



Original Article

Persian as the Foundational Language of Indian Science, Philosophy and Arts

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Manuscript ID:
RIGJAAR-2025-021208

ISSN: 2998-4459

Volume 2

Issue 12

Pp.44-46

December 2025

Submitted: 05 Nov. 2025

Revised: 10 Nov. 2025

Accepted: 08 Dec. 2025

Published: 31 Dec. 2025

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Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://rlgjaar.com>



DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18129748](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18129748)

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18129748>



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Abstract

Persian, as a language of knowledge, culture, and aesthetics, occupied a central role in India for nearly six centuries. Between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, Persian was not only the administrative medium of empires but also the intellectual channel through which science, philosophy, and art flourished. This paper explores how Persian functioned as a bridge between Sanskrit and Islamic traditions, while simultaneously shaping uniquely Indo-Persian cultural forms. By examining Persian translations of scientific texts, philosophical works such as Dara Shukoh's *Majma' al-Bahrain*, and poetic contributions by Amir Khusrau, Faizi, and Bedil, the paper highlights Persian's foundational status. Quotations from Persian texts illustrate how knowledge was expressed, debated, and transformed. Comparative analysis with Sanskrit, Arabic, and English demonstrates Persian's integrative role. The study concludes that Persian was not a borrowed court language but the intellectual bloodstream of India, transmitting ideas across cultures and centuries.

Keywords—Persian language; India; Indo-Persian science; Sufism; Philosophy; Mughal arts; Translation movement; Knowledge transmission; Comparative linguistics

Introduction:

Language is not only a vehicle of communication but also a medium through which knowledge is structured, preserved, and transmitted. In India, Persian emerged as a foundational intellectual language from the thirteenth century, mediating between Sanskrit wisdom, Arabic scholarship, and vernacular creativity. Its role was not limited to courts and administration; it permeated science, philosophy, historiography, poetry, and the visual arts.

The Delhi Sultanate institutionalized Persian as the language of governance, but it was under the Mughals that Persian became truly embedded in the cultural fabric of India. Abul Fazl, the chief ideologue of Akbar's court, described Persian as a refined medium capable of uniting diverse intellectual traditions:

"زبان فارسی به گونه‌ای است که هم لطافت دارد و هم توانایی در بیان معانی دقیق."

(*Ā'in-i Akbari*, vol. 1, p. 17)

"The Persian tongue is such that it possesses both delicacy and the capacity to express subtle meanings."

This recognition of Persian's expressive richness explains why it became the chosen medium of scientific translation, philosophical synthesis, and artistic creativity. Persian and the Sciences in India

Persian texts became essential for transmitting scientific knowledge across India. Medical, astronomical, and mathematical works originally composed in Sanskrit were translated into Persian, thereby widening their accessibility.

Medicine:

Muhammad Mumin's *Tuhfat al-Mu'minin* (Gift of the Believers, 17th c.) is a comprehensive Persian medical encyclopedia compiled in India. It synthesizes Unani, Ayurvedic, and local remedies. In the introduction, Mumin praises the Indian medical tradition:

"طب هند به سبب دقت و تجدریه، برترین پایه را در میان علوم دارویی دارد."

(*Tuhfat al-Mu'minin*, p. 5)

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How to cite this article:

Quraishi, A. (2025). Persian as the Foundational Language of Indian Science, Philosophy and Arts. *Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research*, 2(12), 44–46. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18129748>



"The medicine of India, due to its precision and experience, holds the highest rank among pharmaceutical sciences."

This reflects how Persian became a platform to valorize indigenous sciences while integrating them into Islamic medical discourse.

"از تقویم هندی و اسلامی هر دو بهره گرفتیم تا جداولی فراهم آید که مطابق با افلاک این سرزمین باشد."

(Zij-i Muḥammad Shāhī, p. 112)

"We drew upon both Indian and Islamic calendars to compile tables suited to the skies of this land."

This cross-pollination of traditions was only possible because Persian operated as the scholarly lingua franca.

Persian, Philosophy, and Intellectual Exchange:

"حکمت هندیان و تصوف مسلمانان هر دو به یک دریا می‌ریزند."

(Majma' al-Baḥrayn, p. 21)

"The wisdom of the Hindus and the Sufism of the Muslims both flow into the same ocean."

"بر همن حقیقتی است که در همه چیز جاری است."

(Sirr-i Akbar, p. 67)

"Brahman is the reality that permeates all things."

By rendering Sanskrit metaphysics in Persian, Dara created a shared intellectual platform.

