



PERSO-INDICA

*An Analytical Survey of Persian Works
on Indian Learned Traditions*



Persian Digraphia in Early Modern South Asia

The Fifth Perso-Indica Workshop

EHESS, Marseille

Tuesday, April 30th 2024

This workshop enquires into the use of alternative scripts for writing Persian language in South Asia and the cross-cultural dynamics and exchanges underlying this phenomenon. The diachronic digraphia of Persian in the transition periods from Old to Middle and again to New Persian – as well as synchronic, with Hebrew and Armenian scripts being used to write New Persian, are well-known phenomena. The use of the Perso-Arabic characters for Urdu and the Devanagari script for Hindi can also be regarded as a typical example of synchronic digraphia of the same language. Conversely, synchronic digraphia of Persian in South Asia has hardly received any attention.

This workshop explores the features of Persian synchronic digraphia in South Asia for the first time by looking at the emergence of Devanagari Persian, that is to say, the writing of Persian through the Devanagari script borrowed from Sanskrit. This phenomenon emerged when a growing number of Hindus commissioned, wrote, translated and read Persian texts in early modern South Asia. Hindus' interactions with Persian textual culture in South Asia were not a homogenous phenomenon but a composite process where different actors could employ alternative strategies to assimilate materials drawn from Persian sources. Within this context, Persian writing was tailored to the needs of Hindu readers. This workshop seeks to investigate the reasons behind the use of Devanagari Persian by looking at epigraphic, archival, and textual sources that testify to its use in different contexts within South Asian society. Selected passages from these sources will be read and commented on, showing how Persian characters were rendered in Devanagari script.

Speakers (in alphabetic order)

Jean Arzoumanov (University of Chicago) - **Fabrizio Speziale** (EHESS-CESAH):
“Domesticating Persian. Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī’s treatise on the astrolabe in Devanagari script”

This paper explores the synchronic digraphia of Persian in South Asia as a phenomenon intertwined with Hindu elites' assimilation of Persianate scientific knowledge. It does so by looking at an anonymous version in Devanagari script of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī's (d. 1274) *Bīst bāb dar ma'rifat-i usṭurlāb*, a compact manual on the use and construction of the astrolabe which had a vast readership in the Persianate world. Hindu elites were eager to assimilate knowledge of the astrolabe, a device unknown in earlier Sanskrit lore. This paper enquires into the function of digraphia and raises a few hypotheses about the unknown commissioner of this text, which was probably prepared in 18th century and was intended for a Hindu reader who did not master the Persian alphabet.



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Eva Orthmann (University of Göttingen, Göttingen), “Direction stones in Persian and Marathi”

This talk looks at the corpus of bilingual inscriptions of South Asia and the use of Persian written in Devanagari script. Among these bilingual inscriptions, we find a certain number of signposts in Persian and Marathi. On these direction stones or signposts, Persian or a mixture of Persian and Marathi has sometimes been written in Devanagari script. In the frame of the workshop, we will look at how the Persian words have been rendered in Devanagari characters. Furthermore, we will discuss some hypotheses on the function and readers of these direction stones.

Chander Shekhar (University of Delhi-EHESS), “Some remarks on digraphia in Persianate South Asia”

In South Asia, digraphia of Persian and Urdu/Hindi was chiefly used to facilitate readers who did not know the script but desired to comprehend the text. Various kinds of texts testified to this phenomenon. For example, most of the poetry of Bhai Nand Lal Goya, a Persian poet from Punjab, is available in Devanagari script. Likewise, the *Zafarnama* of Guru Gobind Singh, a political Persian treatise in poetry which rebukes Aurangzeb, has many versions in Devanagari and Gurmukhi scripts. Also, Khushhal Khan’s *Rag Darshan*, a treatise on music in the Hindawi language, is available in both Devanagari and Persian scripts. Moreover, we find archival documents that provide the same text in Persian and Devanagari scripts. On the one hand, this type of text was thought to facilitate readers; on the other hand, it paved the way for the coinage of graphemes of different sounds, which were uncommon in both scripts.

Location and Info: Tuesday, April 30th 2024, from 14.00 to 18.00, École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), Centre de la Vieille Charité, salle B, 2 rue de la Charité, 13002, Marseille.

Link for online participants: <https://bbb.ehess.fr/b/fab-wrz-cwb-z41>

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