that made him a hero, the details of his eighteen-year-long stay in the mythical land of Mount Qaf, and the events that followed his return to Earth, and his martyrdom.

The second *dāstān* tradition was much longer, loosely arranged and of a more complex nature. It not only included Amir Hamza's adventures but also the exploits of his sons and grandsons. Through telling and re-telling, the storytellers enlarged the existing episodes and continuously added new details and adventures.

Meanwhile, a group of Lucknow storytellers had become disenchanted with the Amir Hamza legend and its regular fare of *jinns* (genies), giants, *devs* (demons), *peris* (fairies), and *gao-sars* (cow-headed creatures). Most of these elements were borrowed from Arabian and Persian folklore. The few token man-eaters and sorcerers thrown into the mix were found to be rather boring.

These storytellers strongly felt that the Amir Hamza story needed an injection of local talent—magic fauna and evil spirits, black magic, white magic, alpha sorcerers and sorceresses. All of them were in plentiful supply in India and would give the story the much needed boost. Moreover, some of these sorcerers had to be True Believers. The Islamic history was chock-full of all kinds of occult arts and artists. A thousand camel loads of treatises had been written on the occult arts in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Many renowned sorcerers were household names. It would be a shame to let that occult heritage go to waste.

But the storytellers were clear about one thing. The course had to be changed without rocking the boat. The proposed story had to remain a tale related to *The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza*—the brand that was their bread and butter. As long as the audience understood that the tale was a part of that famous cycle of tales, the storyteller would not lack an audience.

The godfather of this group of conspirators—and the likely mastermind of the planned hoax—was a Lucknow master storyteller, Mir Ahmed Ali. He sat down to prepare a fantasy tale that would have all of these ingredients, and more.

In the longer Amir Hamza cycle, every adventure began with a token mischief monger starting trouble in some place. Amir Hamza took it upon himself to fix it, and when he was finished, the mischief monger escaped elsewhere to create trouble anew. When one villain was defeated, another took his place. Amir Hamza dutifully followed and carried forward the storytellers' oral franchise. The audience only needed the most basic information about Amir Hamza, his companions and the past events to enjoy a new episode.

Mir Ahmed Ali was well acquainted with this structure and decided to exploit it. When he looked around for a mischief monger to start his tale, his eyes fell upon one of Amir Hamza's more celebrated enemies, Zamarud Shah Bakhtari, alias Laqa. In fact, it would have been difficult to miss Laqa. He was a giant.

In the surviving leaves of Emperor Akbar's Amir Hamza illustrations we find some fine pictorial representations of Laqa. In one of my favorite illustrations, he is flying in the clouds astride a magic clay urn. He is accompanied by his cohorts, some of whom are playing bugles, cymbals, trumpets, and kettledrums. The fair-skinned Laqa with his long, flowing, pearl-strung beard, has a meditative look on his face. One day I measured him with my ballpoint pen, using his human cohorts as a rough scale. According to my calculations, Laqa came out of Emperor Akbar's studio some twenty feet tall. It is important to remember this figure because we will be referring to it again shortly.

At the end of one of Amir Hamza's pre-existing tales, Laqa was defeated and pursued by Amir Hamza's armies. Mir Ahmed Ali saw his opportunity and scooped it up: his story would begin right at the point where Amir Hamza was chasing the giant.

Next, Mir Ahmed Ali used occult arts of the Islamic world as his inspiration to create a magical world called a tilism (*tilism*), which is created by a sorcerer by infusing inanimate things with the spirit of planetary and cosmic forces. Once an inanimate thing becomes a tilism it appears in an illusory guise and performs supernatural functions assigned to it by the sorcerer. Tilisms can be small or large depending on their structure or the complexity of the formula used in creating them.

Now, tilisms had been present in *The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza* since Emperor Akbar's times. But they were shabby little things. Sometimes they were in the shape of a domed building atop which sat a bird of some kind. If someone shot down the bird, the tilism was conquered. Sometimes it was a visual illusion that had to be ignored, or a physical trap that must be avoided. At best, tilisms were small tracts of land that had some magical property assigned to them. This, and other such uninteresting stuff, had been sold in the name of tilism to this point.

