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## **Sanskrit: A language of Science and Spirituality in the light of Arabic and Persian Translations**

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### **Abstract**

*The foundation of Indian culture is based on the Sanskrit language. It has enriched our society from time immemorial. Today many nations are trying to research Sanskrit writings which are there in our ancient scriptures. There is a wealth of knowledge available in Sanskrit which scientists and technologists are discovering today. Sanskrit is the foundation of Vedic literature and the Vedic literature held universal spiritual knowledge. Even the Puranas, which are considered to be the interplanetary histories and elaborations of the spiritual knowledge of the Vedic samhitas, such as the Rig, Sama, Atharva, and Yajur Vedas, all these are said to be universal in nature. The translations from Sanskrit into Arabic and Persian offer a particularly promising ground for examining Muslim approaches to Indian culture and philosophy. Translation movement between the Indian and Islamic cultures is still poorly studied. This paper is a humble attempt to clarify the significance of this translation movement. In this paper, I will also try to delineate the role of Sanskrit Literature in shaping the science subjects into Arabic Literature as well as evaluate its mystical influence on Persian Literature in developing the spirituality.*

**Key Words:** *Sanskrit language, Indian Culture, Science, Medicine, spirituality*

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**Introduction:** There is a misconception about the Sanskrit language that it is only a language for chanting mantras in temples or religious ceremonies. However, that is less than 5% of the Sanskrit literature. More than 95% of the Sanskrit literature has nothing to do with religion, and instead it deals with philosophy, law, science, literature, grammar, phonetics, interpretation etc. In fact, Sanskrit was the language of free thinkers, who questioned everything, and expressed the widest spectrum of thoughts on various subjects. In particular, Sanskrit was the language of our scientists in ancient India. Today, no doubt, we are behind the Western countries in science, but there was a time when India was leading the whole world in science. Knowledge of the great scientific achievements of our ancestors and our scientific heritage will give us the encouragement and moral strength and once again it will take India to the forefront of science in the modern world. All mystic tradition tried to comprehend divinity, universe and life from personal subjective and individual perspectives. Spirituality does not need to follow any particular religion. Customs and rituals are only the outer form of religion. Spirituality is, however, seeking the truth and self-realization that is a matter of heart which is same in each and every individual.

**Arabic Translations from Sanskrit literature:** The early Arabic translations from Sanskrit were in scientific works on Mathematics, Medicine, Toxicology, Astronomy, Physics and Chemistry. A number of Sanskrit works were translated during the Abbasside period in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> A well-known result of this scientific exchange was the transmission on Indian numerals and the zero notions which was later known in Europe as Arabic numbers. The same practical characteristic of some of the early translations from Sanskrit into Persian commissions by the Turkish Sultans of Delhi Sultanate. For example, when Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq besieged the hill of fortress of Nagarkot, Kangara in 1365, and his army raided and plundered nearby temples and acquired a library of thirteen hundred Sanskrit books. Out of this, only a single book on Natural Philosophy was translated into Persian under the title of *Dala'il Firoz Shahi (The Demonstrations of King Firoz)*. This work contained elements of astronomy and divination. A historian in the Mughal period commented it a very useful book containing various philosophical facts both of science and practice.<sup>2</sup> Bada'uni, a learned man of his time perused the same work in Lahore in 1591, found it moderately good and said that a number of books had been translated from Sanskrit during the period of Firoz Shah Tughlaq but most of them are profitless like on the subject of music and dance.<sup>3</sup> The single Muslim Scholar who took sustained interest in Indian religious and philosophical text was the great scientist and philosopher of his time al- Bairuni. He translated a number of Sanskrit works into Arabic including selection from Patanjali's *Yogasutras* and *Bhagavad Gita* in his encyclopedic treatise on India.<sup>4</sup> No other Arabic translator followed the foot step of al- Bairuni except al Sharastani a learned man of his time as a specialist on Indian religion and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Wilhem Halbfass has attempted to assess al Bairuni contribution he said: A clear awareness of his own religious horizon as a particular context of thought led him to perceive the "otherness" of the Indian religious philosophical context and horizon with remarkable clarity he did not translate the names of foreign deities; nor did he incorporate them with his own pantheon, and of course, he did not possess the amorphous "openness" of syncretism and the search for common denominators" that is why he could comprehend and appreciate the other, the foreign as such, schematizing and explicating in an essentially new manner the problems of intercultural understanding and the challenge of "objectivity" when shifting from one tradition to another, from one context to another."<sup>6</sup> Al- Bairuni perception of the otherness of Indian thought was not hermeneutical clarity with regard to preexisting division: It was the invention of the concept of a unitary Hindu religion and Philosophy.

