

NAIYER MASUD

The Fifth Saasaan*

My tale was heard and yet it was not told,
I saw the world and yet I was not seen;
My thread is cut and yet it is not spun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

— CHIDIOCK TICHBORNE

Are you mortal? Or immortal? Or both?
Both? Or are you not? Or is “not” you?
Fānīʿī? Yā Bāqīʿī? Yā har dōʿī?
Har dōʿī? Yā tō nabʿī? Yā “nab” tōʿī?

— FARID AL-DIN ATTAR

IT HAD TAKEN CENTURIES to build these massive stone structures scattered across the plains that spread out far into the distance, and centuries had also passed while they had fallen into ruin. Travelers with imagination were amazed by the wide doors, high stairs, and very large niches of these ruins and they would conjure up images of the time when these remnants of past kings were still intact and those kings were alive. Most of their attention and interest was focused on the carved drawings visible on the stone slabs there were fastened to the structures, where coronations, wars, slaughters, defeated kings appearing in the courts of conquerors, and scenes commemorating other occasions were depicted. It was quite evident that the drawings were recounting the history of their time. Quite a few things about those ancient days could be surmised from these drawings, and some tentative information could be garnered about the ancient history and civilization of these regions.

There were also inscriptions carved on the stones of these ruins and

*“Sāsān-e Panjum,” from the author’s *ʿItr-e Kāfūr* (Lucknow: Niẓāmī Press, 1990), 186–91.

travelers would scrutinize those a long time too, fascinated, but no one could read them. The only thing that could be discovered from looking at them was that someone had drawn rows of arrowheads at different angles. Nevertheless, everyone agreed that these rows of arrowheads were, in fact, lengthy compositions, and if these compositions could be deciphered and understood, then, with their help, the drawings might also be understood better and many things might be learned that were impossible to learn from the drawings alone.

For a long time our scholars tried unsuccessfully to decipher these inscriptions. They knew the writings were in the same language the Fifth Saasaan had collected specimens of, but it was impossible to decipher the inscriptions with the help of those specimens because the specimens were not in the arrowhead form of writing, and the Fifth Saasaan had died ages ago, in fact no one even knew during what age he had lived.

Finally, after struggling a long time, the art of reading dead languages advanced sufficiently and our scholars succeeded—with the help of the drawings on the ruins and through some other methods—in deciphering the writings that were in the arrowhead form. And with the help of these writings, the drawings were also understood fully. In this way, as it were, the writings repaid their debt to the drawings.

Each of the inscriptions was deciphered one by one, and the news was generally welcomed that a new language that was thousands of years old had been added to our repertoire. However, there was no discernible connection between that language and the language of the specimens assembled by the Fifth Saasaan. In fact, there wasn't even a coincidental similarity between the two, and this hadn't even been suspected by our scholars because several generations of them had studied those specimens very seriously and had made known their learned opinion about the matter. They now concluded that the Fifth Saasaan was the biggest deception or the biggest joke in the history of languages. Clearly, they could derive no pleasure in having fallen prey to this, so there should be no surprise if they now wanted the Fifth Saasaan and his language to be forgotten.

However, it must be conceded that the Fifth Saasaan was not dealt with fairly. First of all, his very existence was denied, and the argument given was that without four earlier *saasaans*, the existence of the Fifth could not be established. And in history, except for the one *saasaan*, no trace was

found of the Second, Third or Fourth, thus, there was also no Fifth! At the same time, the language put forward by him was also denied. Through a great deal of hard work, erudite scholars established that the language the Fifth Saasaan claimed was genuine and ancient had never existed. He had devised the meanings of the words he transcribed from that imaginary language, and those words themselves were made up by him. They hadn't been uttered by any tongue before that, nor had any pen written them. And the grammar the Fifth Saasaan had laid out for that language was also entirely an invention of his own mind. In reality, the word order found in his hypothetical grammar wasn't to be found in the sentences of any language whatsoever.

In proving all these things, our scholars displayed evidence of incredible study and intellectual effort using both knowledge and reasoning, and every new discovery related to this matter further strengthened their claims. Nevertheless, on the basis of these same discoveries, our scholars also acknowledged that for a long time the Fifth Saasaan was considered real and his language genuine, and scholars of the past had used the words of that language proudly. However, those earlier scholars had not succeeded in coming up with the original spoken or written language that used these words, although several of them reportedly claimed an acquaintance with that language.

The scholar of today says that in the past some words were used that didn't really exist. These words were used to mean things they didn't actually mean, in fact they had no meaning whatsoever. Nevertheless, every one of them was used for a particular meaning. That is, a speaker would say a word and, from it, he would intend a meaning, and the one who heard it understood the very same meaning the speaker intended. However, in reality, that word didn't have the meaning the speaker intended and the listener understood because, in fact, it wasn't a word at all, and since it wasn't a word, it didn't have any meaning.

And these meaningless words that were considered a language—that language also didn't really exist. Although scholars would not deny the possibility that at some time, somewhere, this language may have been spoken and understood, nevertheless, it was not, in fact, a language at all.

The sum of the entire investigation of our scholars was that there was no Fifth Saasaan, nor was any language put forward by him, nor did that language have a single word, nor did that word have any meanings.

However, the sum of the entire investigation was also that at one time there were some meanings that were expressed through certain words, and these words were ascribed to a language, and one person introduced

this language, and that person called himself the Fifth Saasaan. □

—*Translated by Jane Shum and Mubammad Umar Memon*