But Mir Ahmed Ali thought up a tilism that would be a whole country and contain other tilisms within it. Its original founder sorcerers would be True Believers and the tilism would have an unalterable fate. The ruler of the tilism would be the powerful sorcerer Afrasiyab, titled the Master of the Tilism. With a sorceress empress, he would rule over a vast number of sorcerers and sorceresses. But having a wife would not keep the sorcerer emperor from lusting after other princesses and carrying on an affair with

a beautiful boy. Because the emperor of sorcerers was a usurper, his empire would be filled with treachery and palace intrigues. And, most important of all, he would have an ongoing border feud with a neighboring tilism and its equally powerful sorcerer emperor.

Anything less complicated would have been an affront to Mir Ahmed Ali's imagination.

Such a dazzling, mind-and-socks-blowing tilism had to have an equally magnificent name. Mir Ahmed Ali decided on Hōshrubā (*bōsh* = senses, *rubā* = ravishing, stealing). And with that, he had the title for his story: *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* or the Tilism of Hōshrubā.

Mir Ahmed Ali parked the fleeing giant Laqa in a land neighboring Hōshrubā. Amir Hamza and his army followed and landed nearby. But the story was not about Laqa or Amir Hamza. The main action was set in Hōshrubā. One of Amir Hamza's sons was sent out hunting. He trespassed the boundaries of Hōshrubā and killed one of the guardian sorcerers running on all fours in the shape of a fawn. The Emperor of Sorcerers decided to teach the prince a nice lesson. When Amir Hamza's camp raised noises, the emperor responded in kind. Amir Hamza sent for his diviners to figure out what to do next. They declared that the fate of Hōshrubā was tied to Amir Hamza's grandson, Prince Asad, who would conquer the tilism with the help of five tricksters. With that, the scene was all set for action. And before we know it a campaign is launched to conquer Hōshrubā.

Prince Asad enters Hōshrubā with a large army and great preparations but in no time he is stripped of all that paraphernalia and left standing with only the clothes on his back. It turns out that he is completely useless in the tilism. The trickster Amar Ayyar, his four trickster companions and their newfound friend, the rebel sorceress Mahrukh Magic-Eye, must make war on the Emperor of Hōshrubā, Afrasiyab. Amir Hamza watches from the sidelines and periodically indulges in cosmetic battles with Laqa and his minions lest the audience forget they are listening to a story from the Amir Hamza cycle of tales. But in a symbolic manner, the story has gotten rid of the Amir Hamza legend as soon as Prince Asad is rendered ineffective upon entering Hōshrubā. He will remain a figurehead with only a ceremonial presence.

Mir Ahmed Ali wanted to make *Hōshrubā* the most sharp-clawed, shiny-scaled tale in the whole of the Amir Hamza cycle so he liberally poured in vicious sorceresses, nubile trickster girls, powerful wizards and dreaded monsters and stirred the tale with non-stop action. In that process, Mir Ahmed Ali transcended the whole business of legend making and created a fantasy—the first, the longest, and the greatest fantasy of the

*dāstān* genre.

It also influenced the elements used in *Hōshrubā* from the Amir Hamza legend. Some of the familiar characters appeared in it in a more fantastic idiom. We see this when we compare two characters common to Emperor Akbar's Amir Hamza illustrations and *Hōshrubā*.

The first one is our giant friend Laqa. We remember his size and appearance from Emperor Akbar's illustrations. Now we read a description of Laqa in *Hōshrubā*: "For some time now, Amir Hamza was engaged in warfare with the false god Laqa, an eighty-five-foot-tall, pitch-black giant. His head was full of vanity and resembled the ruins of a palace dome; his limbs were the size of giant tree branches" [(Jah 2009, xxxiii)].

Mir Ahmed Ali knew better than anyone else in the world that in all matters giant, size mattered greatly. Anyone can see that the Laqa of the fantasy is a far handsomer giant than the Laqa of the legend. We salute the author for making him a pitch-black, false god besides, and for the whole palace-dome and giant-tree imagery.

The second character is Amir Hamza's master trickster, Amar Ayyar. We meet him as well in Emperor Akbar's illustrated story. In one illustration he is blithely kicking an enemy trickster. In another place he is setting fire to a dragon with naphtha. In both illustrations, Amar Ayyar is shown to be thin. Except for this relative slimness, he is indistinguishable from other soldiers in Amir Hamza's army.

Now we read Amar Ayyar's fantastic description in *Hōshrubā*: "...a head like a dried gourd, eyes the size of cumin seeds, ears like apricots, cheeks resembling bread cake, a neck that was thread-like, and limbs akin to rope. His lower body measured six yards and upper body three" [(*ibid.*, 106)].

Some of this marvelous detail could also be the natural result of hundreds of years of exaggeration through oral retelling, but it is equally likely that in the world of *Hōshrubā*, exaggeration was employed, not only to create an enlarged picture of an event but also to provide one that was fantastic.