Al- Bairuni translation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* was based on combination of the original text plus a commentary that is still not identified, all rephrased by al- Bairuni into a question and answer format. Al- Bairuni rendered the Sanskrit "gods" (deva) with Arabic terms for angels (Mala'ikah) or spiritual beings (Ruhaniyat, this is surely a theologian shift amounting to translation. He was convinced a deep level that Sanskrit text were saturated with recognizable philosophical doctrines of reincarnation and union with God.<sup>7</sup> Al- Bairuni made deliberate and selective use of terms derived from Greek philosophy and Sufism to render the Sanskrit technical terms of *Yoga* but al-Bairuni's rationalistic approach to Indian religions remained isolated and almost forgotten, while his Arabic version of Patanjali was described incomprehensible.<sup>8</sup> There is some superficial reference to al-Bairuni's work on India and the Patanjali translation in the *Bayanul-Adyan (The Explanation of Religions)* today, both al-Bairuni works on India and his translation of patanjali exist in unique manuscripts. Al- Bairuni's rationalistic approach to religion is much more palatable to the modern test and clearly explains his popularity.

**Persian Translations from Sanskrit literature:** The early translations from Sanskrit into Arabic and Persian focused primarily on arts and sciences. Pre-Mughal translations of epics

texts from Sanskrit into Persian hardly found. A partial translation of the *Mahabharata* was done in the early of eleven century. In the beginning of fourteen century, the Bhagwd Gita and Purana appeared into a translated works. The political context for the Mughal interest in Sanskrit lies in the imperial program devised by Akbar and his successors. Akbar's sponsorship of the translation of Sanskrit works was part of the overall literary phase of his region, which included the regular reading aloud of works from canon of Persian court literature, history, and Sufism. Akbar desired that the book of the Mahabharata which contains the jewels of the goals should be translated with a clear expression. According to Imam Jafar Sadiq and Ibn al Arabi, the beginning of human being happened seven thousand year back. Therefore, Akbar decoded that this book which have the explanation of the antiquity of the universe must be translated in a language easy to understand.

The process of the translation between Sanskrit and Persian literary traditions can be glimpsed further in the case of Tahir Muhammad Sabzawari, an official in the court of Akbar, who made abridge translations of *Bhagabhata Purana*, The Mahabharata and its appendix *Harivamsa*.<sup>9</sup> Four years later, he wrote a world history of Persian literature and gave the name *Rawzat al-Tahereen*, the garden of the pure. He mentioned the Indian historical traditions selected from the Mahabharata and other Sanskrit epics.<sup>10</sup> One translated text that Abu al-Fazl specially refers to as religious incomplete version of the *Atharva Veda*. Another popular Sanskrit text, The *Singhasan Battisi*, the Thirty two tales of the Throne, about the ancient Indian king Vikramaditya, one of the Persian translation of this work present to Akbar was entitled *Shahnama*, the book of Kings.<sup>11</sup> In 1470, the ruler of Kashmir, Zainul Aabedeen translated Mahabharata into Persian along with Sanskrit metrical history of Kashmir. He was a patron of Sanskrit literature and commissioned the Sanskrit historian Srivra to translate Jami's romantic Persian epic on Yousuf and Zulekha into Sanskrit.<sup>12</sup>

