



# 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](http://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](mailto:fabrizio.speziale@ehess.fr)

## *Zayn al-aḥbār*

Nothing is known of ‘Abd al-Ḥayy ibn Żaḥḥāk Gardīzī, the author of this work, aside from what is mentioned in the text itself. The book’s title comes from the epithet (*Zayn al-Milla*) of the Ġaznavid sultan ‘Abd al-Rašīd ibn Maḥmūd (r. 440-443/1049-1052), to whom it is dedicated. The condition of the only two known manuscripts has left the organization of the text unclear. In the first complete edition of the text, by Ḥabībī (Gardīzī 1347/1968), it is divided into 19 sections, the first five of which, describing the ancient Persian kings, are entitled generations (*tabaqa*). The rest are called chapters (*bāb*), containing accounts of the following: the early Muslim caliphate, including the governors of Khurasan (vi-vii); calendars and festivals (viii-ix); Jewish festivals (x-xi); Christian festivals (xii); Magian festivals (xiii-xiv); Indian festivals (xv-xvi); information (*ma’ārif*) on the Turks (xvii); information on the Greeks (xviii); information on the Indians (xix).

The second editor to take on this task, Rizā-zāda Malik (Gardīzī 1384/2005, pp. lvi-lxv), proposed an alternative organization based on internal evidence, consisting of three discourses (*maqāla*) and thirty chapters (*bāb*), as follows: an introduction to history (discourse i); the creation and the prophets (i-iii); Chaldean kings (iv-v); Persian kings (vi-vii), with chapter vii further divided into five generations; caliphs (viii-ix), governors of Khurasan (x-xi); Samanids and Yamīn al-Dawla (xii-xiii); disentangling four different histories (xiv); calendars and festivals (discourse ii); Muslim festivals (xv-xvi); Jewish festivals (xvii-xviii); Christian festivals (xix-xx); Magian ifestivals (xxi-xxii); Indian festivals (xxiii-xxiv); knowledge of the four non-Iranian peoples (discourse iii); the state of the four non-Iranian peoples (xxv); information (*ma’ārif*) on the Turks (xxvi), information on the Greeks (xxvii); information on the Indians (xxviii); information on the Africans (xxix); notices of physicians (xxx). The arguments for this arrangement are persuasive.

Gardīzī, as a native of Khurasan, has an expansive view of Iran, remarking that “Mecca, Medina, the Hejaz, Yemen, Iraq, Khurasan, Nimruz, and part of Syria, are called ‘Iran’ in Persian” (Gardīzī 1347/1968, p. 544; Gardīzī 1384/2005, p. 368). He maintains that God made this region more excellent than any other place, so therefore it is not customary for Iranians to serve those from other regions; indeed, the reverse is the case. While Iran is at the heart of this book, the author acknowledges that it is useful to know about the peoples of the four adjoining regions, assigning the Turks to the north, the Indians to the east, the Africans to the south, and the Greeks to the west.

Gardīzī’s treatment of India begins with the two chapters on Indian festivals (Gardīzī 1347/1968, p. 528-543). Calendars are first presented as charts (*jadwal*) and then briefly described. Gardīzī based his cursory account of Indian festivals on the work of Bīrūnī (Bīrūnī 1888, pp. 178-184), whom he claimed as a personal acquaintance. He regards festivals as largely commemorative, whether happy or sad. The 28 festivals listed by Gardīzī clearly draw upon the 37 given by Bīrūnī (Verdon 2019, pp. 69-71), but not all have been fully identified and matched with Sanskrit names of known Hindu festivals; the most recent attempts (Akbarzadeh -- Shukla 2014, Verdon 2019) still leave some puzzling terms unexplained, which is perhaps unsurprising, in view of the antiquity of the information and its largely oral sources.

From a religious point of view, it is noteworthy that some festivals honor the goddess Gauri or Bhagavati, such as Āśvayuja 8. These festivals are listed in Persian under the following names: *mahānaḥamī* (Sanskrit *mahānavamī*); Caitra 22, *čītar jašt* (Sanskrit *caitra-ṣaṣṭhī*); Vaiśākha 3, *gaurtar* (Sanskrit *gaurī tṛtīya*); Mārgaśīrṣa 3, *govān bātrīj*; and Māgha 3, *hatrīj* (Sanskrit *haratrīj*). Other festivals are devoted to Mahādeva (Śiva), such as Phālguna 15, Sanskrit *śivarātri*; or to Vāsudeva (Krishna), like Caitra 11, *hindūlī* (Sanskrit *hindolā*); Āśvayuja 16, *puhāy*; Bhādrapada 11, *barbat* (Sanskrit *pārvatī*); Bhādrapada, *gūnālahīd* (three days for Krishna’s birthday); Kārttika 1, *dīwālī* (Sanskrit *dīpāvalī*). Yet other festivals are of a seasonal nature, often characterized by fun and celebration, with frequent reference to women’s participation and feeding brahmans.

