



PERSO-INDICA

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

OFFPRINT



PERSO-INDICA.

AN ANALYTICAL SURVEY OF PERSIAN WORKS ON INDIAN LEARNED TRADITIONS

is published on line at: www.perso-indica.net
ISSN: 2267-2753

CHIEF EDITORS

Fabrizio Speziale (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris)

Carl W. Ernst (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

Muzaffar Alam (University of Chicago, Illinois)

Marc Gaborieau (Formerly Professor, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris)

Fathullah Mojtaba'i (Tehran)

Sheldon Pollock (Columbia University, New York)

Francis Richard (Paris)

Sreeramula Rajeswara Sarma (Formerly Professor, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh)

Chander Shekhar (University of Delhi, New Delhi)

SECTION EDITORS

Carl W. Ernst (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

Supriya Gandhi (Yale University, New Haven)

Susanne Kurz (Ruhr-Universität, Bochum)

Corinne Lefèvre (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris)

Eva Orthmann (University of Göttingen, Göttingen)

Katherine Butler Schofield (King's College, London)

Pegah Shahbaz (Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation)

Fabrizio Speziale (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris)

Audrey Truschke (Rutgers University, Newark)

ADDRESS

Perso-Indica

c/o Fabrizio Speziale

École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

Centre d'études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du sud

54 Boulevard Raspail

75006, Paris

France

e-mail: fabrizio.speziale@ehess.fr

Tarjuma-yi kitāb-i Bārāhī

Occult Sciences. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Šams-i Tahānīsārī’s *Tarjuma-yi kitāb-i Bārāhī* (q.v.) is a 14th century Persian translation of Varāhamihira’s *Bṛhatsamhitā*, a 6th century Sanskrit encyclopedia of prognostication. According to Indian classification, *jyotiṣa* not only comprises mathematical astrology (*tantra*) and horoscopy (*horā*), but also natural astrology (*aṅgaviniścaya* or *śākha*) (Gansten 2010a, 281). This latter branch encompasses all kinds of divinatory practices mainly based on portents, like omens taken from the cries of animals, garments, toothsticks, umbrellas, sneezing, urinating and so on (Gansten 2010b). Quite often, astrology and other divinatory techniques are intermingled in this branch: in chapter twenty-eight on “signs of immediate rain,” for example, the text first refers to the constellation at the moment of interrogation, but later turns to the position of the questioner and his touching any wet object (Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 101a-104b). And omens taken from a sword are mostly done by looking at the position of notches in its blade, but the ascendant at the moment of inquiry also has to be taken into consideration (chapter fifty of Sanskrit version; Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, chapter fifty-two, ff. 145a-149b).

In his translation, Šams-i Tahānīsārī uses *aḥkām* (judicial astrology) for natural astrology, although the latter is mostly outside the scope of astrology in the Islamic world. Several sections of the *Bṛhatsamhitā* resemble however other prognostic practices from there; this is especially the case with physiognomy and omens taken from birds and animals as well as the science of limbs.

Physiognomy (*firāsa*, *qiyāfa*) was well known in the Islamic world. Nevertheless, Šams-i Tahānīsārī does not use the expression *firāsa*, but translates the Sanskrit *purush lakshan*, used in the the *Bṛhatsamhitā* instead of the more common *samudrika*, as *aḥkām-i ‘alāmāt-i ādamiyān*, “rules for the signs of male

bodies” (chapter sixty-eight; Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, 195a-211a; female bodies are described in chapter seventy). The chapter deals with diverse physical marks, including palmistry, but also sneezing, the smell of semen and so on. The translation follows the Sanskrit original, but not without censorship: the translator omits, for example, to mention that having two hairs in a pore points to scholarship and expertise in the Veda, and moves directly from one hair in a pore (kingship) to three and more hairs in a pore (poverty). Two sections of the chapter on physiognomy are of especial interest: the first dealing with men’s complexion, which is explained as the outer appearance of a man’s inner constitution, and the second dealing with his natural character, which has consequences for his situation after reincarnation. In the section on complexion, the Persian translation omits to mention that this phenomenon not only applies to men but also to beasts and birds—probably because Šams-i Tahānīsārī disapproves of an equal treatment of men and animals. Although four of the five constitutive elements of the body mentioned in the Sanskrit text, that is, earth (*ku*), water (*jala*), fire (*agni*) and air (*anila*) are also important in medical texts from the Islamic world, in this chapter Šams-i Tahānīsārī uses the Sanskrit terminology in Persian script. Instead of the terms found in the *Bṛhatsamhitā*, however, he transcribes *pr̥thivī* (earth), *āp* (water), *tejas* (fire) and *bād* (for *vāyu*, wind or air). Perhaps this is due to the fact that here he slightly changes the order of the text and does not translate strictly. He furthermore does not give any explanation for the introduction of a fifth element, ether (*ambara*, term used in the transcription: *ākāśa*), which according to natural sciences in the Islamic world has no place in the sublunary sphere (Bhat 1981, pp. 602, 637, 638; Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 195b-196a, 207a).

In the section on the natural character, in addition to characters related to earth, fire, water, air and ether, we find the character of immortals (*sura*), mortals (*nara*), demons (*rakṣas*), devils (*piśācaka*) and beasts (*tiryāñc*) in Sanskrit. In Persian, these five characters are translated as *firišta* (angel), *ādam* (man), *‘ifrīt* (demon), *dīv* (devil) and *čahār-pāy* (quadruped), respectively; they have thus been persianized or Islamized. Šams-i Tahānīsārī adds to the description of the last group’s capabilities and features a short passage in which he points to a link between that natural character and a man’s nature after reincarnation: this is, as he explains, what the Hindus believe and what a Muslim should refrain from (Bhat 1981, pp. 643-644; Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 209b-210b).

