



A'LAM, HUŠANG

A'LAM, HUŠANG (b. Tehran, 1928; d. Tehran, 2007), eminent scholar of the history of science.

Hušang began his primary education at home, where he was taught by his father, Naṣr-Allāh A'lam-al-Saltāna, who disapproved of the way children were taught at schools. He himself had studied medicine at the [Dār al-fonun](#) during the reign of Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah (1896-1906) and had a good command of French. By the age of 11, Hušang had already acquired some knowledge of Persian and French literature at home. He was allowed to enter primary school, where he was placed in the fourth grade. He completed his secondary education at Irānšahr and 'Elmiya schools, where he continued to study English, which he had already started on his own. He also took some Arabic lessons (A'lam, 2006a, pp. 21-35). He gained his degree in French language and literature from Tehran University, and, as he aimed to qualify as a teacher of French, he also studied at the Teachers' Training College (see [Education xix. Teachers'-Training Colleges](#)) for two years, graduating in 1950. He was an outstanding student throughout his university years.

In order to discharge his five years of teaching commitment, in 1951 he went to Sāri, Māzandarān's capital city. Having secured a government grant in 1956, he traveled to the United States, where he obtained his M.A. in English language and literature from the University of Michigan in 1958. Upon his return, he resumed his teaching at Sāri (A'lam, 2006a, pp. 44-49, 53, 73).

In 1961, the Ministry of Education began to publish a journal entitled [Farhang](#),



and A'lam returned to Tehran to join the staff as a translator. This was the beginning of his work in the field of translation, covering a range of topics translated from French and English. His association with *Farhang* brought him into contact with a number of established writers and poets, including 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Navā'i, the editor of the journal, and Mehdi Akhavan-e Saless. The journal ceased publication after four issues, and A'lam was employed by the Iran National Library (Ketābkāna-ye melli), where he began to learn modern cataloging methods. He also became acquainted with the noted scholar and bibliographer Iraj Afšār, then the head of the library. After some time, the National Library sent him to the United States, where he studied librarianship at Simmons College, Boston, while at the same time cataloging the Persian and Arabic books at Harvard University (A'lam, 2006a, pp. 56-57; Afšār, 2001, pp. 232-33). In addition to receiving his M.A. in librarianship, he enrolled in the doctoral program in linguistics and Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard and embarked on a dissertation on the Māzandarāni language under Richard Nelson Frye's supervision. The dissertation was left unfinished when he was urgently summoned back by the Iranian government (A'lam, 2006a, pp. 57-61). He also developed a close friendship with Muhsin Mahdi (1926-2007) the James Richard Jewett Professor of Arabic at Harvard, and translated into English a chapter of Soyut'i's *al-Moẓher*, and wrote an extensive introduction to it on the origin of language according to Muslims and from the Koranic perspective (for the text of this treatise, see *Pažuhešhā-ye Irānšenāsi* 16, Tehran, 2005, pp. 1075-1132).

Back in Tehran, in 1972 A'lam was employed at *Farhangestān*, where he was assigned to evaluate the series of books and fascicles published there under the rubric *Pišnahād-e šomā čist?* (What is your suggestion?). A'lam himself authored the fascicle *Vāžahā-ye ketābdāri* (The terminology of librarianship, 1973). However, his scrupulously critical approach in vetting the material submitted to the *Farhangestān* for publication led to disagreements with the director Šādeq Kiā, and A'lam was transferred to the Ministry of Culture and Art in 1979. There, he compiled a volume in English on teaching Persian to non-Persian speakers. For several years before the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79, he also cooperated with *Bonyād-e Farhang-e Irān*, headed by the eminent scholar Parviz N. Kānlari (A'lam, 2006a, pp. 60-64). Concurrently, A'lam was engaged in translating articles from the *Encyclopedia of Islam* for publication in *Dāneš-nāma-ye Irān wa Eslām*.