While the world of *Hōshrubā* was fantastic, its details were not alien to its audience. Mir Ahmed Ali had modeled them on the world he knew best—the Lucknow of nineteenth century India. It was one of the centers of Indo-Islamic culture and civilization. The details of dress, food, etiquette and daily life in *Hōshrubā* were borrowed from that living model. In a few places, the material and fantasy worlds overlap, as when we encounter Lucknow's iconic architectural landmarks in the tale.

Mir Ahmed Ali's story was ready but it could hardly be launched without an "original author." In the world of the Indian storytellers, glory

came from association. It had always been fashionable for the storytellers to attribute their stories to the most prestigious past sources. Since Emperor Akbar's court had patronized it, Mir Ahmed Ali deemed the emperor's poet-laureate Faizi (1547–1595) the best candidate to be touted as the “original author” of *Hōshrubā*.

The names of those who wrote the mnemonic text of Emperor Akbar's illustrations, as well as those who painted them, are recorded in history. Faizi is not one of them, but a small detail like that could hardly be allowed to stand in Mir Ahmed Ali's way. He brushed it aside royally and made Faizi the “original author” of *Hōshrubā*. Mir Ahmed Ali would be the ghost-writer of a writer ghost.

It is possible that Mir Ahmed Ali chose Faizi precisely because neither Emperor Akbar's court chroniclers nor later historians ever mentioned his name in association with the illustrated Amir Hamza project. Perhaps Mir Ahmed Ali felt that one day someone would start digging for the truth and the trail of lies would lead straight to his grave. But, no matter what Mir Ahmed Ali's twisted motivation for choosing Faizi, all the formalities were now complete and the tale was ready to be unleashed.

I can imagine Mir Ahmed Ali narrating it for the first time for a select audience—entry by invitation only—gathered at a Lucknow nobleman's house. Mir Ahmed Ali, his host and some close friends sit at the head of the room resting against bolsters. The audience sits before them on a carpet. The host tells the group that Mir Ahmed Ali has discovered, purely by accident, a new tale of the Amir Hamza cycle, which his great-great-great-grandfather received directly from Faizi. It lay hidden in an old family heirloom in the form of notes. For the last three months, Mir Ahmed Ali has been busy arranging and decoding the notes and now he is done with his labors.

The audience demands that Mir Ahmed Ali share the tale with them without loss of time. Mir Ahmed Ali quickly excuses himself. He says there has been a misunderstanding. The tale, named *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* is not yet ready. Only one part of it is. Moreover, as he is allergic to dust, going through the old parchments gave him a sore throat. He cannot narrate that evening—a great shame because the tale is one the likes of which his audience has never heard.

Members of the audience look at each other with open mouths. Mir Ahmed Ali has never made such an atrocious claim.

“Such a tale! Such a tale!” Mir Ahmed Ali keeps repeating to himself.

A faint smile appears on the host's face. He whispers into a friend's ear, who also smiles and nods his head. The audience becomes increasingly impatient. Mir Ahmed Ali is absolutely quiet, the audience fully

disposed to riot. The host calls for calm and orders another round of refreshments, which momentarily pacifies everyone.

Mir Ahmed Ali sits with closed eyes, softly intoning some verses from a *ghazal*.

After the round of refreshments is over, the host leans toward Mir Ahmed Ali and asks if he is feeling any better. Everyone waits in anticipation. “Not so much,” says Mir Ahmed Ali.

Could he—asks the host—perhaps, maybe, possibly find the strength to narrate a little episode from the *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*? Just a tiny little insignificant bit of a scene?

That he might do, Mir Ahmed Ali says after due reflection, his eyes half shut.

Members of the audience look at each other gleefully. They have never felt so lucky.

Mir Ahmed Ali clears his throat, glances around majestically, and begins in a clear, slowly rising voice: *The cupbearers of nocturnal revelries...the bibbers from the cup of inspiration...pour the vermilion wine of inscription...into the paper's goblet thus...*

God be praised, Mir Ahmed Ali has miraculously recovered. He holds forth with accompanying theatrics for a full three hours. The account of his sore throat was greatly exaggerated, but not his praise of *Hōshrubā*. The audience sits entranced. When he stops, they clamor for more. Mir Ahmed Ali promises to tell them the rest the following night at the bazaar corner where he has an ongoing gig.