**Metaphysical translations of Sanskrit Literature into Persian:** After the political phase of translation, we find a third kind of Persian translations from Sanskrit on works that we can say metaphysical or mystical translated works. These works are manifested as Vedantic philosophical provided by Indian Pandits. This was rephrased in their Sufi technical vocabulary and frequently amplifying their contents by the insertion of Persian mystical verses. Many Sanskrit works were translated by the companion of Akbar great son Dara Shikuh. Banwali Das, also known as Wali Ram produced a Persian translation *Probhodacandrodaya*, a Vedic theological allegory in dramatic form composed by Krishna Das in eleven century for the king of Chandela. This translation was entitled *Gulza-e- hal ya tulu'-e- qamar-e marifat*. meaning, *The Rose garden of Ecstasy, or The Rising of the Moon of Gnosis*. Banwali Das related it to classical India metaphysical works. Later he called it "Books of Sufism and Unity (*Tasawwuf wa Tawheed*) and text of Sufism."<sup>13</sup> Banwali Das had also a hand in translation of the shorter version of the Yoga Vasistha, treatise on Vedantic metaphysics which explains the nature of illusion and realities. Another scholar of his time Chandarbhan Brahman, translated a vedic work of Sankara, the Atama Vilasa, under the title *Nazuk Khayalat* meaning Subtle Imaginings.<sup>14</sup> There were other contemporary students of Indian mysticism outside the circle of Dara Shikuh who translated many Sanskrit literatures dealt with spirituality on Islamic Sufi line. Abdur Rahman Chisti, a learned man produced a Sufi interpretation of the Bhagvavad Gita under the title of *Mirat al-haqaiq*, "*The Mirror of realities*".<sup>15</sup> Nizamuddin Panipati translated Yoga Vasistha at the request of Jahangir in 1597. This translation was considered as a part of the encyclopedic collection edifying literature initiated by Akbar. This book "*Yoga Vasistha*" contains mystical thought "*Tasawwuf*" and provides commentary on realities, diverse moral, ethical and remarkable advice. Dara Shikoh himself supervised Persian translation more than fifty most important Indian scriptures, the Upanishad, under the title of *Sirr-e-Akbar*, "*The Greatest Mystery*". He

was also credited with a translation of *Bhagvad Gita* entitled “*Aab-e-Zindagi*” meaning “*The Water of life*”.<sup>16</sup> Dara Shikoh viewed the Upanishads as hermeneutically continuous with the Quran, providing an extended exposition of the divine unity that was indicated in the Arabic script. The most important contribution of Dara Shikoh is his comparative study of the Hinduism and Islam. He named his remarkable book “*Majma’al- Bahrain*”, “*The Meeting Palace of the two oceans*”. It is interesting to note that this Persian work has been translated into Arabic, Urdu and Sanskrit. There are a number of other literary phenomena besides the translations from Sanskrit that put a challenge the standard notion of fixed boundaries between Hinduism and Islam.

**Conclusion:** The translations from Sanskrit Literature into Arabic and Persian have a special importance. This translation process fall into four classes: practical arts and science, Political works, metaphysical or mystical treatises and works on Hindu religion and law commissioned by the British. In British colonial period, the Arabic and Persian translations from Sanskrit were viewed as representing Hindu religion as it is understood today. The translation metaphysical works of Sanskrit literature that accrued in different phases of the history explored the answers of those questions what already been raised in Vedantic texts and related to Islamic philosophical and mystical themes. Islam has been assimilated in Indian literature. Sufi Islam had many points in common with the Vedanta and Yoga and the essentials of higher Hinduism. The way of the Sufism was, therefore, easily successful in bringing to the Hindus a closer understanding of Islam and *vice versa*. Through Sufism, we find a considerable amount of spiritual understanding between Hindus and Muslims all over the country. The mystical dimension of Sanskrit literature had contributed significantly to enrich Indian cultural and religious legacy. The idea of *Wahda-tul- Wajood* and several techniques’ of mediation brought the Islamic mysticism very close to India religious traditions what already existed in Sanskrit Literature. The Aatma (Human Soul) and Parmatma (God) is the one and same, a theory similar to *Wahd –tul- Wajood*. The Sufis found much to learn from their Hindu counterparts such as Yoga which developed their mediation techniques.

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