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An Analytical Survey of Persian Works
on Indian Learned Traditions

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PERSO-INDICA.
AN ANALYTICAL SURVEY OF PERSIAN WORKS ON INDIAN LEARNED TRADITIONS

ʿIšq-nāma

ʿIšq-nāma (The Book of Love), or *Ḥikāyat-i ʿāšiq-i nāgawrī* (The Story of a Lover from Nagaur), is a romance *maṯnawī* set in the city of Nagaur in Rajasthan. It narrates the tragic love story of a Muslim boy who fell in love with a Hindu girl and later committed *satī* (self-immolation) on the funeral pyre of his beloved. It was composed by Najm al-Dīn Ḥasan Sijzī Dihlawī (1253-c.1337) on the very first day of the month of *ḏū al-ḥijjah* in 700/Monday, August 15, 1301. Though it is the longest *maṯnawī* ever composed by Sijzī Dihlawī, he avers it was completed in just one night (*bayt* 572, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, p. 580). In the book's second section entitled "Reason for composing the tale," the poet recounts how he had heard this tale (*qiṣṣa*) from an inspired storyteller (*hamdāstān*) the preceding night at a local gathering (*bayt* 20, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, p. 558). In the final section of the book, he reminds his audience again that he was merely retelling a folktale (*afsāna*) that was already popular in its homeland (*bayt* 575, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, p. 580). Since the tale conveyed the profound import of eternal love (*ḥadīṯ-i ʿišq*), the poet decided to recast it in the form of a *maṯnawī* and in pursuance of a literary style (*ṭarz*) and an aesthetic sensibility (*liṭāfat*) that had been perfected by the godfearing (*pārsā*) poet, Niẓāmī-i Ganjawī (c. 1141-1209) almost a century ago (*bayt* 560-561, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, p. 580).

Although Sijzī Dihlawī had a lifelong penchant for literary innovation, he was always deeply sensitive to the literary taste of his immediate audiences. His continuous interaction with the courtly elite and Sufi audiences and his extended stay in different parts of the subcontinent influenced the thematic, structural and metaphorical fabric of *ʿIšq-nāma*. About two decades before the completion of *ʿIšq-nāma*, he accompanied the sultan of Delhi, Ġīyāṯ al-Dīn Balban (r. 1265-1287), to Lakhnawti in Bengal in order to suppress the revolt of its provincial governor Ṭuġril Ḫān. After spending considerable time in Bengal, Sijzī Dihlawī returned to Delhi for

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a brief period, as Muḥammad Ḫān (d. 684/1285), the eldest son of Balban, invited him and his bosom friend, Amīr Ḫusraw (d. 725/1325), to join his provincial court in Multan. Sijzī Dihlawī had spent five years in the affectionate company of Amīr Ḫusraw and Muḥammad Ḫān when the latter was unfortunately killed in a battle against the Mongols. Once again, Sijzī Dihlawī returned to Delhi, and afterwards joined the court of sultan Jalāl al-Dīn Fīrūz Šāh Ḫaljī (r. 1290-1296). At the time of the composition of *ʿIšq-nāma*, ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Ḫaljī (r. 1296-1316) was the monarch of Delhi, and Sijzī Dihlawī was still connected with the royal court in the city. Being endowed with exceptional creative imagination, Sizjī Dihlawī was able to experience and assimilate diverse values and elements from the rich ecology of oral and literate traditions that were thriving in various regions of South Asia.

The taut plot of *ʿIšq-nāma* exhibits close structural and thematic affinities with some of the oral story cycles and folkloric types in western and northern India. The basic structure of its plot can be classified into five episodic sections. In the opening episode, a Muslim youth, a scribe by training, is appointed as a clerk in the local secretariat of Nagaur. One day he chances upon a beautiful Hindu girl near a well in the city, and he immediately falls in love with her. It is the season of spring, the sun is headed to the house of Aries, and the moon rises in the zodiac of Aquarius. As soon as she departs from the well, the youth is so fervidly smitten by her that he cannot bear the pangs of separation from his beloved anymore. In an intense outpouring that is reminiscent of *viraha* (*biraha* in vernaculars; literally "desertion" or "separation") in Indic traditions, he vents his pain of love (*bayt* 94-122, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, pp. 561-562), and finally decides to approach the girl the following day. When she appears at the well the next morning, the poet describes her physical beauty – from head to toe (*sar tā pāy/sarāpāy*) – in a style that mirrors the *nakha-śikha varṇana* (a poetic delineation of one's beauty from "toe-nail to head") in Indic literatures (*bayt* 136-142, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, p. 563). As soon as she arrives at the well, the boy slips his hand into her skirt, starts crying inconsolably and confesses his unrelenting love for her. She is finally moved by his passionate pleading, but advises him to be patient.

