

Iranian Languages and Scripts

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This article aims to investigate the Iranian languages and their changes during history, especially Persian language or Farsi. In addition to the languages, Persian scripts and their developments have been studied. Meanwhile, Persian literature with its glorious and famous poets, who composed excellent and brilliant poems in different periods, has been examined. Iran as a vast territory has had many different aspects during history, including different languages, scripts, nations and cultures; therefore, studying these aspects is of great importance and interest. Due to the fact that many people and nations love the Persian language and literature, they are eager to become acquainted with them, and interested in knowing how this language has influenced and affected the neighboring countries and other cultures.

Key words: Iranian languages, scripts, Persian/Farsi language, Farsi script, Persian literature

Este artículo tiene como objetivo la investigación de las lenguas iraníes y los cambios que han sufrido durante la historia, en particular la lengua persa o farsi. Además de las lenguas, también se ha estudiado la escritura persa y su desarrollo; la literatura persa, con sus gloriosos y famosos poetas, autores de piezas brillantes y genuinas, ha sido examinada en diferentes periodos. Irán, al ser un vasto territorio, ha evidenciado diversos aspectos durante la historia tales como: distintas lenguas, escrituras, naciones y culturas; por tanto el estudiar estos aspectos es de gran importancia e interés. Debido a que un gran número de personas y naciones aprecian mucho la lengua y la literatura persa, existe un gran interés en conocerlas y en saber cómo esta lengua ha influenciado y afectado a sus países vecinos y a otras culturas.

Palabras Clave: lenguas iraníes, escritura, lengua persa

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Iranian languages are derived from Indo-Iranian/Aryan languages, which are branches of Indo-European languages. Iranian languages and scripts are a manifestation of culture and civilization of this large and vast country. The scholars have divided them into three periods in the course of time:

1. Ancient Iranian languages: Ancient languages contain Avestan and Old Persian whose written documents fortunately are also accessible at the present time. From Avestan, the book of Avesta has five sections. From the Old Persian there are inscriptions of Achaemenid kings. Usually, these inscriptions are trilingual i.e. Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian. To write the text of these inscriptions, they have used cuneiform.

2. Middle Iranian consists of six languages: Sogdian, Khotanese (Saka), Chorasmian, Bactrian, Parthian and Middle Persian. Sogdian, Khotanese (Saka), Chorasmian, and Bactrian belong to the eastern group of Middle Iranian languages and have written documents. Parthian and Middle Persian belong to the western group of Middle Iranian languages. They have written documents as well. Nowadays, Ancient Iranian and Middle Iranian languages are no longer in use.

3. New Iranian languages are as follows: Pashto, Pamirian, Yaghnabi and As / Ossetic, which belong to the eastern group of New Iranian languages. Pashto and Ossetic have written documents. New Persian/Farsi, Kurdish, and Baluchi belong to the western group of New Iranian languages. Of New Persian and Kurdish, written documents are accessible.

In addition to the use of different languages in Iran, various scripts have also been used in the cradle of civilization such as Din-dabireh/Avestan script, cuneiform/Old Persian script, and Aramdic script in the ancient period. The scripts of Sogdian, Brahmi, Chorasmian, Bactrian, Parthian, Middle Persian and Manichaeic in the Middle period and the scripts of Persian/Farsi, Arabic, Kufic, Hebrew and Syrilic in Ossetia in the New period.

Persian Language/Farsi

At the end of the Sassanid era, Pahlavi language/Middle Persian changed because of its combination and integration with other languages and local dialects. Then, after the invasion of Iran by Arabs and the influence of Arabic words, a new form of language was put into use and was called the Persian/Farsi language. Grammatically, in the beginning the formulas of Middle Persian governed it but gradually under the influence of Arabic grammar, it changed and the Persian grammar was formed. Nowadays, Persian grammar books are written on the basis of linguistic formulas. As we know, in the early Hegrid centuries, Persian was used in the spoken form in Iran; however, we are not aware of its written form and this is a matter of uncertainty and ambiguity for us. But, many written works in Persian existed at the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth century A.H.

Farsi became the official language from the time of the Saffavid dynasty, specially by the command of Yaghub-e-Layth, in the middle of the third century A.H. i.e. 254 and after that, all documents and its scripts were written in this language.