Having gone through some hard times after the Islamic Revolution, A'lam was

finally employed in 1988 at the Bonyād-e Dā'erat-al-ma'āref-e Eslāmi to participate in the compilation of *Dāneš-nāma-ye jahān-e Eslām* (Encyclopedia of the Islamic World; a continuation of the aforementioned *Dāneš-nāma-ye Irān wa Eslām*). After the *Dāneš-nāma*'s change of policy, when it began to solicit original articles rather than relying on direct translations from English-language encyclopedias, 'Alam began to contribute entries related to history of science. At the same time, he wrote numerous botanical and zoological articles in English for the *Encyclopædia Iranica* (see below). A'lam's most accomplished output was the well over 100 articles that he wrote for these two encyclopedias in the last two decades of his life (Afšār, 2001, pp. 235-37; Āzarang, pp. 239-41). During this period, he was at his most prolific while maintaining his highly meticulous approach to scholarship, exhibiting his formidable expertise in both history of science and lexicography (Borjiān, 2004). Before his death, he entrusted some 5,000 notes that he had prepared for his own unfinished project, a dictionary of Persian compound words and derivatives, with special emphasis on both spoken and standard language, to the lexicographer, Ġolām-Ḥosayn Šadri-Afšār (A'lam, 2006a; pp. 93-95).

A'lam's encyclopedia articles are impressive in many ways. Written in a clear and succinct style, they exhibit his knowledge of sources in different languages, his familiarity with the etymology of the names of flora and fauna, and his firm grasp of the history of their lore and use in medical literature from the pre-Islamic period to the present-day, in both Persian and Arabic (Afšār, 2001, pp. 235-37; Āzarang, pp. 239-41; Borjiān, 2004).

A'lam's articles in the first five volumes of *Dāneš-nāma-ye jahān-e Eslām* were compiled into a single volume and published in 2002 as *Jostārḥā'i dar tāriḳ-e 'elm-e dawra-ye Eslāmi* (Essays on the history of science in the Islamic era; see Borjiān, 2011), with A'lam's own introduction on the characteristics of articles written for an encyclopedia. His other publications are: *Ošul-e sāda-ye ketābdāri*, with Ḥosayn Bani-Ādam and 'Ali-Akbar Jānā (Tehran, 1965); and *Afġānestān* (collection of articles), tr. Sa'id Arbāb-Širāni and Hušang A'lam (Tehran, 1997). His last work was an introduction to the facsimile of a manuscript, kept in Golestān Palace at Tehran, of the Arabic *al-Ḥašā'eš* (De Materia Medica) by the renowned Greek botanist and pharmacologist Dioscorides.

In reviewing the works of others, A'lam was outspoken and sometimes acerbic. Examples of his critical reviews are those on Yahyā Māhyār-Nawwābi's *Ketābšenāsi-e Irān* (in *Rāhnemā-ye ketāb* 14, 1971, pp. 353-62) and Abu'l-Ḥasan



Najafi's *Farhang-e fārsi-e 'āmmiāna* (in *Nāma-ye Farhangestān* 17, 2001, pp. 98-125). A'lam sometimes flavored his reviews with satirical remarks, an interesting example being his review of Amin-Allāh Rabbāni's *Parandagān-e Kāvar-e miāna va Kāvar-e nazdik* (in *Našr-e dāneš* 9, 1988, pp. 48-50). In addition, in the final decade of his life, A'lam attended and made presentations at several international scholarly conferences (for a full list of such conferences as well as his publications, see 'Alam, 2006b, pp. 235-46).

A'lam also was greatly interested in photography, and that in his youth he translated and wrote several articles on the subject, which were published in the journals *Farhang* and *Soḳan* (see also A'lam, 2006a, pp. 65-66).

A'lam was characteristically modest, kind, emotional, sensitive and easily hurt, but with a good sense of humor. He was almost blind in the final months of his life, and died at the age of 79 following a heart attack. He was buried in the writers and artists' allotment at the Behešt-e Zahrā cemetery in south Tehran.

As a Contributor to Encyclopædia Iranica. Hušang A'lam was one of the most valued contributors to the *Encyclopædia Iranica*. He first became acquainted with its General Editor, Ehsan Yarshater, in 1967 at a meeting of The Book Society of Persia ([Anjoman-e Ketāb](#)). Yarshater had brought along a copy of the proofs of his book, *A Grammar of Southern Tati Dialects* (The Hague and Paris, 1969), and he showed it to A'lam. A'lam spent a couple of hours on the proofs and made several perceptive comments. His overall judgement, his apparent knowledge of some Iranian dialects, and many of his concrete suggestions for improving the book impressed Yarshater and later suggested to him, as General Editor, the possibility of asking A'lam to contribute to the *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

