Chapter Two

Beginnings of Persian Lexicography
(Ninth–Tenth Centuries)

The early development of the Persian lexicographic tradition is directly linked with the rich poetry written in New Persian, which developed suddenly over a vast area; and, in broader terms, with the evolution of medieval Persian literature as a whole.

The medieval Persian literary corpus consisted for the most part of versified texts. Poetic forms of the written language were inherent not only in belles-lettres but also in didactic works of science and theology. The complex literary style which had become standard, the flowery and metaphorical poetry developed in the thirteenth century, the graphic language of prose embellished with poetic interpolations, the extreme polysemantism of Persian lexis enriched with Arabic loanwords – all promoted the early development of lexicographic activity in the compilation of glossaries.

Literary works originating in various regions some distance apart showed the unmistakable influence of local dialectal peculiarities of Persian. Seeping into the written texts, these were unknown and incomprehensible to readers in other regions. A manual of some sort for reading this poetry was seen as a necessity. This is what led to the appearance of farhangs, the defining dictionaries of the Persian language.

It should be emphasized here that it was just such practical considerations that for long afterwards defined the very essence of medieval Persian lexicography. Persian lexicographers did not envisage the task of compiling large normative dictionaries that would contain the vocabulary of the whole literary language. In their minds, farhangs would solve a strictly limited problem:
they would help in the reading of poetry, by glossing the increasingly difficult dialect words or the archaic vocabulary used in the earliest literary works, notably the Šāhnāma.

Persian lexicographic tradition, as evidenced by literary monuments dating back to the eleventh century and still extant, has its roots in an even more remote past. Sources have established the existence of at least four Persian farhangs compiled earlier than Asadī Ṭūsī’s Luğat-i furs. Chronologically, the earliest of these – Farhang-i Abu Ḥafṣ Sugdī, or Risāla-yi Abu Ḥafṣ Sugdī – was compiled toward the end of the ninth or the beginning of the tenth century.

Little is known about the author, Abū Ḥafṣ Ḥakīm-i Sugdī(-yi Samarqandi). It is known that he was a prominent musician and music theorist of his time, that he invented a musical instrument, the šahrūd (this invention dates back to the year 306/919), and that he composed (in Arabic) two treatises on music which have come down to us in rare manuscripts: Rawnaq al-majālis (‘Splendour of concerts’) and Jawāhir al-majālis (‘Jewels of concerts’).¹

The presently inextant manuscripts of Abū Ḥafṣ Sugdī’s dictionary were apparently still in circulation in the 1600s of our era. Lexicographers in Iran and compilers of Persian dictionaries in India, right up to the seventeenth century, refer to Risāla-i Abū Ḥafṣ as one of their sources. In some medieval works, starting with the poetics of Šams-i Qays (13th century), Abū Ḥafṣ Sugdī, musician and lexicographer, merges with his namesake predecessor who allegedly was the author of the first poems in New Persian; according to Rīzā-quīli Xān, he lived in the first century of the Hijra, i.e., the seventh to the early

¹ Reference to Abū Ḥafṣ Sugdī as a prominent musician is found in a 10th-century Arabic treatise by Abū Naṣr Fārābī (d. 950). In Haji Khalfa’s 17th-century bibliographical dictionary, both the musical treatises by Abū Ḥafṣ Sugdī are mentioned (ascribed to the 1st century A.D.), but Abū Ḥafṣ’s dictionary is not mentioned (Haji Khalfa, 1835-1858).