Gardīzī’s account of the religions of India in chapter xxviii (or chapter xix in Ḥabībī’s edition, Gardīzī 1347/1968, pp. 612-643) is one of many that were based largely on a report prepared by an ambassador to India appointed by the ‘Abbāsīd minister Yaḥya al-Barmakī around 800. Authors transmitting much the same materials,

all in Arabic, include Ibn al-Nadīm in the *Fihrist*, Ibn Ḥūrdādbih, Jayhānī (Gardīzī’s immediate source), Muṭahhar ibn Ṭāhir Maqdisī, al-Marwazī, Ibn Rūsta, and other geographers and heresiographers (Šahrastānī) who were dependent on them (Minorsky 1942, p. 125). Gardīzī is the first of these geographers to write in Persian. Bīrūnī had criticized these authors for perpetuating errors by copying them, rather than doing original research as he did. There are indeed significant problems in the transmission of Indian names and terms in these texts, only some of which can be resolved by comparison. There is also some confusion in matters of classification, particularly with the question of where to put the Buddhists. But these materials have some value, because they reflect conditions in India at a fairly early date.

The chapter on religions begins with a preface devoted to a description of seven hereditary castes of the Indians, followed by a detailed account of their talismans and charms (*afsūn*), which are famous for their thaumaturgic power and efficacy in matters such as snakebite. This section is characterized by the use of explanatory Islamicate terminology, particularly in the term *wahm*, usually translated as “imagination.” But there is reason to think that this refers specifically to the “estimative faculty” according to Avicenna, which is endowed with occult power that can work miracles. This was theorized extensively by Faḥr al-Din Rāzī in his philosophical writings, and it seems to be this framework that is consistently used by Muslim authors in their accounts of occult powers among the Indians (Noble 2020, pp. 136-154). No reference seems to be made to Indian theories on the subject.

After remarks on Indian achievements in the sciences and weapons, and comments on several Indian cities, Gardīzī turns to the overall classification of Indian religions (*millat*; Marvazī here adds *ahwā’*, “opinions”) offered in the ambassador’s report. He states that there are 99 “groups” (*firqā*), further divisible into 42 “teachings” (*madḥab*; Marvazī has *naw’*, “kind, type”). These are ultimately resolved into four “foundations” (*asās*), basically consisting of Islamic theological categories: (1) those who affirm the Creator, the prophets, and reward and punishment in the afterlife; (2) those who reject prophets; (3) those who affirm the Creator and the eternity of the afterlife; and (4) those who maintain that reward and punishment is accomplished through reincarnation. The overlapping of these four categories seems to indicate some confusion in Gardīzī’s account, which places the Buddhists (*šamaniyya*) in both categories 2 and 4. Marvazī’s more systematic version makes more sense and probably reflects the original formulation: (1) those who affirm both the Creator and

prophets; (2) those who affirm the Creator but reject prophets; (3) those who reject both Creator and prophets; and (4) those who affirm that reward and punishment are accomplished through endless reincarnation. Neither of these four-fold classifications maps clearly onto the groups that are actually described.

Gardīzī then presents brief accounts of the principal deities of the Hindus, characterizing them as angels sent by the Creator to act as prophets, and providing details about their iconographic representations and the rituals of their devotees. This section corresponds to the first of the four “foundations” of Indian religions just described. It covers four groups: the worshippers of Vasudeva (Krishna), Mahadev (Shiva), the Kapalika ascetics (also devotees of Shiva), and Rama. This is followed by a second section continuing the four-fold classification, those who affirm the Creator but reject prophets; this begins with the Buddhists, followed by two types of philosophically minded thinkers.

At this point, the four-fold theological classification becomes indistinct, with a total of 26 entries, usually introduced with the formula, “and there is another group” (*gurūh*). While some of these descriptions remain obscure, they include ascetics who wear iron, the Ganges pilgrims, idol makers, worshippers of Mahakala, the goddess (bhagavati), worshippers of fire and water, and sun and moon. The remaining items are mainly extreme ascetics, such as graveyard dwellers, bovine ascetics who eat grass, silent sages, those who abandon walking, and Jains (*sīdra* should be read as *sīwṛā*). The last groups mentioned are those who commit suicide by self-immolation, heated stones, disembowelment, cutting off their own limbs, sitting in dung, starving themselves, leaping onto sharpened tridents, being cut in half by others, or being eaten by birds.