That night, many present at the narration have dreams of the scantily clad sorceress Sandal. Some dream of Prince Badiuz Zaman, “the moon of the constellation of excellence.” We do not know if anyone dreamt of the fawn that, “appeared near the river bank, cavorting and gambolling like a frolicsome beloved well-versed in coquetry.”

Before he arrives in the bazaar the next evening, Mir Ahmed Ali sends out his disciple storytellers, Amba Prasad Rasa and Hakim Asghar Ali Khan, to bring him a report from the venue. They come back with the intelligence that a large crowd is gathered at the appointed place. They saw many new faces in the crowd.

That is just as Mir Ahmed Ali expected. He sets out with his disciples and arrives at the venue to loud, thankful murmurs from the throng. Everyone demands that Mir Ahmed Ali begin the tale from the beginning. And he does.

Only an infidel would doubt that it did not happen exactly in this manner.

From that day onward, the three storytellers narrate the *Hōshrubā* in

public and private gatherings. When they pass in the street, people look at them with terrible envy. They are the only ones who know what will happen next. People try all kinds of tricks on the storytellers to learn what they know of the next episode, but the affable storytellers become very taciturn whenever asked in the street, “What happened next?” Outside the storytelling sessions they speak not a word about *Hōshrubā*.

In the coming days, the crowds steadily increase in number. Amba Prasad Rasa and Hakim Asghar Ali Khan arrive an hour before Mir Ahmed Ali and summarize the preceding events of the tale for the gathering before the maestro begins his narration. It will be several years before the tale will finally end. And even then, it does not end. In fact, people wait for the end so that they can revisit their favorite episodes.

Or perhaps it takes Mir Ahmed Ali many more years to end it because people keep demanding he narrate again some particular episodes they had previously enjoyed. He tries telling them to have patience, that an even better episode will soon follow, but nobody listens to him. Every day, Mir Ahmed Ali is assailed with requests—now this incident, now that passage. Like a beleaguered but indulgent parent, Mir Ahmed Ali feels obliged to give satisfaction. When he gets bored with reciting the same episode over and over again, he expresses his displeasure to the audience by narrating it breezily, without all its juicy details. People relent and let the storyteller have his own way for a few days, then return to their old ways. The drama continues.

As an oral, narrative genre, *dāstān* draws heavily on improvisation, but once the story of *Hōshrubā* was established it turned into an elaborate chess game. The result was predestined but not the individual moves that would always be improvised. As Mir Ahmed Ali added characters and scenes and improved on the earlier descriptions, he kept adding to the subplots that must flow toward the predestined end. He and his disciples had their own favorite episodes, which they embellished in this way during storytelling sessions.

The storytellers knew how many times a lie has to be repeated before it becomes accepted truth. They never forgot to attribute the tale to the Amir Hamza cycle of tales, and to Faizi. As far as audiences were concerned, they cared little where the tale came from as long as it was a good one and from the Amir Hamza cycle. And such an entertaining tale as *Hōshrubā*! Why on earth wouldn't it be a part of *The Adventures of Amīr Hamza* cycle—the grandmother of all fine tales?

All other stories of the Amir Hamza cycle paled in comparison with its popularity. The audience asked for *Hōshrubā* and the storytellers complied. It was told in public and private gatherings, sometimes in long

sessions that continued over many days.

In the period around the 1840s and 1850s, *Hōshrubā* had taken Lucknow by storm. Travelers to Lucknow returned with the tales of *Hōshrubā*. Attending Mir Ahmed Ali's narration was a sacred ritual for all Lucknow visitors.

The neighboring cities started feeling jealous. Before an all-out bidding war could break out between the princely states of India to steal the storytellers from Lucknow, a group of troopers astride fleet-footed Arabian mares, arrive in Lucknow early one evening covered in dust. Their leader remains cloistered with Mir Ahmed Ali and his two disciples for many hours and leaves early the next morning with his entourage.

The Prince of Rampur has made a pre-emptive strike. Mir Ahmed Ali has accepted the prince's invitation to become the court storyteller of Rampur. The terms of the offer and the perks are not disclosed.

When Mir Ahmed Ali packed his belongings, his two disciples, Rasa and Khan, also packed theirs. They would follow him. Along with their bed and bedding, Rasa and Khan also packed their families, including sons Zamin Ali and Ghulam Raza. Both boys would also become storytellers. One of them would write another version of *Hōshrubā*.

When the caravan of storytellers sets out for Rampur in oxen-driven carriages, the citizens of Lucknow—men, women and children, young and old alike—accompany it on foot to the limits of the city. There is not a single dry eye in the crowd. Mir Ahmed Ali shamelessly cries loudest of all.

