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HOSHRUBA: The Land and the Tilism

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HOSHRUBA

Book One

THE LAND AND THE TILISM

A First Translation of the World's First Magical Fantasy Epic

Tilism-e Hoshruha

Translated from the Urdu with an Introduction and Notes by

MUSHARRAF ALI FAROOQI

HOSHRUBA: An Introduction

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, 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 *Tilism-e Hoshruha* 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 *Tilism-e Hoshruha* 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 *Tilism-e Hoshruha* appeared in print, everyone believed that it belonged to the cycle of tales of *The Adventures of Amir Hamza*, which could be traced back in India to the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605).

The Adventures of Amir Hamza 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 Amir Hamza* 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 Amir Hamza* was told in India in the *dastan* genre, which is of Persian origin. How-

ever, over hundreds of years, a distinctive Indo-Islamic *dastan* 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 Amir Hamza* found a foothold in the Mughal Empire, it was narrated in the Urdu language in two different *dastan* 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 *dastan* 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. The martyrdom was postponed. Through telling and retelling, 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. 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 Amir Hamza* – 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, Zamarrud 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, 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 Amir Hamza* 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 Hoshruba (*hosh* = senses, *ru* = ravishing, stealing). And with that, he had the title for his story: *Tilism-e Hoshruba* or the Tilism of Hoshruba.

Mir Ahmed Ali parked the fleeing giant Laqa in a land neighboring Hoshruba. 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 Hoshruba. One of Amir Hamza's sons was sent out hunting. He trespassed the boundaries of Hoshruba 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 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 Hoshruba 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 Hoshruba.

Prince Asad enters Hoshruba 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 Hoshruba, 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 Hoshruba. He will remain a figurehead with only a ceremonial presence.

Mir Ahmed Ali wanted to make *Hoshruba* 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 dastan genre.

It also influenced the elements used in *Hoshruba* 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 *Hoshruba*.

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 *Hoshruba*: "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, and his limbs were the size of giant tree branches."

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 *Hoshruba*: "...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."

Some of this marvellous 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 *Hoshruba*, 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 *Hoshruba* was fantastic, its details were not alien to its audience. Mir Ahmed Ali had modelled them on the world he knew best – the Lucknow of nineteenth century India. It was one of the centres of Indo-Islamic culture and civilization. The details of dress, food, etiquette and daily life in *Hoshruba* 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 *Hoshrubā*.

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 *Hoshrubā*. 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 *Tilism-e Hoshrubā*, 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 *Tilism-e Hoshrubah*? 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 *Hoshrubah*. 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 *Hoshrubah* 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 *Hoshrubah*.

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, *dastan* draws heavily on improvisation, but once the story of *Hoshruba* 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 *Hoshruba*! Why on earth wouldn't it be a part of *The Adventures of Amir 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 *Hoshruba* 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, *Hoshruba* had taken Lucknow by storm. Travelers to Lucknow returned with the tales of *Hoshruba*. 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 Luc-

know 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 *Hoshruba*.

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 *Hoshruba* in safe hands. He had passed on his mantle to a young storyteller named Muhammad Amir Khan, who began narrating episodes from *Hoshruba* 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 *Hoshruba*. 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 *Hoshruha*. He wrote it down in fourteen volumes between 1858 and 1880. His work remained in manuscript.

But *Hoshruha* 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 *Hoshruha*. Thanks to the work started by him and his disciples and carried on by Muhammad Amir Khan, *Hoshruha* 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 *Hoshruha* 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 Muhammad Husain Jah. Kishore remembered him well. Some years previous, he had been commissioned to write a short *dastan*, *Tilism-e Fasahat*. The book was a testament to his mastery of prose. Kishore showed up at a *dastan* narration session and was impressed by Jah's masterful narration of *Hoshruha*. Jah was engaged to write the *Hoshruha* tale, and that was just as it should have been. Muhammad Husain Jah's father was a *rammal* or diviner, which means – why deny it – a sorcerer. The *Hoshruha* project was in excellent hands.

Jah knew his *Hoshruha* 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 *Hoshrubas* 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 *Hoshrubas* is Emperor of Hoshrubas, sorcerer Afrasiyab. In any heroic tale it is the hero who faces the greatest number of threats and challenges. In *Hoshrubas*, 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. Afrasiyab 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 *Hoshrubas* 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 Amir Hamza* 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 *Hoshrubas*, 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 *Hoshrubas* are play-

ing 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 Amir Hamza* 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 *Hoshrubā* neutralizes the influences from the *Adventures of Amir Hamza* 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 *dastan* a completely new strain within the *dastan* genre. This dazzling uniqueness was one of the reasons for Hoshrubā's widespread appeal and popularity.