In the northeast of Iran, the Samanid dynasty supported and protected poets and authors who composed in Farsi like Rudaki, the poet. Laurorte of the Ghaznavid Kingdom also encouraged the poets and writers and gave them awards and prizes such as Unsori, Bayhaghi, etc.

In the period of the Turk dynasties like Seljuks, Kings of Chorasmia, Mongols and Timurids, Farsi was the official language. At that time, many Turkish words influenced Farsi, but this gradually decreased. In the Safavid era, because of the journeys poets took, Persian language and literature were developed in India. Indian poets and writers were concerned about it; therefore, some of the Indian kings such as Akbar, Humayun and Jahangir composed poems in Farsi. On the other hand, fights between kings of the Iranian and Ottoman empires caused the development of Persian language and literature in Anatolia (i.e. Turkey) to the Balkan Peninsula. Some of the Ottoman empires like Muhammad Fateh and Sultan Salim I also composed Persian poems.

Nadir Shah Afshar invaded the Indian Territory and occupied its northwestern regions, and this itself was the cause for the Persian language and literature to become eternal in India and paved the way for the establishment of the Ordu language in that country. Nowadays, a course of Persian language and literature is being taught in all

fields and university curricula throughout India and Pakistan. In the thirteenth century A.D., Amir Khusru of Delhi was the best Persian poet in India. In the contemporary period, Muhammad Eghbal Lahori, the great poet of Pakistan, composed his verses in the Persian language.

Since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, western tourists and orientalists have travelled to the eastern countries and become familiar with their languages and cultures. Some of them absorbed the culture and civilization of the eastern nations so much that they stayed there for years like Tavernier, Chardin and the Sherly brothers.

They have specially written diaries about Iran and its cities, such as Isfahan and Shiraz and introduced the cultures of Iran, India and China to the European people. Relations among the people of China, India and Iran increased and many orientalists travelled to these territories frequently. As a result, European words and terms, especially Russian, French and English, entered the Persian language. Furthermore, imports of industrial goods from developed countries to Iran were accompanied by new words.

At present, the Language Academy of Iran is getting involved in finding and choosing the equivalent words for them. Persian/Farsi is the official, scientific and literary language of Iran that has existed for more than ten centuries. It has naturally changed and other languages, local dialects and factors have affected it, but the sweet Persian language continues its life forever. In the contemporary period, the Persian language is officially current in Tajikistan called “Tajiki”, even in Samarkand and Bukhara, cities of Uzbekistan. In Afghanistan, the Persian language called Dari has come into use and become official; the poets compose the verses and the authors write the books in Farsi. Also, the Persian language has influenced the areas around the Caspian Sea and in Caucasus. Nowadays, more than one hundred million people speak Persian /Farsi and day by day the number of people interested in and fond of Persian language and literature increases in this vast area and throughout the world. As a result, university departments of Persian language and literature have been established and set up in most countries. Governments and nations, interested in getting familiar with the culture and civilization of Iran, especially with the Persian language and literature, among them, Colombia, have established and taught the Persian language for the first time.

Persian Script

Before Islam, the Pahlavi/Middle Persian script was used in Iran for writing religious texts and other books, and was continued until the fourth century A.H./tenth century A.D. With regard to the Arabic script, it is necessary to mention that, at first, Arabs of Basra were using the “Naskh” script and Arabs of Kufa, the “Kufic” script. Gradually, the use of the Kufic script became more common and also after the attack on Iran, this writing system was used for its specimens and treasures in museums. Little by little, the Arabic script was replaced by the Kufic script and documents were written in this script. Then, Iranians invented the “Naskh Taligh” script from the “Naskh” script and gradually called it “Nastaligh”. While the “Pahlavi” script was still in use in Iran, Iranians replaced the “Nastaligh” script with the name of “Farsi” script. The Persian script, like the Persian language, became official and public and they used it to write state documents, scientific and religious books and literary works. The Farsi script was shaped proportionally and in accordance with the sounds of the Farsi language. The phonemes such as p, ch, zh and g were added to the previous twenty eight letters and the number of letters of the Farsi alphabet increased to thirty two.

The Persian/Farsi script is not only used currently in Iran for writing different texts but is also used with some minor changes in Afghanistan. In Tajikistan, plans are under consideration to use the Syrilic script (derived from Russian script) to replace or be used in addition to the Farsi script. While the Farsi script was in use in Iran, a very advanced art of calligraphy was created which had various styles.

