



ḤAMZA-NĀMA II. IN THE SUBCONTINENT

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The Indo-Persian romance tradition, extending from the medieval period to the early 20th century, produced prose works of considerable literary and cultural interest, chief among which were many versions of the Ḥamza romance, as well as an indigenous imitation called *Bostān-e kiāl*.

Persian-speakers began to establish themselves in large areas of northwestern South Asia from the early 11th century onward. As their advance continued, Persian became a widely used language of immense cultural prestige. But of all the Persian romances (*qeṣṣa*, *dāstān*) only the story of Ḥamza took root firmly in the new soil. Annemarie Schimmel judges that the Ḥamza story “must have been popular in the Subcontinent from the days of Mahmud of Ghazna” (Schimmel, p. 204) in the early 11th century. The earliest solid evidence, however, seems to be a late-fifteenth-century set of paintings that illustrate the story; these were crudely executed, possibly in Jawnpur, perhaps for a not-too-affluent patron (Khandalavala and Chandra, pp. 50-55).

By the beginning of the Mughal period, the Ḥamza story was well established across a wide region. The emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605) conceived and supervised the task of illustrating the whole romance. Akbar’s court chronicler



Abu'l-Faẓl wrote that Ḥamza's adventures were "represented in twelve volumes, and clever painters made the most astonishing illustrations for no less than one thousand and four hundred passages of the story" (Blochmann, p. 115). Attempts to reconstruct Akbar's text have been hampered by the fragmentariness of the surviving passages (Glück; Faridany-Akhavan). Akbar was so fond of the Ḥamza story that he even used to read it out himself in the harem like a professional narrator, or *qeṣṣa-k̄vān* (Lang and Meredith-Owens, p. 473). Akbar's own personal narrator was said to have been so much present in court that he earned the nickname of "Darbār-K̄ān" (Beveridge, II, p. 343). Akbar's successor Jahāngir (r. 1605-27) also retained a Persian narrator, Mirzā Asad Beg Širāzi, whose skill he valued and rewarded (Gyān Čand, p. 106).

The Ḥamza story left traces in the Deccan as well. One Persian romance-narrator, Ḥāji Qeṣṣa-k̄vān Hamadāni, records his relocation to Hyderabad in 1612, at the court of Sultan 'Abd-Allāh Qoṭb-Šāh (r. 1611-72) of Golconda. The Ḥāji writes, "I had brought with me a number of manuscripts of the *Romuz-e Ḥamza* (The Subtleties of Ḥamza). When I presented them in the king's service, I was ordered, 'Prepare a summary of them.' In obedience to this order, this book *Zobdat al-romuz* (The Cream of the *Romuz*) has been prepared," (Hamadāni, p. 2). In addition to this work, at least two other seventeenth-century Indo-Persian Ḥamza manuscripts have survived, dated 1096/1684-85 and 1099/1687-88, as well as various undated and later ones (Monzavi, VI, pp. 933-39).

By the 18th century, the Ḥamza story was so well known in India that it inspired an indigenous Indo-Persian imitation, the massive *Bostān-e k̄iāl*. In the origin myth for this work, the future author, Mir Moḥammad-Taqi, who had chosen as his pen-name "K̄iāl" (dream, vision), is said to have come to Delhi from Aḥmadābād, hoping to improve his fortunes: "Near the house where he was staying was a gathering place where a number of people came every day, and before them a *qeṣṣa-k̄vān* used to narrate the *qeṣṣa* of Amir Ḥamza, which is well-known in the whole world. Poor Mir Taqi too, with a view to lifting his spirits, joined the gathering on one or two occasions, and listened silently to the *qeṣṣa*. The *qeṣṣa-k̄vān*, seeing this person poorly dressed and looking like a student, one day said tauntingly before the people of the gathering, "A man can, according to his capacity, learn every discipline and science. But the art of *qeṣṣa* narration is so subtle and difficult that it can never be acquired at all—except by someone whose temperament is naturally suited to it" (Amān, p. 3). The young K̄iāl is supposed to have responded by



vowing to create a “colorful story of such a style that not even the sky itself, much less mere human beings, will ever have heard the like!” (Amān, p. 3).

The result of Kīāl’s labors was an original Indo-Persian *dāstān* that kept getting longer and longer: over a thirty-year period (1726-1756) Kīāl filled fifteen massive manuscript volumes which averaged something like 500 extraordinarily large-sized pages each; during most of this time he lived on patronage from various local rulers. To speed up the process of composition, one eager patron is said to have bestowed on him “fifteen swift-writing scribes with fine penmanship” (Ebn-e Kanval, p. 25). Kīāl’s original work was never printed, but it circulated widely in manuscript form, and as a basis for oral narrative it indeed became the only serious rival to the Ḥamza cycle throughout northern India (Gyān Čand, pp. 598-600).

In the course of countless retellings before faithful audiences, the Indo-Persian Ḥamza story seems to have grown longer and more elaborate throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Oral narration in Persian continued well into the 19th century in India. Writing in 1834, James Forbes describes the household of a Persianized *navāb* at Cambay, near Aḥmadābād, as containing the usual contingent of professional narrators: “kissa kawn, a class of people well known to the admirers of Persian and Arabian tales” (Forbes, II, p. 235).

Even in the second half of the 19th century, it appears that written Persian *dāstāns* of considerable length were circulating among the educated elite in northern India. The renowned Persian and Urdu poet Mirzā Asad-Allāh-Kān Ġāleb (1797-1869), writing around 1861, speaks of his delight at receiving “a book of the *dāstān* of Amir Ḥamza about fifty or sixty *jozw* long, and a volume of the same size as *Bostān-e kīāl*” (Ġāleb, I, p. 385; the length of a *jozw* in Delhi was usually sixteen pages, which would imply a book 800 to 960 pages long). No accessible Urdu version of such length then existed, so Ġāleb was surely reading a Persian narrative, most likely an Indo-Persian work rather than an import from Iran. The same applies for *Bostān-e kīāl*, as a few years later he took elaborate and celebratory notice of two Urdu translations, as though he had never seen any before.

By the 19th century, Persian as an Indian language was in a slow decline, for its political and cultural place was being taken over by the rapidly developing modern languages. But even into the early 20th century, there was still some demand in India for short Persian versions of the Ḥamza romance: one such version, attributed to Mirzā Moḥammad-Kān, was published in Bombay as



recently as 1909.

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