



GILCHRIST, JOHN BORTHWICK

GILCHRIST, JOHN BORTHWICK (b. 19 June 1759 in Edinburgh; d. 8 January 1841 in Paris; [Figure 1](#)), physician, Indologist, and teacher of Persian and Urdu. He pioneered the Western study and teaching of modern Indian languages in British India.

Abandoned by his parents in childhood, Gilchrist was educated through a scholarship at George Heriot's Hospital, which also funded his medical studies at Edinburgh University. After a few years spent in the West Indies, in 1782 Gilchrist made his way to [Bombay](#) ([Kidwai](#), p. 36). Subsequently he was employed as Assistant Surgeon with the [Bengal Army's Bombay Detachment](#) of the [East India Company](#) (EIC), which promoted him to Surgeon in 1794. After his arrival in Bombay, he became interested in the languages spoken in northern India, particularly the vernacular of both Hindus and Muslims later to be called Hindi and [Urdu](#), which Gilchrist termed "Hindustani" (cf. [INDIA xviii Persian Elements in Indian Languages](#)).

A tour of the region during 1785 included a stay at Fayzābād near Lucknow, where Gilchrist sought out local poets. The experience convinced him that this language was a sophisticated medium, with a literary register called Hindavi or Hindi. He reported that the pidgin variety called 'Moors,' which English employees of the EIC were generally content to use, was inadequate for the Company's officers to understand, and efficiently command, the sepoys in their charge. For such purposes, he argued, Hindustani was more suitable than Persian, which, as the language of bureaucracy and high culture, was the usual medium taught—often perfunctorily—to EIC employees. Gilchrist was



accepted to tutor the Company's junior employees in Persian and Hindustani, and from 1787 compiled a grammar of the latter and a two-volume dictionary. In 1801 he was engaged as the first professor of Hindustani at the newly established College of Fort William. Hiring munshis (Ar. *monše'* "author, scribe" Pers. *monši*) from around Lucknow and Delhi, he set them to translating stories from Persian into a simple but elegant style of Hindustani to be printed in a modified Perso-Arabic script. Some of these, such as *Bāḡ o Bahār* by Mir Amman Dehlavi (active 1801-06), a frame-story narrative with five episodes, became popular among Indian readers (Prior, p. 218; see Steadman-Jones, Bibliography). The work is a translation of the Persian *Qeṣṣa-ye čahār darviš*, which has sometimes been attributed to [Amir Ḳosrow](#) (1253-1325) but almost certainly belongs to a later era (Ahmad, p. 18). Gilchrist also produced model specimens of Hindi prose, printed in Devanagari script.

Gilchrist contributed little to Persian scholarship. Like his colleagues [William Ouseley](#) (1767-1842) and John Richardson (b. 1740 or 1741; d. 1795), he translated a number of ghazals (*ḡazal*) by [Hafez](#) (ca. 1315-90) for the *East India Kalender, or Asiatic Register* (Javadi, p. 66). In 1801 he published a study of Persian verbs, developed from a one-page class handout, in which he exhaustively tabulated the Persian "irregular" simplex verbs, to show the relationship of present stems and infinitives, with Hindi equivalents and notes on cognate and seemingly cognate forms (Steadman-Jones, pp. 229-31). However, [William Jones](#) (1746-94) had already analyzed the Persian verb system in a simpler and pedagogically more useful manner in his pioneering Persian grammar, first published in 1771.

Though generous in acknowledging the contributions of the munshis and pandits (Sk. *paṇḍita* "learned man") who collaborated with him, Gilchrist had a strong sense of entitlement and tended to be abrasive, quarrelsome, and manipulative. In 1804, as the result of an outcry from Muslim students who objected to his choice of a sensitive religious topic for the annual college debate, Gilchrist resigned his post and sailed for England. He settled first in Edinburgh, and married Mary Ann Coventry in 1808. In early January 1809 Gilchrist left the Company's service, began to invest money in commercial enterprises, and became involved with republican politics (Kidwai, p. 57). In 1816 the couple left Edinburgh for London, where Gilchrist continued to publish and took up private tutoring of Persian and Hindustani. Between 1818 and 1825, the EIC rehired Gilchrist to teach their India-bound medical personnel at a generous salary, which he supplemented by requiring his



students to buy their textbooks from his publishers, “a profitable but unpopular scam” (Prior, p. 219). Gilchrist spent his last years in Paris, where he died and was buried. As there were no children from his marriage, Gilchrist bequeathed most of his considerable estate to an educational trust, which, among other benefits, for many years sponsored scholarships to Britain for students from India, Canada, and Australia, and scholarships and fellowships for women to Oxford and Cambridge; the [Gilchrist Educational Trust](#) is active in Britain to this day.

Gilchrist undoubtedly understood the sociolinguistic trajectories of the Urdu-Hindi complex and of Indo-Persian and anticipated the separate evolution of Urdu and Hindi as both written and spoken modern languages. In 1824, the EIC formally distinguished between Urdu and Hindi, and began to emphasize teaching of the latter (Rai, pp. 15-16). During the following decade, Urdu replaced Persian as the official language of colonial administration.

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