Persian Literature

With regard to the history of Persian literature, we elaborated on the “Avesta” and “Behistan inscription” in Old Persian language earlier. Perhaps we could say that the history of Iranian poetry begins with the book of Avesta, and Zoroaster is the first poet in ancient Iran. We are uninformed of the literature in the Arsacid/Parthian period; however, according to the view of scholars and, “Iranologists”, poetry books such as *Drakhte Asuri/Assyrian tree* and *Ves and Ramen*, a romantic story from the fifth century

A.H/ eleventh century A.D., have been composed. In addition, books such as *Yadgare Zareran/The Commemoration of Zarer* were compiled at the end of the Sassanian period but their contents belong to the Arsacid period. Also, the Manichaeon Hymns in the Parthian language, which were discovered from Turfan in the northwest of China, are among the literary works of that era. From the Sassanian period, in addition to the Zoroastrian texts, we are familiar with the beautiful and wonderful literary works like *Karnamage Ardashir e Babakan* and *Khusro Kavadan and redag/little boy*. The Persian literature of the post- Islamic era mainly contains verse and prose texts and each one of them has many types, such as Masnavi, Robaei/Quatrain, Ghaside/Elegy/ode, Ghazal/Lyric/ode about the structure and form of the poem; and Morsal/simple, Mowzun/Rhythmical, Mosajja/Rimed and Fanni/Artistic/Technical and Masnu/Artificial in the case of structure and form of the prose.

The durability and performance of Persian literature in more than ten centuries is divided into four periods for the ease of study and better recognition: 1. Persian literature after Arab sovereignty until the Mongols' attack. 2. Persian literature from the Mongols' attack until the reign of Safavid. 3. Persian literature from the Safavid era until the Ghajar period. 4. Persian literature in the reign of Ghajar and the contemporary period.

Persian Literature after Arab Sovereignty until the Mongols' Attack

The first Persian verses in this period were mainly composed in Khorasan in the middle of the ninth century and the beginning of the tenth century A. D. The poets like Asadi Tusi composed the poem "Garshasp name", and Daghighi Tusi composed the poem "Goshtasp name". Particularly, the Samanians' era in the fourth century of A.H./ the tenth century A.D. was the best period of Persian language and literature circulation and was filled with Iranian talent, art, soul and thought.

Poets such as Rudaki Samarghandi, Unsori Balkhi, Farrokhi Sistani and Ferdowsi Tusi are the best of this period. Among them, Rudaki Samarghandi, who died in 329 A.H., was the first great poet of Iran, master of elegy, composer/ode versifier and founder of Persian literature. He was titled the father of Persian poetry and is recognized as the master of poets. It is said that Rudaki composed more than one million couplets,

but, unfortunately, from this huge number only a few verses of his remain. The versified “Kalila va Demna” is his creation.

Abu'l Gasim Ferdowsi's (329/330-411/416 A.H.) birthplace was Bazh Village of Tus in Khurasan. He is the reviver of the name of Iran and Persian language, the biggest epic-composer poet of Iran and the creator of “Shah-name”. Shah-name is Iran's unparalleled epic and national story and is one of the largest literary masterpieces of Iran and the world. According to Ferdowsi, he composed the Shah-name in sixty thousand couplets over thirty years: “I labored too much in these thirty years, I revived Iranians by this Persian/Parsi”.

Fardowsi is one of the most brilliant stars of Iran's literature. By composing his eternal work, he revived the language, culture and history of Iran. The contents of Shah-name can be divided into three periods: 1. the mythical period, 2. the heroic period and 3. the historical period. Each chapter of Shah-name is related to the era of one king. The battles and lives of heroes, especially the world's hero, “Rostam of Dastan”, were accompanied by theism, patriotism, truthfulness and bravery everywhere. Its love stories such as “Zal va Rudaba”, “Rostam va Tahmina” and “Bizhan va Manizha” are very nice and fascinating. Jules Mohl, the French scholar/orientalist, labored forty years to translate Shah-name into French and introduce it to the European people.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D., Persian poetry was circulated in other regions of Iran and different types of poems, wise and philosophic verses with excellent thoughts and even mystical and love verses were developed. The theologian Naser Khusro Ghobadiani, who died in 481 A.H., is still considered as the most powerful poet and writer of the Persian language. His “Divan”/poetic work is full of philosophical and theological elegies/odes and thoughts. He also composed and wrote many different works.

