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

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## AN ANALYTICAL SURVEY OF PERSIAN WORKS ON INDIAN LEARNED TRADITIONS

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Perso-Indica  
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54 Boulevard Raspail  
75006, Paris  
France  
e-mail: [fabrizio.speziale@ehess.fr](mailto:fabrizio.speziale@ehess.fr)

## *Tarjuma-yi kitāb-i Bārāhī*

**Astrology.** The *Bṛhatsamhitā* is an important Sanskrit text dealing with *jyotiṣa* which has been rendered into Persian by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Šams-i Tahānīsārī (14th century) under the title of *Tarjuma-yi kitāb-i Bārāhī* (q.v.). *Jyotiṣa* is one of the six *vedāṅgas* or auxiliary sciences related to the study of the Vedas (Türstig 1980: XVII). It is traditionally subdivided into three parts: mathematical astronomy (*tantra*), horoscopy (*horā*) and natural astrology (*aṅgaviniścaya* or *śākha*), and covers a very wide range of prognostic sciences (see Türstig 1980, p. xvii; Shastri 1996, pp. 430-431; Gansten 2010, p. 281). While mathematical astrology and horoscopy belong to the field of astrology in the Islamic world, too, most of what is dealt with in natural astrology is either completely unknown to Muslim astrologers or belongs to other branches of prognostication.

This discrepancy is nowhere discussed by Šams-i Tahānīsārī. He quite consistently translates *jyotiṣa* as *‘ilm-i nujūm*, a term comprising both astronomy and astrology. For the three parts of *jyotiṣa*, he uses *istihrāj* (extracting; not a specific astrological term) to translate *tantra*, *mawālīd* (nativities) for *horā* and *aḥkām* (judicial astrology) for *aṅgaviniścaya*, but does not elaborate on the problem that these terms are not congruent with the Sanskrit classification, where *mawālīd* and *aḥkām* would both belong rather to the field of *horā* (Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, f. 8b). However, his translation and adaptation of the second chapter on “guideline for the astrologer” (*sāmvatsarasūtrādhyāyah*, translated as *dar ṣifat-i munajjim*, “description of the astrologer”) point to an awareness of this incongruity. In the Sanskrit version, this chapter comprises many details about the astronomical and astrological knowledge required by an astrologer and includes a list of the topics belonging to this science. This list is the table of contents of the *Bṛhatsamhitā*. In the Persian version, however, the table of contents is not included in that chapter but placed at the beginning of the

book. This rearrangement might have had practical reasons, but it might also indicate that the translator felt uneasy with attributing all these different prognostic sciences and techniques to the field of astrology. He also omits most of the details given in the Sanskrit version about the three parts of *jyotiṣa* an astrologer should know (Bhat 1981, pp. 8-15; for the status of astrologers in India, see Gansten 2011). With regard to the physical and moral requirements of an astrologer, the text of the second chapter was adapted to a Muslim audience. On the whole, the list of requirements is shorter in Persian than in Sanskrit. However, some Islamic prescriptions have been added to it: while astrologers shall be “well versed in the art of performing rituals” and “engaged in the worship of gods, observances or austerities and fast” according to the Sanskrit version (Bhat 1981, p. 8), they shall “fast and worship God” and “abstain from what is religiously forbidden, especially from alcohol and adultery” according to the Persian version (Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, f. 10a).

As these requirements show, *jyotiṣa* was related to cosmological and religious notions. This correlation was due to astrology’s function in determining the appropriate moment for ritual. The fate planets were believed to indicate was furthermore considered to have been acquired through deeds in an earlier life and thus closely linked to the notion of *karman*. Last but not least, the planets were regarded as deities (Gansten 2010, pp. 281-283). The high number of references to religion and cosmology in the *Brhatsamhitā* reflects this background and posed a challenge for the translator. Moreover, differences between the cosmological model of India, which traditionally presupposed a nonspherical universe with a flat earth (Plofker 2009, p. 52), and the spheric model used in Muslim astronomy also caused some translation problems.

To give it a more Islamic appearance, references to religion and ritual have mostly been censored in the translation, but not all evidence of Hindu practices has been eliminated. The veneration of planets, recommended in a passage describing how to reduce the negative effects of the planets, but completely unacceptable according to the Islamic Sharia, has not been omitted, for example. In the Sanskrit version, the planets have to be worshipped with devotion (*bhaktyā pūjyau*), and each of them is offered specific donations (Bhat 1981, p. 921). In the Persian version, this worship is translated by *ṣadaqa dādan*, almsgiving, which is typical of Islamic religion. Yet against all Islamic proscriptions, this *ṣadaqa* has to be adjusted to the planet in the Persian version, too, and the translation even renders which offerings are associated

with which planets. It just avoids specifying the recipient of the donations (Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 311a-b).