He would never have left Lucknow if he had not been convinced that he was leaving *Hōshrubā* in safe hands. He had passed on his mantle to a young storyteller named Muhammad Amir Khan, who began narrating episodes from *Hōshrubā* in Lucknow some time earlier, with Mir Ahmed Ali's blessings. He had a knack for creating the episodes about tricksters. Khan did not let Mir Ahmed Ali down. He continued spreading the tale among the Lucknow audience. He also wrote at least two volumes of the tale.

By the time the oxen-driven carriages arrive in Rampur, Mir Ahmed Ali has stopped crying. On the way, he has thought up a fine magic war involving a magic effigy that kills a sorcerer by casting a love spell over him. When he is led to his lodgings by the prince's attendants he tears open his bag, takes out his inkwell and paper, and starts scribbling. It was impossible to take notes during the jolting carriage ride.

Only an infidel would doubt that it did not happen exactly in this manner.

At the Rampur court, Mir Ahmed Ali continued his storytelling work.

He also put on a lot of extra weight from eating all the good stuff from the royal kitchen. Life was kind to him. His cheeks were ruddy and he laughed easily. He composed two tales at this time, one in Persian, another in Urdu, but he did not write *Hōshrubā*. Once he organized the different episodes of the story, he probably improvised the rest of the details just using notes.

It fell to his disciple, Amba Prasad Rasa, to transcribe his notes. We do not know how detailed these notes were, or whether Rasa added some details to them. That manuscript is now lost; until recently even its existence and provenance were unknown.

Later, Rasa's son, Ghulam Raza, who adopted the pen name Raza, was commissioned by the Rampur court to compose the tale of *Hōshrubā*. He wrote it down in fourteen volumes between 1858 and 1880. His work remained in manuscript.

But *Hōshrubā* began to acquire a life of its own. While Raza's work on his manuscript was coming to an end in Rampur, Mir Ahmed Ali's home town of Lucknow was again about to become the official headquarters of *Hōshrubā*. Thanks to the work started by him and his disciples and carried on by Muhammad Amir Khan, *Hōshrubā* was winning over the Lucknow audience in ever greater numbers.

By then it was commonly accepted as part of the Amir Hamza cycle of tales. In fact, it also had a specified place in the cycle as its fifth book. In the early 1880s, the erudite and enterprising Munshi Naval Kishore, owner of the Naval Kishore Press, decided to publish the entire, longer Amir Hamza cycle of tales. The Naval Kishore Press decided to start its publication project with *Hōshrubā* because it was an independent story and already extremely popular in oral narration.

When Munshi Naval Kishore asked around for someone to compose the tale, he was given the name of Lucknow storyteller Syed Muhammad Husain Jah. Kishore remembered him well. Some years previous, he had been commissioned to write a short *dāstān*, *Ṭilism-e Faṣāḥat*. The book was a testament to his mastery of prose. Kishore showed up at a *dāstān* narration session and was impressed by Jah's masterful narration of *Hōshrubā*. Jah was engaged to write the *Hōshrubā* tale, and that was just as it should have been. Syed Muhammad Husain Jah's father was a *rammal* or diviner, which means—why deny it—a sorcerer. The *Hōshrubā* project was in excellent hands.

Jah knew his *Hōshrubā* and, as a professional storyteller, he knew its real provenance. Now that he was commissioned to write it, he decided to compose a master version using all available written versions and oral traditions of his contemporary storytellers. Amba Prasad Rasa was still

alive at the time. Jah obtained the version Rasa had prepared from Mir Ahmed Ali's notes. He also used the one written by Ghulam Raza in fourteen volumes, and the two volumes written by Muhammad Amir Khan. Besides those, he borrowed some episodes from a contemporary storyteller, Sheikh Tasadduq Husain. Then he sat down to compose his masterwork.

Jah must have had a delightful time comparing how the several storytellers differed in their accounts of each character and his or her peculiarities. The work would not be unlike making a composite literary sketch of each character. And he did, indeed, do a fine work of compilation. The result is a complex set of characters unparalleled in literature, and a highly subversive arrangement of roles.