The philosopher Omar Khayyam Nishapuri, who died in 517 A.H/12 A.D., was a great mathematician, astronomer and poet. He stated his high thoughts about the wonders of the creation of the world and secrets of human life by simple, sweet and fine Rubaeiyyat quatrains. The English poet, Edward Fitzgerald, translated his quatrains into English and made the high position of Khayyam known to the Europeans and other world readers.

Sanaiy Ghaznavi, who died in 535 A.H/12 A.D., was the first poet who integrated his poems with the subject of Sufism and mysticism. The masnavi of “Hadighatul Haghghat” is his famous work.

Nezami Ganjeiy/Ganjavi, who died in 614/619 A.H/ 13 A.D., is the biggest story-teller/poet of Farsi and is considered as the composer of the most beautiful banquet poems, lyrics and love stories. The Khamsa/Quintuple of Lanj Ganj/Five Treasures of Nezami is very famous and his romance stories “Khusro va Shirin” and “Layli va Majnun” have universally renowned fame. His masnavi “Makhzanul Asrar” begins with “O God, your name is the best start for everything. How can I open the letter without your name”?

Attar Nishapuri, who died in 618 A.H., was the best mystic poet of Iran before Mowlavi and the mystical poem “Manteghul Tayr” is his masterpiece. Mowlavi said in his praise: “Attar took a walk in the seven cities of love but we are still in the curve of one alley”. It is said that Khurasani’s style is the poetic style of poets in this period and the types of its verses are Ghasida/Elegy/Ode and Masnavi.

Persian Literature from the Invasion of the Mongols until the Safavid Era

The seventh to ninth centuries A.H./thirteen to fifteenth A.D. is called Mongols’ and Timurids’ era in Persian literature. In spite of the fact that murder, pillage and destruction reached their highest degree in this period, Persian literature continued its way. Many Turkish words entered Farsi and poets were interested in subjects such as sufism, mysticism and philosophy. Most of poets became subjective and paid more attention to metaphysics. Moreover, the criticism of poetry was highly considered and developed. The presence of great poets like Mowlavi, Sadi and Hafiz, who are the splendid stars of Iranian literature in this period, took on great importance and the period is considered as the golden age of Iranian culture and Persian poetry, especially of the mystical type.

Mowlana Jalaludin Mohammad Balkhi/Rumi, known as Mowlavi and who died in 672 A.H., is one of the most famous literary characters of Iran and one of the greatest thinkers of the world. As an infant he was taken by his father from Balkh in Khurasan to

Conia in present-day Turkey. There and in cities like Damascus and Halab, he learnt all the sciences until he was promoted to the Ejtihad grade (the highest degree) and began to preach to and guide people until he became acquainted with a great mystic called Shams-i Tabrizi and got more involved in spiritual changes. He left the assembly of lessons and guidance and became interested in journeys to the interior and soul travelling. Then, he proceeded to create amazing and incomparable works like the mystical poem “Masnavi-y, Manavi” or “Spiritual Masnavi”, which is the most authentic work and spiritual book in the Persian language about Sufism and Mysticism. Also, “Ghazaliyyat-I Shams”/ “Shams Lyrics” are his poetical works and indicative of his excellent thoughts about the heart, soul, interior traveling and making love with one’s beloved. Moulavi reached the highest level of mystic verse and revealed the spiritual and rational perfection of the human being in these verses.

Sheikh Mosleh-uldin Sadi Shirazi, who died in 691 A.H., is the biggest master of poetry and prose. The most important and famous works of his are “Bustan”, an ethical and social poem; also “Gulistan” is the best rhythmic prose of his and includes instructive and delightful anecdotes and tales. Gulistan shows Sadi’s astonishing power in composing/writing prose. Sadi is incomparable in composing and versifying elegant Ghazal/lyrics. He is actually eminent in the composition of all sorts of poetry/verses.