The second volume of *Hoshrubā* came out in 1884. There was a delay of four years before the third volume was published in 1888–89. Considering the popularity of *Hoshrubā*, 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 different 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 a while 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 *Hoshrubā* 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 *Hoshrubā* 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 *Hoshrubā* 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 *Hoshrubā* was close to his heart. He was not willing to give up without a fight. In the December of 1889, the same year *Hoshrubā* 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 *Hoshrubā*, 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 *Hoshrubā* that was published in two parts.

After publishing the first part of the fifth volume, Jah fell silent. Perhaps 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 *Hoshrubā*, 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, *Tilism-e Fasahat*, 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 *Hoshrubā*. In some weak moments, he declared himself to be the "original author" of *Hoshrubā*. 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 *dastan* 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 Sorcerer 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 *Hoshrubā* 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.

Tilism-e Hoshrubā 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 "Hoshrubā" 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 Hoshrubā 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 *Hoshrubā* 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 *Hoshrubā* 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

Hoshruha tale. He campaigned longer, harder and more gloriously. From 1913–1919 he produced twelve volumes and two secondary legends associated with the *Hoshruha* 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 *Hoshruha* 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 *Hoshruha* history would be incomplete without the mention of the Pakistani painter Ustad Allah Bakhsh (1895–1978), who captured the magic and dense storytelling of *Hoshruha* in his glorious painting *Tilism-e Hoshruha*. 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 *Hoshruha*. 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 *dastans* and became interested in *dastan* narration. Farooqui and Himanshu Tyagi collaborated to start *dastan* narration from *Hoshruha*. 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 *dastan* 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 *dastan* 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 *Hoshruba* 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 *Hoshruba* 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 kettle-drums.

Hear then that this translation of *Tilism-e Hoshruba*, the first in any language, is a secret passage through this mountain. You may now bypass 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. – M.A.F. (December 5, 2008)

MAGICAL AND MARVELLOUS DEVICES AND BEINGS

DEMON: Also called a *dev*. A gigantic being with horns and a tail, which also has a taste for fine clothes, jewelery and lavish palaces.

DOPPELGANGER: An invisible being associated with every human being. Its existence is independent of its human counterpart's and unconstrained by considerations of time and space. When a doppelganger enters a corpse a dead person can revive and narrate the circumstances of his death.

FAIRY: Also called a *peri* (female fairy) or *perizad* (male fairy). Winged male or female creatures that live on Mount Qaf.

GIANT: A legendary, manlike being of huge stature. The false god Laqa is a giant.

JINN: Creatures made of fire and invisible to the human eye. According to popular belief, jinns and fairies are the children of Jan, a being who once inhabited Earth and was banished for disobedience to the Supreme Being.

LIGHTNING-BOLT: One of seven sorceresses who exist in the form of lightning in a crimson cloud and strike as lightning bolts. They also appear in human form as beautiful, golden-skinned women.

MAGIC BIRD: A bird made of magic by sorcerers to act as their eyes and ears and spy on enemy camps.

MAGIC CLAW: A claw or hand made by magic that carries messages, objects or people. Sometimes magic slaves turn into magic claws to perform these functions.

MAGIC DOUBLE: A magical projection of Emperor Afrasiyab, which replaced him when he was away or when he had to disappear during imminent danger.

MAGIC EFFIGY: A magical being made by a sorcerer or sorceress that assumes human shape and can work the magic spells assigned to it by its master or mistress.

MAGIC FAIRY: Not to be confused with *FAIRY* above. A magic fairy is made by a sorcerer by magic. Magic fairies can be either male or female.

MAGIC SPIRIT: The spirit of a dead person, commanded by a sorcerer's spells. A magic spirit is set free at the death of the sorcerer who commands it. Unless captured by another sorcerer by reciting the capturing spells at the time of its master's dying, a magic spirit is released into the cosmos and becomes harmless.

MAGIC SLAVE: They are both male and female. Magic slaves and magic slave girls are magical beings that can fly in the air and travel under the earth. They can change into magic claws and carry away people and objects. Magic slaves are also employed by sorcerers to fight in the battlefield, and to guard sorcerers against dangers. They can be made of paper, lentil-flour, clay, wax, brass, or steel. They are made by the occult art of *nairanj* by which a sorcerer manipulates the properties of matter to create mechanisms.

MAGIC MIRROR: A magical mirror that projected Emperor Afrasiyab's presence into his court during his absence.

MAGIC TROOPER: A horseback warrior created by magic who fights at a sorcerer's command. It is impossible to kill magic troopers with weapons.