The plot enters a scene of conflict in the second episode. The family of the heroine and their religious community do not approve of a tentative romance between her and the Muslim youth. An elderly Brahmin is sent to change the boy's mind. The philosophical sophistry and rhetorical manoeuvers of the old Brahmin, however, fail to influence the young lover. When the crisis heightens, the poet commences the third

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episode in which a resolution to the social crisis is sought. Troubled by the unwarranted advances of the Muslim boy, the girl's family approaches the sheriff for help. The sheriff catches the boy and incarcerates him on the charge of eve-teasing and sexually assaulting a Hindu woman. The girl is subsequently married to another person. In this way, whatever threats their love had posed to the social order, all of them are neatly resolved at the end of the third episode. The poet could have ended the story of *'Išq-nāma* here, and his audience would still experience a coherent sense of closure – somewhat tragic, realistic nevertheless.

But Sijzī Dihlawī continues to spin his yarn, and brings the hero back to the scene of the crisis in the fourth episode. Given the resilient social order that was restored at the end of the third episode, the poet has to craft a novel *deus ex machina* in order to enable the hero's return to the city of the beloved. Sijzī Dihlawī uses this occasion to tie fiction to history - a practice that was common both in the epic traditions of the Persianate world as well as the folkloric traditions of South Asia. Accordingly, a year after the hero's imprisonment, Ġīyāt̲ al-Dīn Balban comes to power in Delhi (664/1266), and he grants general amnesty to all prisoners in his dominion in order to celebrate his accession to the throne. As soon as he is released by the royal decree, he returns to the well of Nagaur to quench his "thirst" and he chances upon his beloved again. She, now a married woman, promises to unite with him and advises him to be patient until she finds an opportune moment for their meeting. For the fifth and final episode to unfold, the scribe waits for fourteen long years, before she comes up with a plan for their prospective union. She explains her scheme to him, and he eagerly looks forward to meeting her. Unfortunately, she falls sick in the meantime and passes away. When the boy learns of her death, he is aghast and shocked. He rushes to her funeral pyre and commits *satī*.

The extant folkloric and literary traditions of western and northern India preserve several oral story cycles with a basic plot that follow similar episodic movements exemplified in *'Išq-nāma*. For instance, one may find comparable episodes in the *Rāso* tradition, one of the oldest narrative traditions of Rajasthan. In *Pṛthvīrāj Rāso* (*Pirathabīrāj Rāso* in Rājsthānī dialects) of Cand Bardāī, a representative work of the *rāso* tradition, first, the hero, Pṛthvīrāj, the king of Ajmer and Delhi, and Sanyogitā, the princess of the rival kingdom of Kannauj, fall in love and wish to get married. Second, their union is not acceptable to Jaichand, the king of Kannauj and the heroine's father. Therefore, he hastens to organize a marriage ceremony (*svayaṃvara*) for her daughter.