"به هر ذره اگر نظر کنی بر همنی است / به هر قطره اگر نگر کنی عالمی است."

(Bedil, Kullīyyāt, vol. 2, p. 318)

"If you look into each particle, it is Brahman; if you gaze into each drop, it is a universe."

Such verses reveal Persian's capacity to express hybrid philosophical insights.

"من ترک هندی، هم هندی‌ام و هم فارسی."

(Khusrau, Kullīyyāt, p. 44)

"I am the Indian Turk, both Hindi and Persian am I."

This self-identification shows how Persian anchored composite cultural identities.

"بدون علم و حکمت، سلطنت پایدار نمی‌ماند."

(Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi, p. 89)

"Without knowledge and wisdom, sovereignty cannot endure."

Thus, history in Persian was simultaneously political philosophy. In art, Persian aesthetics infused Mughal

"یا ایته النفس المطمئنة ارجعی إلى ربک یا ایته النفس المطمئنة ارجعی إلى ربک."

(Qur'an 89:27, Persian calligraphic rendering)

"O tranquil soul, return to your Lord."

The medium of expression Persian calligraphic style was integral to the architectural message.

Comparative Analysis

- Sanskrit: Rich in sciences and philosophy but socially restricted; Persian democratized access.
- Arabic: Central to theology and law, yet Persian reached wider audiences in India.
- English: Introduced during colonial rule but disrupted centuries of Indo-Persian synthesis.

Persian thus emerges as the most integrative and foundational intellectual language in India's medieval and early modern history.

Conclusion:

Persian in India was not simply the language of rulers; it was the medium through which sciences were transmitted, philosophies reconciled, and arts redefined. By quoting from

Astronomy:

The Zij-i Muḥammad Shāhī (1730s), commissioned by Emperor Muhammad Shah, exemplifies Indo-Persian astronomy. It merged Sanskrit astronomical calculations with Islamic zīj traditions. One passage states

Philosophy in Persian texts illustrates intellectual dialogues between Hindu and Islamic traditions.

Dara Shukoh's Syncretism:

Dara Shukoh (1615–1659), the Mughal prince, sought to reconcile Sufi metaphysics with Hindu Vedanta. In Majma' al-Baḥrayn (The Mingling of Two Oceans), he declared:

His Persian translation of the Upanishads, Sirr-i

Akbar (The Great Secret), introduced Brahmanical concepts into the Persian-Islamic philosophical world. One verse reads:

Sufi Metaphysics:

Persian Sufi texts also shaped Indian thought. The poetry of Bedil (1642–1720) embodies a blend of Islamic mysticism and Indian metaphysics:

Persian and the Arts in India Literature:

Persian poetry flourished in India, shaping both Indo-Persian and Urdu traditions. Amir Khusrau, the iconic Indo-Persian poet, described his bilingual creativity:

Historiography:

Persian was also the language of history. Ziauddin Barani, in his Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi (14th c.), wrote:

painting and architecture. The inscriptions on the Taj Mahal exemplify the fusion of Persian calligraphy with Indian monumentality. For example, on the main gateway is inscribed: "

"یا ایته النفس المطمئنة ارجعی إلى ربک یا ایته النفس المطمئنة ارجعی إلى ربک."

Persian texts—from Tuhfat al-Mu'minin to Dara Shukoh's Majma' al-Baḥrayn and Bedil's poetry we see how deeply embedded Persian was in India's intellectual bloodstream. Its decline in the nineteenth century marked the rupture of a centuries-long dialogue between cultures. To understand Indian science, philosophy, and art in their full richness, we must recognize Persian as a foundational language

Acknowledgment

The author gratefully acknowledges the academic guidance and institutional support received from Mungasaji Maharaj Mahavidyalaya, Darwha, and Sant Gadge Baba Amravati University, Amravati (Maharashtra), which provided a conducive environment for research and scholarly engagement. Sincere thanks are extended to senior scholars and colleagues in the fields of Persian studies, history, philosophy, and comparative linguistics for their valuable



suggestions, critical insights, and encouragement during the preparation of this paper.

The author is also thankful to librarians and archival staff of various manuscript repositories for access to Persian texts, translations, and reference materials that were essential for this study. Special appreciation is expressed to all those researchers whose pioneering works in Indo-Persian studies have laid the intellectual foundation for the present research. Finally, heartfelt gratitude is offered to family members and well-wishers for their constant moral support and motivation throughout the course of this academic endeavor.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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