The discrepancy between the cosmological model of India and the spheric one of the Islamic world becomes apparent in the part on the lunar nodes as well as in that on “planetary wars” (*grahayuddha*, translated as *qirānāt-i ḥarb*). The Sanskrit version refers in the chapter on planetary wars to planetary orbits lying over one another, thereby reflecting traditional Indian cosmology, according to which the planets do not revolve in spheres but in super-imposed orbits. To the eye, Varāhamihira says, they seem however to move in one single orbit on an even surface, and when they come too close to each other, wars take place (Bhat 1981, p. 205). The translator skips this sentence, since orbits lying one above the other do not fit into a spheric universe, and just talks about *qirānāt*, conjunctions, a well-known concept in Islamic astrology. Something similar takes place in the chapter on Rahu and Ketu, the two lunar nodes which were perceived as the head and tail of a dragon who swallows the sun and moon during eclipses (Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 74a, 20a). In the Sanskrit version, the mythological understanding of Rahu and Ketu is first described at length, and then rejected by Varāhamihira who gives a scientific explanation of eclipses (Bhat 1981, pp. 42-47). The Persian translation refers only briefly to the mythological background, and then elucidates the lunar nodes and their daily motion. Obviously, for Šams-i Tahānīsarī, the discussion on Rahu and Ketu was needless, and the fact that the shadow of earth and moon causes eclipses was so well established in his environment that it did not require further explanation.

Astronomy in the *Bṛhatsamhitā* is in the service of astrology and prognostication. Planetary courses are not calculated or described with the object of mathematical accuracy, but to indicate their prognostic qualities. Their course is in each case related to the lunar mansions (*nakṣatra*, translated as *manāzil*). Although in the Muslim world, the zodiacal signs are used as a reference system for planetary positions, this difference did not pose a problem, since the lunar mansions were well known there, too. The concept of lunar mansions is therefore not explained in the translation. The correlation between zodiacal signs and lunar mansions is given in chapter one hundred and two by both the Sanskrit and the Persian version.

The translator however comments on quite a few other parameters, like especially time units. He thus adds information about the four *yugas* (eras), the six

seasons of two months each, and the lunar days (*tithi*) as well as about the two different Indian months, one beginning with the full moon, and one with the new moon (Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 9a-10a, 16a-b, 81b-82a). Additional information is also given for the calculation of the current *yuga* as well as the position of the Seven Seers (*saptarṣayah*, translated as *banāt-ni 'š*, some stars in Ursa major). In both cases, the calculations of the translation go beyond the calculation in the *Bṛhatsamhitā* (Bhat 1981, pp. 88-90). In the case of the *yuga*, the *Bṛhatsamhitā* calculates only the current year of the *yuga*, while in the translation, the month, day, minutes and seconds are also computed (Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 40a-41b). The calculation of the current position of the *banāt-ni 'š* is also explained in more detail (Bhat 1981, pp. 161-162; Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 61b-62b). Šams-i Tahānīsarī might have found these calculations in some copy he used, but I rather assume that he was sufficiently well versed in astronomy and astrology to be able to complete these calculations himself.

Even if we leave out the chapters on omens which do not belong to the field of Islamic astrology (q.v. Bārāhī occult sciences), many of the prognostic concepts used in the *Bṛhatsamhitā* were not familiar to an astrologer from the Muslim world. Quite a few chapters of the *Bṛhatsamhitā* describe the effects of different constellations at the beginning of a specific enterprise, like well construction (chapter fifty-four in the Sanskrit version), sowing (chapter fifty-five) or marriage (chapter one hundred and three). The prognostic procedures are like a combination of those employed in the Islamic world in the context of *iḥtiyārat* (elections) and *masā'il* (interrogations): the first (*iḥtiyārat*) used to choose the right moment for the beginning of an action, and the second (*masā'il*) to answer specific questions of an astrologer's client, like concerning the whereabouts of a runaway slave or the marital bliss of a couple. In spite of the propinquity of the procedures, the example of well construction nevertheless shows the dissimilarity between the *Bṛhatsamhitā* and astrological texts from the Islamic world. The chapter deals with water divination (*dakārgal*, translated as *ṣifat-i āb jāhhā*) and begins with methods to find water veins. Indications for water veins are trees, the color of soil and specific animals like snakes and frogs found while digging. It also describes how best to construct a well, with the constellation being only one factor to be taken into consideration. Astrology in a narrow sense is therefore only an ancillary science here, while in astrological texts from the Muslim world, the astral constellation would be the only factor considered, all other indications belonging to different domains.

Again, the translator does not delve into this disparity, but just takes what he finds and translates it without referring to the concept of elections and interrogations.

One more chapter is of specific interest here: chapter ninety-six, which is concerned with the relation between astral constellations and names, or the attribution of letters to planets. Such correlations also exist in the Islamic world and are described by the *'ilm-i taksīr*, a science which assigns each letter to one of the four elements (Dorpmüller 2000, p. 31) and sometimes also to a specific planet. However, Šams-i Bahā' Nūrī does not attempt to adapt the system of the *Bṛhatsamhitā* to the system of the *taksīr*, but just translates Varāhamihira's text, keeping all the Sanskrit letters and sounds for which no Persian equivalent exists. This feature is typical of the translator's approach; although he often adds information on technical aspects like measures, in many other parts he does not persianize the text by translating foreign concepts with terms better known to Muslim readers.

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**Eva Orthmann**

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