SORCERER: Someone who has a commanding knowledge of the occult powers of astral bodies, alchemy and magic, and can combine them to create a tilism or make spells.

TRICKSTER: Male or female warriors known for their cunning, quickness and mastery of disguise.

Amir Hamza and the False God Laqa

The deft fingers of narrators weave this splendid legend with the golden thread of sorcery and spread it out thus, before marvelling eyes.

Emperor Naushervan of Persia dreamt one night that a crow coming from the East flew off with his crown, then a hawk flew in from the West, killed the crow and restored him his crown. In the morning he asked the interpretation of this dream

from his minister, Buzurjmehr, who was singularly adept in all occult arts. Buzurjmehr made his calculations and replied that in the future a raider named Hashsham from the eastern city of Khaibar would defeat the emperor's army and capture his crown and throne. A warrior named Hamza from the western city of Mecca would then appear on the scene and would kill the raider and restore the regalia to the emperor.

Hearing the auspicious news, Naushervan sent Buzurjmehr to Mecca in anticipation of Hamza's birth to declare the boy the emperor's protégé.

On the day Hamza was born to the chieftain of a tribe, two other boys, named Amar and Muqbil, were also born in Mecca. Buzurjmehr predicted from occult foreknowledge that they would be Hamza's trusted companions. He foretold that Amar would become a devious trickster and Muqbil a matchless archer.

Meanwhile, in the far-away, enchanted land of Mount Qaf, a daughter was born to Emperor Shahpal, the lord of the jinns, fairies and demons. She was named Aasman Peri. Shahpal's minister and diviner made her horoscope and revealed that after eighteen years, the demons of Mount Qaf would rebel and overthrow Emperor Shahpal. Then a human being named Hamza would come from the world of men to defeat the demons and restore Shahpal to the throne. The horoscope also disclosed that Hamza would marry Aasman Peri. Upon learning of this, Emperor Shahpal sent for Hamza's cradle from Mecca and kept him in Mount Qaf for seven days. Before he was sent back, Hamza was nursed on the milk of jinns, demons, fairies, ghouls and other beasts to expel the fear of those creatures from his heart.

As Hamza, Amar and Muqbil grew up they met with many adventures and received holy gifts and talents with whose help they triumphed over powerful enemies. Their fame and exploits won them friends and followers. Hamza was chosen as their *amir* or leader, and became renowned as Amir Hamza. Because he was born under a lucky astrological conjunction of Jupiter and Venus, he was titled the Lord of the Auspicious Planetary Conjunction.

As foretold by Buzurjmehr, Amir Hamza defeated the raider Hashsham who captured Naushervan's crown and throne and restored them to the emperor. While at Naushervan's court, Amir Hamza fell in love with the emperor's daughter, Princess Mehr-Nigar. Their love attracted the notice of Naushervan's evil minister, Bakhtak. He was no idle hand at mischief and, suspecting Hamza of carrying on secret trysts with Mehr-Nigar, Bakhtak began to stir trouble at court. Buzurjmehr did his best to protect Amir Hamza but Amir Hamza's amorous passion and reckless trysts with the princess made Buzurjmehr fear for his own reputation.

When the King of India rebelled against Emperor Naushervan, Buzurjmehr saw an opportunity to send Amir Hamza on a far-away campaign. He advised the emperor to promise Princess Mehr-Nigar's hand in marriage to the one who would

subdue the rebel king. As Buzurjmehr expected, Amir Hamza accepted the challenge, was engaged to Mehr-Nigar, and sent off on the campaign to India.

In Amir Hamza's absence, Bakhtak hatched countless treacherous plots against him with the sanction of the fickle-minded emperor. But Amir Hamza foiled them with the help of his holy gifts, Amar Ayyar's cunning stratagems, and Buzurjmehr's assistance. When Amir Hamza returned victorious from his adventures, the palace intrigues continued against him. However, to the shame and chagrin of Naushervan and his court, Mehr-Nigar left to join Hamza.

Meanwhile, the foretold rebellion of demons was underway in the enchanted land of Mount Qaf. Emperor Shahpal sent for Hamza to subdue the rebellious demons. While Amir Hamza was away, Amar Ayyar countered the intrigues and plots hatched by Bakhtak and his son, Bakhtiarak. He defended his camp against Naushervan's armies and kept them from carrying away Mehr-Nigar. During his destined eighteen-year stay in Mount Qaf, Amir Hamza quelled the rebellion of the demons, married Aasman Peri and had a daughter with her.

