

Thinking of language and the language of thought: exchanges in early modern Sanskrit astronomy

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BEGINNING FROM THE LATE MEDIEVAL PERIOD of Indian history, Islamicate (Arabic and Persian) and Sanskrit astral sciences exchanged ideas in complex discourses shaped by the power struggles of language, culture, and identity. The practice of translation played a vital role in transporting science across the physical and mental realms of an ever-changing society. At the Mughal courts (1526–1857), Sanskrit scholars and their Persianate counterparts—along with a newly emergent class of bilingual interpreters—jostled for imperial sponsorship and employment opportunities at the royal translation bureaus (*maktab khāna*). In this competing and cosmopolitan society, Sanskrit astronomers truly began engaging with Greco-Islamicate ideas, and the language, logic, and structure of their arguments shaped subsequent discourses on foreign ideas (*yavana-mata*) in Sanskrit astronomy.

In this talk, I explore the language with which Nityānanda, a seventeenth-century Hindu astronomer at the Mughal court of Emperor Shāh Jahān, translated into Sanskrit the Persian astronomical text *Zīj-i Shāh Jahānī* “The tables of Shāh Jahān” (ca. 1629/30) of his Muslim colleague Mullā Farīd. Nityānanda’s works, the *Siddhāntasindhu* “The Ocean of *Siddhāntas*” (ca. early 1630s) and the *Sarvasiddhāntarāja* “The King of all *Siddhāntas*” (1639), are an example of how sacred tradition, secular innovation, and scientific rationalism express themselves in the language of early modern Sanskrit mathematical poetry.