The overall effect of Gardīzī’s account of Indian religions is that of second-hand description in which the exotic plays a prominent role, and the deeper levels of understanding are obscured by imperfect transmission of earlier materials. Nevertheless, this remains a useful example of the perspective of an Iranian scholar who viewed India from a position of assuming the cultural and religious centrality of Persianate Islam.

**Manuscripts:** **Cambridge**, Cambridge University, King's College Library, King's Pote 213, ff. 209, **ii**) 1093/1682, **viii**) Browne 1922, no. 743. **Oxford**, Oxford

University, Bodleian Library, MS. Ouseley 240, ff. 262, **ii**) 21 dū al-ḥijja 1196/27 November 1782, **viii**) Sachau — Ethé 1889, col. 9, no. 15.

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)

**Editions:** *Zayn al-aḥbār*, **Editor:** Muḥammad Qazvīnī, Tehran, Kitābhāna-i Adab, 1315/1937, pp. 107. *Zayn al-aḥbār*, **Editor:** ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī, Tehran, Bunyād-i Farhang, 1347/1968, Reprint 1363/1984, Tehran, Dunyā-i Kitāb *Zayn al-aḥbār*, **Editor:** Raḥīm Rizāzāda Malik, Tehran, Anjuman-i Ātār va Mafāḥir-i Farhangī, 1384/2005, pp. 733.

**Arabic translation:** *Kitāb Zayn al-aḥbār*, Muḥammad ibn Tāwīt, Fes, Maṭba‘at Muḥammad al-Ḥāmis al-Jāmi‘īya wa-al-Ṭaqāfiya, 1972.

**Arabic translation:** *Kitāb Zayn al-aḥbār*, ‘Affāf Sayyid Zaydān, Cairo, Dār al-Ṭibā‘a al-Muḥammadiya, 1984.

**English translation:** *The ornament of histories: A history of the Eastern Islamic lands AD 650-1041*, Edmund Bosworth, London, I.B. Tauris, 2011.

**English translation:** “Gardīzī on India,” Vladimir Minorsky, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 12, No. 3/4, pp. 625-640, 1948.

**Secondary sources bibliography:** Akbarzadeh, Daryoosh — Shukla, Narayan S., 2014, “Gardizi’s History: Sanskrit Terms and Expressions of Hinduism,” *Zinbun* 44, pp. 1-11. **Bīrūnī**, Abū Rayhān, 1888, *Alberuni’s India*, trans. Edward C. Sachau, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. **Browne**, Edward Granville, 1922, *A Supplementary Hand-List of the Muhammadan Manuscripts, Including All Those Written in the Arabic Character, Preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, Cambridge, University Press. **Lawrence**, Bruce B., 1976, *Shahrastānī on the Indian religions*, The Hague, Mouton. **Minorsky**, V., 1942, *Sharaf al-Zamān Ṭāhir Marvazī on China, the Turks and India*, London, The Royal Asiatic Society. **Noble**, Michael Sebastian, 2020, *Philosophising the Occult: Avicennan Psychology and ‘The Hidden Secret’ of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, Berlin, Boston, De Gruyter. **Sachau**, Eduard — **Ethé**, Hermann, 1889, *Catalogue of the Persian, Turkish, Hindūstānī, and Pushtū manuscripts in the Bodleian Library*, Oxford; at the Clarendon Press. **Shahrastani**, 1986, *Livre des religions et de sectes*, trans. Jean Jolivet — Guy Monnot, Paris, Peeters/

Carl W. Ernst  
*Zayn al-aḥbār*

UNESCO. **Verdon**, Noémie, 2019, “Indian Calendar and Festivals through al-Bīrūnī’s Eyes,” *East-West Encounter in the Science of Heaven and Earth*, Kyoto, Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University, pp. 63-81.

**Carl W. Ernst**

Originally published: 30 novembre 2023

How to quote this article:

Ernst, Carl W., 2023, "Zayn al-aḥbār", *Perso-Indica. An Analytical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions*, F. Speziale - C. W. Ernst - E. Orthmann, eds., available at [http://www.perso-indica.net/work/zayn\\_al-ahbar](http://www.perso-indica.net/work/zayn_al-ahbar).

ISSN: 2267-2753

© 2010 Perso-Indica. All rights reserved