That a woman, the sorceress Mahrukh Magic-Eye, should lead the camp of True Believers may seem curious now, but it was not so in the nineteenth century Indo-Islamic society where women had a vibrant social role. There are a few shy and retiring females as well; Mahjabeen Diamond-Robe and Almas Fairy-Face are two such examples. However, Queen Mahrukh Magic-Eye, trickster girl Sarsar Swordfighter, Empress Heyrat and sorceress Bahar of the Spring-Quarter are complex and powerful women entirely comfortable with their sexuality. They hold their own against male tricksters and sorcerers in intellect, physical prowess and magical powers. The strident personalities of these female characters did not emerge from the author's fancy but from the lives of the contemporary women. The *Hōshrubā* sorceresses appear in the dresses of Lucknow princesses and noble women, speak in their idiom and follow their social etiquette.

The most complex and interesting character in all of *Hōshrubā* is Emperor of Hōshrubā, sorcerer Afrasiyab. In any heroic tale it is the hero who faces the greatest number of threats and challenges. In *Hōshrubā*, it is not the Conqueror of the Tilism or the trickster Amar Ayyar who face the greatest number of odds. It is Afrasiyab. He must keep the increasingly demanding false god Laqa safe from Amir Hamza, take care of the menacing rebel sorcerers led by Mahrukh Magic-Eye, watch out for the rampaging tricksters and, finally, contend with the rival emperor of the neighboring tilism. In setting him up against all these challenges, Mir Ahmed Ali and succeeding storytellers probably wished to show Afrasiyab's power and resourcefulness. In the process, they also made him into a heroic character.

At a personal, human level too, Afrasiyab is very likable. Even his unbridled sexual appetite makes him a far more interesting character than the asexual Amar Ayyar and the frigid, battle-hardened Amir Hamza. Afra-

siyab shows great sensitivity toward his beloved Princess Bahar, who has joined his enemies. He is magnanimous toward a couple whose only son has died in his cause. When he boastfully fulminates against the god of sorcerers to assert his grandeur, he sounds entirely believable. And the scene where he sacrifices his beautiful male lover to a vampire monster to save his empire is one of the most tragic and memorable in all his personal history.

The tale of *Hōshrubā* is a contest between sorcerers and tricksters more than it is a war between sorcerers. Against the endlessly powerful sorcerers, the tricksters rely on their cunning, talent and wits. This is a fundamental departure in storytelling from *The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza* legend where holy figures of all stripes made frequent appearances to offer aid and counsel to Amir Hamza, and sometimes even did his work for him. In *Hōshrubā*, it is hard to find a holy personage. When Amir Hamza and his camp are faced with dire situations, it is the tricksters who save the day.

The tricksters' mastery of the art of disguise plays a crucial role in their success. Sometimes their change of disguise from one person to another occurs so rapidly and in such complex mixes that it seems the creators of *Hōshrubā* are playing a literary thimble-rig with the reader. Perhaps this was the contribution of the storyteller Muhammad Amir Khan, who was the trickster expert.

It is true that magic does not have any effect on Amar Ayyar's holy gifts—an inheritance from *The Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza* legend—but equally, Amar Ayyar is also proscribed by a code of tricksters against using holy gifts to kill sorcerers. Even when Amar Ayyar uses his holy gifts, he employs them to aid his tricks or in self defense. This is another symbolic way in which *Hōshrubā* neutralizes the influences from the *Adventures of Amīr Ḥamza* legend where these devices were used directly. It can be said that throughout the fantasy, the focus has shifted from divine help to human resourcefulness.

Mir Ahmed Ali and other Indian storytellers had brought about a fundamental shift in the approach to storytelling. They made the Indo-Islamic *dāstān* a completely new strain within the *dāstān* genre. This dazzling uniqueness was one of the reasons for *Hōshrubā*'s widespread appeal and popularity.

The second volume of *Hōshrubā* came out in 1884. There was a delay of four years before the third volume was published in 1888–89. Considering the popularity of *Hōshrubā*, the Naval Kishore Press hurried Jah, demanding that he finish the subsequent volumes speedily.

But Jah was in deep trouble. Merging the three accounts of the dif-

ferent storytellers and simultaneously composing his own version was difficult enough. At the same time, he was devastated by the deaths of his young son and daughter, which happened while he wrote the third volume. For awhile he even stopped writing. He resumed at the encouragement of his publisher. He shares his trauma with his readers by duly incorporating the entire episode in verse in the *Hōshrubā* narrative.

After he finished the fourth volume in 1890, or perhaps a little before that, the publisher informed Jah that he would be relieved of the responsibility of writing the three remaining volumes. Someone else had been hired to finish the project more quickly.

The fourth volume has no last words by the author, which was customary. Jah had surrendered the manuscript on an unhappy note, and it was little wonder. His replacement for the *Hōshrubā* project was his rival storyteller, Ahmed Husain Qamar.