Besides physiognomy, the science of limbs (chapter fifty-one) also bears resemblance to practices in the Islamic world. Although the divinatory method is different, the kinds of problems dealt with are similar to problems answered there in the astrological branch of interrogations (*masā'il*): the questions are related, for instance, to the sex of a child to be born, or the whereabouts of a thief. While such questions are answered on the Islamic side by looking at the astral constellation, the *Brhatsamhita* takes into consideration the placement of the questioner and the position of his limbs, especially his hand, at the moment of inquiry. The translation consistently takes over the Indian concepts and does not adapt it to the model of interrogations. Slight modifications are made by censoring references to trees as the abodes of gods or to the omniscient time in the Persian version (Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 149b-156b).

Omens related to animals play a rather important role in the text. They are dealt with in different contexts. Anthills, for example, are mentioned in the context of water springs and their exploration. The most important part on omens through birds and beasts is however contained in chapters eighty-six to ninety-five that deal with elephants, cows, crows, jackals and others. Much in these chapters is devoted to the behavior and cries of animals. Such forms of augury were known in the Islamic world and practiced especially in the form of ornithomancy (*'ilm al-tīra*). This similarity facilitated the translation of these parts, which have generally been rendered literally in Persian. In the context of questions to the *piṅgalā* bird, though, the Sanskrit version describes in detail how to address it. This bird cannot just be asked, but worship of Brahman and other gods has to be practiced along with the inquiry. The bird will then answer with specific cries. The idea of inciting an augury by specific worship was obviously obnoxious to the translator, who skipped this entire paragraph and just refers to different cries of the bird (Bhat 1981, pp. 804-805; Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, f. 259a). Chapters sixty-one to sixty-seven also deal with animals, but from a different perspective: this time, bodily marks and behavior are taken into consideration to assess the animal's value. The part on horses (chapter sixty-six) is redolent of the *Śalihotra* treatises which describe the characteristics of horses, a popular topic of study, a few Persian translations of which also appeared during the pre-Mughal period. The version in the *Brhatsamhita* is the earliest preserved translation of excerpts from such a treatise; since it is more comprehensive than the Sanskrit version,

the translator might however have had an unknown earlier Persian translation at his disposal.

The occult techniques and practices covered in other chapters are mostly unrelated to practices in the Islamic world. Most of them were unproblematic and could just be reproduced; in some cases, slight adaptations were made. An interesting case is how the translator deals with the chapter on omens from slits of garments (chapter seventy-one). It poses a specific challenge insofar as according to the Sanskrit version, gods dwell in the four corners of a cloth, men in the middle parts of the broad sides, and devils in the remaining three divisions. Šams-i Tahānīsarī does not skip this part, but adapts it to an Islamic understanding by translating gods (*devāḥ*) as *firišta* (angels), and devils (*niśācara*) as *ifrīt*. Even the small drawing that shows the position of the three groups has been taken over (Bhat 1981, p. 677; Ms. London, British Library, India Office, 1262, ff. 222a-b). This passage was probably kept because the entire prognostic method of the chapter is based on this division and would have become meaningless without it.

But not all topics were acceptable. As the translator mentions right from the beginning, eight chapters referring to Indian gods and kingship have been omitted in the translation. Large parts of these chapters are devoted to the description of rituals, hymns and procedural manners, but they also contain prognostic elements and are therefore related to the realm of occult sciences. Omens taken from Hindu religious or royal rituals were therefore not considered worth translating. They might furthermore have been problematic because of their legitimating function, and were consequently left out.

Secondary sources bibliography: Bhat, M. Ramakrishna, 1981, *Varāhamihira's Br̥hat Saṁhitā*, 2 vols., New Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers. Ethé, Hermann, 1980, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*, London, India Office Library and Records (1st edition Oxford 1903-1937). Gansten, Martin, 2010a, "Astrology and Astronomy (Jyotiṣa)", *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 2, pp. 281-294. Gansten, Martin, 2010b, "Divination", *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 2, pp. 743-747. Keshavarz, Fateme, 1986, *A descriptive and analytical catalogue*

of Persian manuscripts in the Library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London, The Wellcome Inst. for the History of Medicine. **Munzawī**, Aḥmad, 1378/1999, *Fihristwāra-yi kitābhā-yi fārsī*, Tehran, Anjuman-i āṭār u mafāḥir-i farhangī, vol. 4. **Shahstri**, Ajay Mitra, 1996, *Varāhamihira's India*, 2 vols., New Delhi, Aryan Books International. **Storey**, C. A., 1958, *Persian Literature. A Bibliographical Survey*, II, 1, London, Luzac & Co.

Eva Orthmann

Originally published: 01 mars 2017

How to quote this article:

Orthmann, Eva, 2017, "Tarjuma-yi kitāb-i Bārāhī (occult sciences)", *Perso-Indica. An Analytical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions*, F. Speziale - C. W. Ernst, eds., available at http://www.perso-indica.net/work/tarjuma-yi_kitab-i_barahi-1.

ISSN: 2267-2753

© 2010 Perso-Indica. All rights reserved