

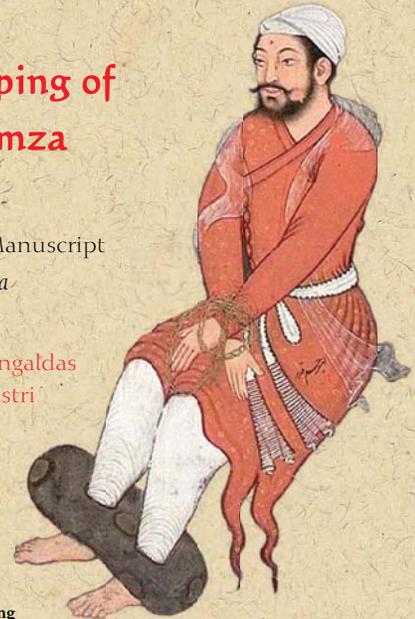
For
Ayesha and Amaya
As wondrous as the sun, moon and stars to me...

For
Samara and Sana
Who find magic in every story.

The Kidnapping of Amir Hamza

From the Mughal Manuscript
Hamzanama

Retold by
Mamta Dalal Mangaldas
and Saker Mistri



Mapin Publishing

Akbar and the Storyteller

Once upon a time, there lived in India a young emperor who loved to ride wild elephants. He used to roam far and wide with his soldiers, through the forests and mountains of his kingdom, crossing deep and fast-flowing rivers, in search of these mighty beasts.

One day, when the young emperor was out riding in the forests of Narwar in North India, he saw a herd of wild elephants. He chased them deep into the woods and ordered his men to use rope snares and capture the elephants. The huge legs of the elephants became entangled in the ropes and, as they struggled to free themselves, the emperor leapt on to the back of the leader of the herd. Digging his heels behind the matriarch's ears, he commanded the wild beast to be calm. Once the elephants were subdued, the emperor left his soldiers in charge, and rode back to the camp to rest in his tent.

On the evening of the elephant hunt, the sun set quietly over the forests. It did not want to disturb the Ruler of Rulers, the Badshah, the Noblest Emperor of all times: Akbar the Great. In Akbar's camp the men were bustling about, waiting for Darbar Khan, Akbar's court storyteller. The emperor loved listening to tales of magic and adventure, and took his storyteller with him wherever he went. Akbar sat in a large and resplendent tent, drumming his fingers impatiently on the rubies and diamonds on his throne.

When Darbar Khan finally entered the royal tent, Akbar leapt up to embrace him and said fondly, "Come and amuse us with one of your stories." Then he turned to his men, "Darbar Khan can tell a different story every day, for a whole year. He is a wonderful storyteller. When he describes a rainstorm, you will shiver and feel the cold wind on your face. If he portrays





a battle scene, the very ground trembles with the sound of horses and elephants in full charge.”

Often the storytelling continued for many hours and was accompanied by music and dancing. As he listened with his head propped on one hand, Akbar found himself wishing he could read. It would be fun, he thought to himself, to be able to read stories on his own—but then, he wouldn't have the wonderful voice and expressive hands of Darbar Khan to transport him to these exciting new worlds.

The musicians took their places, and Darbar Khan in his scarlet robe bowed low before the emperor. “Today's tale, my Badshah, is from your favourite book: the *Hamzanama*. There is no other book like it in the whole world. The paintings in the book are so dazzling that when you see them, it is as wondrous as seeing the sun and the moon for the very first time. The colours glow like the jewels in your majesty's throne. And the hero of my story, the great Persian warrior Amir Hamza, is as strong and brave...,” Darbar Khan smiled, “well, almost as strong and brave... as you, my Emperor!”

The Red Bundle

Darbar Khan opens a large box of paintings. The storyteller's young assistant holds up a painting made of stiff cotton cloth and the opener of the magic chest of stories begins his tale...

A long time ago in the land of Persia, lived a fearless nobleman called Amir Hamza. Hamza was known to fight wild animals with his bare hands and one thrust from his gleaming sword could frighten away an entire army. Hamza travelled across Persia, India and China. Everywhere he went he fought against the wicked and protected the good. He attacked the giants who troubled innocent people, overthrew evil kings, and killed fire-breathing dragons that destroyed cities.

One day, as Hamza sat in the shade of a cherry tree in his garden, watching the fountains and enjoying the cool breeze, he saw a blue rock-pigeon circling above him in the cloudless sky. His heart missed a beat: the rock-pigeon lived near the shores of the Caspian Sea and Hamza wondered why the bird had flown so far from its home. Was it carrying a message for him? The bird slowly descended and landed at the edge of a fountain very close to where Hamza sat. It looked very tired after its flight. The Amir cupped some water in his palms for the bird to drink and saw a message strapped to its leg.

The letter was from the starving farmers of Sabayil, a coastal town along the calm waters of the Caspian Sea. "Oh, Courageous Amir," it said, "we are in trouble. The heartless landlords have stolen all the crops, leaving our children hungry and crying. Please help us to fight the landlords and rescue our families from starvation." Hamza's eyes narrowed and he clenched his fist in anger at the cruel landowners. That afternoon he left for Sabayil with Ashqar, his three-eyed magical horse.

