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Parsi Sanskrit

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Abstract: Following the fall of the Sassanian Empire by the Arab conquerors in 651 AD and after the gradual expansion of Islam in the Iranian-speaking territories, a group of the Iranian Zoroastrians migrated to India, mainly to Gujarat, in the 10th century AD. These new-comers, now known as the Parsis of India, soon produced translations of their religious texts from Middle Persian into Sanskrit and thence into Gujarati. The main figure in translating Middle Persian religious texts into Sanskrit was the celebrated Zoroastrian high-priest Nēryōsang, son of Dhaval, who most probably flourished in the first half of the 14th century AD. Nēryōsang's Sanskrit is a sort of non-classical mediaeval Sanskrit, which can be best called Parsi Sanskrit. Parsi Sanskrit is also represented by a few other Zoroastrian priests including Ākō Adhyārū, Dinidārū Bahman and Mobed Chāndā.

Almost all Parsi Sanskrit texts are translations of Zoroastrian religious texts from Middle Persian. These translations had as their goal to convey the meaning of the original Middle Persian to believers in an environment in which comprehension of Middle Persian was constantly decreasing. It was important for the translator to maintain the words in the same sequence as that of the Middle Persian, so that the translation would truly reflect the original text. In other words, Parsi Sanskrit translations were evidently not meant to be read for themselves, rather they functioned as a key for understanding the Middle Persian original. Hence Parsi Sanskrit is a type of Iranicised Sanskrit which, in some cases, cannot be fully understood without a basic knowledge of Middle Persian.

In Parsi Sanskrit a noun is occasionally used in a different gender, or a verb in a different class of conjugation, from that which is generally employed in Classical Sanskrit. Another important characteristic of Parsi Sanskrit is its avoidance of using the word *deva-* to refer to god, since in the Iranian religious tradition the ancient Indo-Iranian **daivás* were introduced as 'false gods' and 'demons'.

In this paper, the most important distinctive phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical characteristics of Parsi Sanskrit will be discussed and exemplified.