Here was a man with a nicely checkered past. According to his own account, his family participated in the 1857 Mutiny against the East India Company forces. Two of his brothers died in the fighting. Qamar survived and was cleared of the charge of mutineering but because he was not yet of age, he could not lay claim to his estate, which was confiscated by the government. He studied law and became an agent at one of the local courts but when he appeared for the confirmation examination, the old charge of participating in the mutiny was dug up and quoted as a reason for his disqualification. Around that time, Qamar became interested in storytelling and took it up as a profession.

Qamar took up the *Hōshrubā* project where Jah had left off. After making a few self-important remarks about how he would have been the best choice to write the four earlier volumes as well, he got down to work. But just as he was getting started, and with great fanfare, a piece of news arrived that completely marred his happiness.

Apparently Jah's work on *Hōshrubā* was close to his heart. He was not willing to give up without a fight. In the December of 1889, the same year *Hōshrubā* was taken away from him, he played his hand by founding his own press and privately publishing the first part of the fifth volume of *Hōshrubā*, with the promise of more—a lot more—to follow.

Qamar and the Naval Kishore Press sat up. They decided they were up to the challenge. That Qamar was extremely prolific also helped. Naval Kishore Press brought out the first part of the fifth volume in just a few months in 1891, followed shortly with the second part. The competition with Jah seems to have been the main reason for the haste: it is the only volume of *Hōshrubā* that was published in two parts.

After publishing the first part of the fifth volume, Jah fell silent. Per-

haps he was ill. He had mentioned a long period of illness in the third volume. Only one copy of this privately published, slim volume survived and was discovered recently by Urdu researcher Rifaqat Ali Shahid. Throughout the first four volumes, Jah had acknowledged the contribution of other storytellers. But it is in this privately published fifth volume that he methodically lists the three sources he had borrowed from. Its first four pages, in which he may have explained his reasons for leaving the Naval Kishore Press, are missing.

Qamar himself is uncharacteristically tight-lipped about the incident. In the notice printed in the fifth volume of *Hōshrubā*, he cursorily mentions that “some chance events” ended Jah’s association with the publisher.

Only fragmentary information is available about the professional relationship between Jah and Qamar. In his first published work, *Ṭilism-e Faṣāḥat*, Jah acknowledges Ahmed Husain Qamar as his instructor. However, Urdu scholar Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has suggested that the uncharacteristic exaggeration and hyperbole he uses on the occasion suggests that Jah paid the compliment sarcastically. This theory is quite plausible because in a later edition, those words of hyperbole were removed. Qamar himself never made any claims to be Jah’s teacher and we can be sure that had it been otherwise, Qamar would have proclaimed the fact daily from the roof of Naval Kishore Press while he lived, and had it engraved on his tombstone.

Qamar’s head may not have been as large as the false god Laqa’s, but it was as full of vanity. He loved himself with a powerful love that sometimes forced him to claim credit for deeds he had not done. He often experienced small episodes of jealousy during the writing of *Hōshrubā*. In some weak moments, he declared himself to be the “original author” of *Hōshrubā*. But then Qamar would have other weak moments in which, while deriding Mir Ahmed Ali or Jah, or calling their integrity into question, he would make statements that totally contradicted his earlier claim. All this abuse was hurled within the narrative itself, of course. The old mutineer in Qamar had not died. All his subversive talents were now channelled into the *dāstān* genre.

Qamar also liked to make guest appearances in the narrative in the middle of scenes to give the characters a chance to praise him and his many talents. From magic slave girls to Laqa’s devil designate, to the Emperor of Sorcerers Afrasiyab, everyone takes a turn praising Qamar’s first-rate poetical mind, his skill in composing Persian verses, and his ability to decode knotty Arabic prose. Unlike Jah, who always acknowledged the least contribution to the narrative by his seniors and contemporaries,

Qamar never credited anyone besides himself. But despite all these personality quirks and the licenses he took with the narrative, Qamar was as profoundly gifted as a storyteller as was Jah, although their talents lay in different areas.

Jah died between December 1890 and October 1893. According to Faruqi's research, he died at a relatively young age. The *Hōshrubā* project was completed around the same time. The publication of the sixth volume in 1892 was quickly followed by the seventh and last volume in 1893.

*Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* became a bestseller. Between 1883 and 1930, eight editions were published from Lucknow alone. The tale acquired an iconic status in Urdu literature as the ultimate fantasy tale, and the word "Hōshrubā" itself became proverbial for fantastic literature.