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But Pṛthvīrāj appears at the ceremony in a disguised form, and elopes with Sanyogitā. In the third episode, a difficult battle ensues between their armies. On the counsel of his minister and the poet, who interestingly is a key character in the epic, both Pṛthvīrāj and Sanyogitā leave the scene of conflict and escape to Delhi. With the disappearance of the hero and heroine from the scene of conflict as well as the fulfilment of their desire to get married, the crisis of the plot is resolved. The closure of the third episode is qualified to be the proper ending of a narrative. For the story to move forward, the poet must find another compelling reason for reintroducing his central characters in the domain of conflict. This is accomplished in the fourth episode in which the poet and the royal priest convince the king to return to the scene of conflict, and to dispel all impending threats to the kingdom from his rival kings. The hero thus returns to his kingdom and takes charge of the administrative affairs, and eventually wages a war with another rival king, Šīhāb al-Dīn Muḥammad Ġurī (d. 1206). In a reversal of fate, Pṛthvīrāj is defeated in the war, taken as prisoner and blinded. In the final episode, a contest of archery is arranged at the behest of the poet. During the contest, the blind Pṛthvīrāj aims his arrow at Šīhab al-Dīn and kills him. Besides a delayed revenge and a muted honour, nothing much is gained by killing Šīhab al-Dīn. Before long, both Pṛthvīrāj and the poet pass away.

In *Jasmā Oḍan* (*Jasamā Oḍana* in various Mālwī, Gujrātī and Rājsthānī dialects) story cycles, a narrative is usually divided into three episodic sections. First, the hero accidentally comes across the heroine who is introduced in the narrative as the epitome of beauty. Second, he tries hard to attract her attention and love, but his endeavours usually fail. Third, an unfortunate set of events motivates the heroine to give up her life, following which the distraught hero embraces death as well. Some renditions transform the tragic resolution of the third episode into a "happily-ever-after" by supplementing their narrative with the "Śiva-Pārvatī" story cycles. In effect, Śiva and Pārvatī serve as the quintessential *deus ex machina* that moves the plot in the direction desired by the poet (often at the expense of the social order restored in the preceding episodes). In a typical "Śiva-Pārvatī" story cycle, both Śīva and Pārvatī are sauntering when they come across the dying hero and heroine, and Pārvatī, moved by their love-story, pesters Śiva to bring both hero and heroine back to life. Śiva, of course, yields to the request of his wife.

In *Nāgvantī* story cycles of western India, a narrative is usually divided into four episodes. First, both hero and heroine accidentally see each other in an isolated

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setting – one that is devoid of family, friends, acquaintances and elders. They soon fall in love, and, in some versions, they are even secretly married. Second, their love affair is exposed, and the hero is punished. In most retellings, the heroine is married off to someone else, and the hero is either sent away or subjected to harsh punishment. Third, the hero continues to wait for her beloved, and eventually commits suicide or dies. Fourth, the heroine comes across the funeral pyre of the hero, and she commits *satī*. The *Pravāsī* story cycles in Rājasthānī folklore consists of five episodes. First, the hero, who is typically a husband or a lover, is sent away to a foreign land. Second, the hero is unable to return for several years, and there follows a long description of the painful separation between the lover and his beloved, and their longing for each other. Third, in some versions, the heroine sends a message to her beloved, which may or may not reach her. In other versions, although the hero struggles to find his way back to the beloved, it takes a long time for him to be able to return to her. Fourth, the heroine gives up her life, and the hero too commits *satī* or dies in a different way.

The structural organization and episodic movement of the plots of all story cycles mentioned above – which is a very modest sampling of some representative story cycles in western India – expose how deeply *'Išq-nāma* resonated with the folkloric traditions of South Asia. Thematically as well, Sijzī Dihlawī was relying on a thriving culture of commemorating both *satī* performances as well as the construction and renovation of wells by elite and affluent members of the society. The memorialization of *satī* incidents was a recurring phenomenon in both textual and material cultures of South Asia in the 13th and 14th centuries. Its presence in the material culture is attested by several *satī* pillars that have survived the onslaught of time. Four *satī* inscriptions in Nāgarī script are particularly notable insofar as they document the history of *satī* in the 14th century: i) Ajaygaḍh Fort Slab Inscription engraved on 1308 (No. 2.51), ii) Ajaygaḍh Sati Inscription on 20 July 1311 (No. 2.52), iii) Son Stone Inscription on 12 August 1352 (No. 2.64), and iv) Agra Inscription on 9 July 1369 (No. 2.69) (Prasad 1990, pp. xxx, 155, 169). *Satī* remained a persistent theme in oral and literary narratives as well, and its presence in the epics of *Pābujī* and *Ālhā Khaṇḍa* is specifically relevant in exploring Sijzī Dihlawī's choice of themes in *'Išq-nāma*.