Until then, the entries on botanical subjects in the *Encyclopædia Iranica* contained limited information or were exclusively concerned with the taxonomy of plants and flowers. Noting the scholarly curiosity and investigative disposition of A'lam, in 1987 Yarshater proposed to him to write a number of entries in letter "B," including "Basil" and "Beans." A'lam's contributions on these two topics reflected his meticulousness and his exhaustive search for information in sources in different languages, including Persian, Arabic, Latin and Greek, English, French as well as other relevant Iranian languages. He managed to cover not only the taxonomic features of the plants, but also their occurrence in literature and folklore, if any, their medicinal properties and use, if pertinent, followed by a detailed list of the



sources that he had consulted. From then on A'lam became the *Encyclopædia Iranica*'s sole contributor on plants, vegetables, and flowers, and served as a consulting editor for flora from 2003 (vol. XI, Fasc. 6) to the end of his life.

Before the forthcoming entries on plants and flowers were all entrusted to A'lam, he was invited to write the entries "Beaver" and then "Belderčīn." He brought the same exhaustive research to his entries on animals. Encouraged by his agreement to write on some animals and showing the same interest and exhaustive research, the General Editor proposed other entries to him on varieties of fish and birds.

Writing for the *Encyclopædia Iranica* became a regular occupation and pre-occupation for A'lam. The following list of the articles that he wrote for the *Encyclopædia Iranica* exhibits the range of his research, as well as the depth of the *Encyclopædia*'s indebtedness to him. The General Editor was about to invite him to write "Wolf" and "Lion" when the sad news of his passing was announced and the *Encyclopædia* was deprived of one of its most conscientious, erudite and meticulous contributors.

Entries in the *Encyclopædia Iranica*: Plants: Basil, Beans, Beaver, Beech, Beet, Beh, Bid, Birch, Boxtree, Cabbage, Camel Thorn, Camphor, Caracal, Cardamom, Carrot, Cassia, Čenār, Citrus, Fruits, Coconut, Čolāb, Coriander, Cornelian Cherry, Crocus, Cucumber, Cumin, Cypress, Dārčīni, Date Palm, Derakht, Dill, Dorrat, Elm, Felfel, Fennel, Fig, Fruit, Gāvzabān, Gol, Golāb, Golpar, Henna, Rye. Animals: Bāz, Bāzdāri, Belderčīn, Bolbol, Buḡ, Buḡalamun, Bustard, Butimār, Čakāvak, Caviar, Coral, Crane, Crow, Davāl-Pāy, Duck, Fākta, Fish ii. Salt Water Fishes, Fish iii. Pre-Islamic Persian Lore, Honey, Honeybees. Biographical entries: Ebn al-Baytār, Zayn-al-Din Esmā'il Jorjāni.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Iraj Afšār, "A'lam, dānešmand-e vārasta-ye besyār-dān," *Boḡārā*, ser. no. 17, 2001, pp. 232-37.

Idem, "Yādghārhā-ī az Hušang A'lam," *Boḡārā*, ser. no. 62, 2007, pp. 216-44.



Hušanġ A'lam, "Goftogu bā ostād Hušanġ-e A'lam" (interview by Ḥakima Dastranġi), in *Zendagi-nāma va kadamāt-e 'elmi o farhangi-e ostād Hušanġ-e A'lam*, Tehran, 2006a, pp. 21-99.

Idem, "Kār-nāma," in *Zendagi-nāma va kadamāt-e 'elmi o farhangi-e ostād Hušanġ-e A'lam*, Tehran, 2006b, pp. 235-46.

'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Āzarang, "Hušanġ-e A'lam: dānešnāma-nevis-e me'yār," *Boḡārā*, ser. no. 17, 2001, pp. 238-42.

Ḥabib Borġiān, "Kamāl dar taḡġiq," *Nāma-ye Farhangestān* 6/4, 2004, ser. no. 24, pp. 125-27.

Idem, "Jostārḥā-yi dar tāriġ-e 'olum-e eslāmi," in Sayyed 'Ali Āl-e Dāvud and Aḡmad Sami'i Gilāni, eds., *Farhang-e ātār-e irāni-eslāmi* III, Tehran, 2011, pp. 96-97.

Ṭubā Sāṭe'i "Gozāreš-i az marāsem-e tajlil-e ostād Hušanġ-e A'lam," *Boḡārā*, ser. no. 17, 2001, pp. 220-27.