Faizi continued to be credited as its original author. His ghost must still be smiling from ear to ear. To have written the tale of Hōshrubā with an unmoving finger would be a neat trick, even for a spirit. But the happiest ghost must be Mir Ahmed Ali's, his smile the broadest of all. Not only was his creation of *Hōshrubā* accepted as a part of the Amir Hamza cycle, but it also became its defining, single most important tale, surpassing all others. No storyteller could ask for greater glory.

The *Hōshrubā* tale later found other champions as well. A year before the world threw itself into the madness of the First World War, the Rampur storyteller Mirza Alimuddin (1854–1927) launched his personal campaign to write the *Hōshrubā* tale. He campaigned longer, harder and more gloriously. From 1913–1919 he produced twelve volumes and two secondary legends associated with the *Hōshrubā* tale.

Then there was Mir Baqir Ali (1850?–1928), the last renowned storyteller of India in the twentieth century. He was born into a family of royal storytellers at a time when *Hōshrubā* was at the peak of its popularity. But in the 1920s, when he was in his last years, Mir Baqir Ali was unable to find an audience for his art. He privately published some stories for children to make a living, but failed. In the end, he gave up and made a living selling betel leaves. He breathed his last a year after Mirza Alimuddin's death. A sample of Mir Baqir Ali's storytelling method and glimpses of his last days were preserved in a literary sketch in *Dilli Ki Chand Ajib Hastiyan* by Ashraf Subuhi Dehlvi.

The *Hōshrubā* history would be incomplete without the mention of the Pakistani painter Ustad Allah Bakhsh (1895–1978), who captured the magic and dense storytelling of *Hōshrubā* in his glorious painting *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*. This painting hangs in the Lahore Museum.

Without Jah and Qamar—two of Urdu's greatest prose writers—the hoax created by Mir Ahmed Ali and storytellers in his generation may not

have received such wide acclaim. This tale, with its imaginative scope, poetic delicacy, ornate presentation, and metaphor-rich language, became the pride of Urdu literature because of these men. They will always be remembered as two of Urdu's greatest benefactors. Their ghosts, finally free of their professional rivalries, together might even be constructing a tilism of their own—on a much larger scale than *Hōshrubā*. And we can be sure that Qamar's part of the tilism will be completed long before Jah ever reaches the halfway mark.

But these are not the only ghosts. Others have also made their presence known. In 2005, an Indian historian, Mahmood Farooqui, began studying the cultural history of the *dāstāns* and became interested in *dāstān* narration. Farooqui and Himanshu Tyagi collaborated to start *dāstān* narration from *Hōshrubā*. Later, Danish Husain joined Farooqui as his partner. Their performances were held in both India and Pakistan and attracted a large following. Then, one day in 2006, the Indian historian Shahid Amin told Farooqui of two short, crackling audio recordings of someone's voice, which he had recently discovered in the British Library. They belonged to the last famous *dāstān* narrator, Mir Baqir Ali. These three-minute recordings were made in Delhi in 1920 as a part of the Linguistic Survey of India records. One recording was a rendering of the tale of the *Prodigal Son*, which all native speakers had to record for that project. Mir Baqir Ali was unable to finish the tale because his narration exceeded the short duration of the 78-rpm disk and had to be ended abruptly. The other recording was a short *dāstān* of a foolish young nobleman who wishes to visit his in-laws and encounters countless obstacles on the way.

Mir Baqir Ali's ghost has resurfaced eight decades after his death, to say thank-you to someone who had renewed his tradition.

What if all the storytellers are also still with us "in spirit"? And what if one day this battalion of ghosts feels nostalgic, and enters a bookshop to check the latest edition of *Hōshrubā* but doesn't find it on the shelves? Who will have the heart to tell them that because of our neglect and disregard of Indo-Islamic literature, the rich language of *Hōshrubā* has become inaccessible, that our own indifference has now become the tall mountain, reaching into the skies beyond which this tale lies, out of reach for all but a few?

That situation must be avoided at all cost.

And this is why the army of readers is gathered here; why I beat the kettledrums.

Hear then that this translation of *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*, the first in any language, is a secret passage through this mountain. You may now by-

pass the dark terrain of craggy metaphors where puzzles grow, and easily slip to the other side to engage this tale.

And once you are done, you must remember to take on the mountain of indifference. It would be a shame to disappoint all the kindly ghosts in the bookshop who brought you this most excellent tale. □

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