Similarly, the construction and renovation of wells and tanks were regularly commissioned by affluent members of the society, and commemorated in their inscriptions. Five inscriptions in Nāgarī script are of special interest insofar as their construction took place in the vicinity of Delhi during 13th and 14th centuries: i) Palam

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Baoli Inscription constructed on 13 August 1276 (No. 1.4); ii) Delhi Museum Stone Inscription on 5 February 1291 (No. 1.5); iii) Naraina Stone Inscription on August 6, 1327 (No. 1.10); iv) Sarban Stone Inscription on February 16, 1328; and v) Rock Inscription at Ajaygaḍh Fort on April 14, 1261 (No. 2.24) (Prasad 1990, pp. xxviii, 3, 15, 101). The Palam Baoli Inscription is particularly interesting because it was constructed when Sijzī Dihlawī was about twenty-three years old. This inscription compares the well to a beautiful and full-bosomed lady (*pīnottuṅga payodharā*) who quenches the thirst of many love-smitten swains (*tṛṣṇā bhrāmyādanekakāmuka*) and subsequently alleviates the suffering of masses at large (*janakleśapraśāntipradā*) (*śloka* 27). In a similar strain, the Ajaygaḍh inscription too associates its well with ostensibly feminine attributes and virtues. In sync with this popular trend, Sijzī Dihlawī too feminizes the well of Nagaur in an attempt to intensify its aesthetic value in *ʿIšq-nāma*. Thus, the pupil of the well's eye – its deep source of water – is as dark and attractive as the curls of the beloved, and the water in the well appears as the tears shed by unfulfilled and passionate lovers in pursuit of their beloved (*bayt* 71, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, p. 560).

One may still question the historicity and tenacity of epigraphical, codicological and folkloric evidence, and posit all connections and concurrences existing between *ʿIšq-nāma* and the textual and material cultures of 13th and 14th centuries in South Asia as unintentional, accidental and somewhat tentative. Besides, the reification of oral and folkloric traditions is always incomplete and ever evolving, they are not necessarily predisposed to fixity and immutability, and they are usually prone to change and innovation. Yet whatever evidence exists regarding their formulation in history, they seem to resonate with – if not comply with – the structural and episodic movement of Indic folklore. *ʿIšq-nāma* bears their imprint as if they belonged to the same family of narrative compositions.

While there is no denying that Sijzī Dihlawī composed *ʿIšq-nāma* for devout listeners and Sufi enthusiasts, it is evident from its panegyric sections that he keenly wished to impress courtly and elite audiences too. In this regard, he was aware that his retelling would not be approved by some conservative and orthodox members of his audience. He feared they would disapprove of his interest in the Hindu folklore and *satī* rituals, and they would fault him for portraying an amorous tale of non-Muslim, hence faithless (*bīdīnān*), people (*bayt* 576, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, p. 580). Consequently, when Sijzī Dihlawī reaches the final section of his composition, he responds to his

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prospective critics by arguing emphatically that the true essence of love transcends the bounds of both language and religion (*bayt*s 578 and 579, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, p. 580). Apart from offering his counter argument, Sijzī Dihlawī scrupulously adheres to the generic and aesthetic conventions of Persian *maṯnawī* in his literary style and narration. He spins the yarn of *ʿIšq-nāma* in such a way that it readily resonates with popular Sufi narratives in the Persianate world. As a result, even though the story of *ʿIšqnāmā* is set in Nagaur, a historic city of Rajasthan, its plot can be more reminiscent of Niẓāmī's *Laylā wa Majnūn* than a Rājasthānī folklore to a Persianate audience.