After spending eighteen years in Mount Qaf Amir, Hamza finally returned and married Mehr-Nigar. He married several other women and fairies besides and had many sons and grandsons.

Amir Hamza appointed his grandson, Saad, King of the True Believers but retained command of the armies himself. Many sons were also born to the trickster Amar Ayyar and were appointed tricksters to Amir Hamza's sons.

Amir Hamza and his armies continued to battle tyrants, giants and sorcerers for the glory of the True Faith and encountered and destroyed many tilisms. Amir Hamza's knowledge of *Ism-e Azam* or the Most Great Name protected him against magic and sorcery. Many of these events are recounted in *The Adventures of Amir Hamza*.

For some time, 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. He proclaimed himself God and declared Bakhtiarak, son of Bakhtak, the devil-designate of his court. A great many infidels and sorcerers became Laqa's believers. However, the fates and fortunes decided by Laqa always turned out to be false. Calamity and misfortune marked his followers but Laqa had not yet run out of luck.

The Tilism of Hoshrub and the Master of the Tilism, Sorcerer Afrasiyab

We are told that at the bottom of the untold past, a group of sorcerers met to create a tilism or magical world by using occult sciences of *simia*, *kimia*, *limia* and *rimia* to infuse inanimate matter with the spirits of planetary and cosmic forces.

In the tilism, the sorcerers exercised powers that defied the laws of God and the physical world. They created illusions, transferred spirits between bodies, transmuted matter, made talismans, and configured and exploited Earth's inherent physical forces to create extraordinary marvels.

Once the tilism was created, the sorcerers named it Hoshruba. A sorcerer named Lachin ruled Hoshruba in its early years. Then one of his deputies, the cunning sorcerer Afrasiyab, deposed his master and usurped the throne. Afrasiyab became the Emperor of Hoshruba and Master of the Tilism.

Afrasiyab and his sorceress wife, Empress Heyrat, ruled over Hoshruba's three regions: Zahir the Manifest, Batin the Hidden, and Zulmat the Dark. These regions were also tilisms and contained countless dominions and smaller tilisms filled with thousands of buildings, enclosures, gardens and palaces governed by sorcerer princes and sorceress princesses.

Ordinary citizens of Hoshruba lived in the region of Zahir the Manifest. Empress Heyrat and the emperor's ministers, peers and confidants made their abode in Batin the Hidden. Zulmat the Dark was a secluded region of Hoshruba to which few had access. It was inhabited by two of Hoshruba's most powerful sorceresses.

An enchanted river called the River of Flowing Blood divided the regions of Zahir and Batin. A bridge that was made of smoke and guarded by two smoke lions stretched over it. It was called the Bridge of the Magic Fairies and from it a three-tiered tower rose to the skies. On the lowest tier of this tower, magic fairies stood alert, holding trumpets and clarions to their lips. From the second tier, another group of magic fairies constantly tossed pearls into the river to the fish that swam, carrying them in their mouths. On the topmost tier, gigantic Abyssinians arrayed in double rows skirmished together with swords. The blood that flowed from their wounds poured into the water below and gave the River of Flowing Blood its name.

Emperor Afrasiyab moved freely between the three regions of Hoshruba. Whenever anyone called out his name in the tilism, Afrasiyab's magic alerted him to the call. The emperor's fortune revealed itself in the palms of his hands. His left hand warned him of inauspicious moments and the right hand revealed auspicious ones. He also possessed the *Book of Sameri*, which contained an account of every event inside and outside the tilism. And he had a magic mirror that projected his body into his court during his absence, and many magic doubles who replaced him when he was in imminent danger.

Besides sorcerers and sorceresses, Afrasiyab also commanded magic slaves and magic slave girls, who fought at his command and performed any and all tasks assigned them.

Emperor Afrasiyab was among the seven immortal sorcerers of Hoshruba who could not be killed while their doppelgangers lived.

But every tilism had a fixed lifespan and a tilism key that contained directions for its unravelling. The conqueror of a tilism was one who would use that key to unravel the tilism at the appointed time. Over the years, the whereabouts of Hoshruha's tilism key was forgotten. As Hoshruha's life neared its end, Emperor Afrasiyab resolved to defend his empire and tilism and foil the tilism's conqueror when he appeared.

Unbeknown to Emperor Afrasiyab the Master of the Tilism events were already unfolding outside Hoshruha that would soon test his resolve.

The false god Laqa was in flight after suffering fresh defeats at the hands of Amir Hamza the Lord of the Auspicious Planetary Conjunction, whose armies and spies hotly pursued him.

Each day brought Laqa and Amir Hamza a little nearer to Hoshruha.

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website: www.hoshruha.com