Khaja Shams uldin Mohammad Haféz Shirazi, who died in 792 A.H./ 14 A.D., was recognized as the biggest master of Iran “Ghazal-Sora”/Lyric-composer. His romantic and mystic lyrics are delightful and include many different meanings and concepts so that they are absorbed by any reader. Hafez lyrics are full of praise and love of God. He criticizes deceit and hypocrisy and hates them.

Nuruldin Abdul Rahman Jami, who died in 898 A.H. / 15 A.D., is the last great mystic poet and skilled and proficient author of this period. Jami is the most important lyricist-versifier after Hafiz and has valuable verses and compilations of poetical works such as the “Haft Aurang” (Seven Thrones) poem and “Baharistan”, which have been called an imitation of Sadi’s Gulistan. The poetry method of poets at that time was called the Iraqi style and the types of its verses are Ghazal/lyric and Masnavi.

Persian Literature from Safavid Era to the Ghajar Period

From the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries until the nineteenth century A.D., in order to introduce Indian kings to Persian versifier poets, a group of Persian poets went to India and got involved in composing verse/poetry.

Saeb-i Tabrizi, the great poet of the seventeenth century, is the best lyric-versifier of this period. He has poetical works and beautiful monologues in the form of single-couplets that appeared as proverbs. Other important poets of this period are Vahshi Bafghi, Bidel Dehlavi, Orfi Shirazi, Kalim Kashami and Taleb Amoli. It is said that the poetry method of poets in this period is Hindi, and the type of verses is Ghazal/lyric.

Persian Literature in The Reign of Ghajar and the Contemporary Period

From the nineteenth until the twentieth century A.D., and in the contemporary period, great poets such as Hatef Isfahani and Ghaani Shirazi, who was a poet and elegy/ode versifier and imitated Farrokhi Sistani, versified poems in the classic method and style. He has written a book in rhythmic prose called *Parishan* imitating Sadi's "Gulistan", and other poets such as Mushtagh, Soroush, Nishat Isfahani, Fath Ali Khan Saba and Azar Beygdeli.

Contemporary Period

Persian contemporary literature is the result of mental and cultural changes from the nineteenth century onward that was shaped as the result of the following events:

a) To familiarize people with European culture, to obtain freedom and social progress, b) constitution revision and establishing the National Consultative Assembly, c) increasing publications, books and domestic and international magazines, d) founding modern schools and promoting public information.

During that period, Persian poetry and prose, which belonged to courtier circles, nobles and learned men were accepted by the people of the lower classes of society. The style of poetry and penmanship was simplified and was affected by western literature. European words and idioms penetrated the Persian language. Different literary subjects such as the story, drama and social and political criticism and arguments were

widespread in the Persian language and in brief, Persian poetry and prose were at the service of the public. Other specifications of contemporary literature with regard to contents are patriotism, liberalism and philanthropy, which often were accompanied by modernism in literary form and model. Ali Akbar Dehkhoda was the first one who put his talent to test in this area. Then, Iraj Mirza, Bahar, the poet laureate, and Parvin Etesami took up this method and composed their verses with new contents but in old models.

Persian New Poetry and Prose

In Persian new poetry, contrary to the traditional and classical poetry that had continued equal hemistiches, not much attention was paid to rhythm and poets used short or long hemistiches and felt free in the use of rhyme. Nimayushij is the founder of Persian new poetry and is called the father of new poetry. Mehdi Akhavane Sales, Ahmad Shamlu, Forugh Farrokhzad, Sohrab Sepehri and Nader Naderpur are the great poets of this school.

With regard to Persian new prose, it is worthy to mention that nowadays, Persian prose is simple, fluent and beautiful. Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh is known as the founder of Persian new prose and is called the father of new prose. Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, Sadegh Hedayat, Jalal Al Ahmad, Mahmood Dowlat Abadi and Simin Daneshvar are the great writers of Iran.

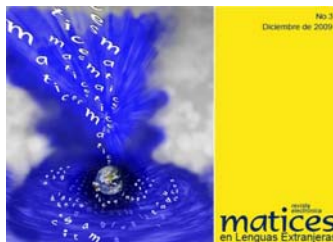
Conclusion

To get familiar with Iranian civilization and culture, it is necessary to know the Persian/Farsi language and literature. Many governments have recognized this necessity and proceed to develop cultural relations with Iran, including the exchange of professors and students and making of arrangements for a chair of Persian language and literature in their universities.

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