To make Rājasthānī folklore amenable to the *maṯnawī* genre, Sijzī Dihlawī had to elide some of the signal elements of the oral tradition. For instance, one rarely comes across a Rājasthānī folktale in which the hero remains unnamed and his pedigree unexplained. Likewise, one seldom witnesses a scene in which the heroine is stubbornly disinclined to reveal her name to her beloved. If ever a heroine evades her identity in a Rājasthānī folktale, it is typically because she is not interested in consummating her relationship with the hero, or because she needs to hide her real nature (as she may need to conceal her accursed past, and/or her magical and supernatural powers). The heroine of *ʿIšq-nāma* exhibits no such tendencies and attributes – she does not have an accursed past, she has no magical abilities, and she is so deeply in love with the Muslim boy that she is willing to consummate her extramarital relationship with him, and yet she chooses not to reveal her name to her beloved. Indeed, while Rājasthānī folklore abound in names, genealogies and listings of diverse kind of entities, *ʿIšq-nāmā* remains acutely devoid of names and lists. The only Rājasthānī name that appears in the narrative belongs to the city of Nagaur. Furthermore, while Brahmins and Hindus populate its narrative and affect the turn of events in its plot, they hardly ever reveal peculiar markers of their cultural, religious and literary backgrounds. There are two moments in the narrative when the poet refers to Hindu customs (*bayts* 405 and 431, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, pp. 573-574), but he makes no attempt to describe them in any significant detail. All the while, he uses commonplace details about Hindu funeral customs, and defamiliarizes them to articulate Sufi views on love, truth and life (for example, *bayts* 431 to 435, Sijzī Dihlawī 1383/2004, p. 574). By effacing identifiable details of Rājasthānī folklore and distinct Hindu customs, Sijzī Dihlawī transforms a local folklore into a narrative that is pliable to the global generic conventions of Persian *maṯnawī*.

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On the basis of the structural, thematic and metaphorical concurrences and connections between *ʿIšq-nāma*, on one hand, and the oral, textual and material cultures of 13th and 14th centuries on the other, one may begin to appreciate the subtle art of Sijzī Dihlawī as he sought to negotiate literary, aesthetic and cultural differences between the Persianate and South Asian narrative traditions. It is the first known instance in Persian literature when an oral tale set in Rajasthan was being recast in the *maṯnawī* genre. In this regard, Sijzī Dihlawī had no reliable precedent that would serve as his guide. About fifteen years later, Amīr Ḥusraw embarked on a similar venture in *Dival Ranī Ḫiżr Ḫān* (715/1315). Their compositions together would pave the way for the next generation of poets to engage in similar intercultural exchange and experimentation, and to create most notably, a congenial environment for the rise of Sufi *premākhyān*s and *prema-kahānī*s in Awadhi and Hindi literatures.

Manuscript: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ouseley 122, 292 ff., **ii)** 20 *šawwāl* 862/9 September 1458, **iii)** Muḥammad ibn Ilyās, **viii)** Éthe 1889, pp. 564-565.

Illustrated manuscript: Hyderabad, Salar Jung Museum and Library, *adab* 325, 275 ff., **i)** Deccan, **ii)** 943/1536-1537, **iii)** Pīr Ḥusayn al-Kātib al-Šīrāzī, **vi)** seven illustrations in the Indo-Persian style of 16th century.

Legend: i) Place of copying; ii) Period of copying; iii) Copyist; iv) Commissioner; v) Information on colophon; vi) Description of miniatures/illustrations; vii) Other remarks; viii) Information on catalogue(s)

Lithograph: *Dīwān-i Ḥasan Sijzī Dihlawī*, Masʿūd ʿAlī Maḥwī - Kišan Prashād, ed., Hyderabad, Maktaba-i Ibrāhīmiya Mašīn Press, 1352/1933-1934, pp. 623 + iv (erratum).

Editions: *Dīwān-i Ḥasan-i Dihlawī: sada-yi haftum wa haštum*, Sayyid Aḥmad Bihištī Šīrāzī - Ḥamīd Riżā Qalīch Ḫānī, ed., Tehran, Mūʾassasa-yi Chāp wa Intišārāt-i Dānišgāh-i Tihrān, 1383/2004, pp. 684 + liv. *Dīwān-i Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī Dihlawī*, Nargis Jahān, ed., New Delhi, Intišārāt-i Ḥażrat Muhānī Foundation, 2004, pp. 855. *Dīwān*, Lola Salomatshoeva, ed., Dushanbe, ʿIrfān, 1990, pp. 500 + xxxii + xix.

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