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Minimum Taxable Knowledge: The *Nisab* Genre of Multilingual Vocabularies in Verse

A South Asian tradition of vocabularies in verse may be traced back at least two millennia through early examples like the *Nighantu* and Amarasimha's *Amarakośa*. With the spread of Persian across much the Indian subcontinent, bilingual Persian-Sanskrit lexicons began to be produced as early as the fourteenth century, reaching their height under direct and indirect Mughal-Timurid patronage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *Nisab al-Sibyan*, a 200-verse Arabic-Persian vocabulary, was composed in AD 1220 in what is now southwestern Afghanistan. Its author arranged the text according to meter, calling his work *nisab* to equate the two verses of the vocabulary with the customary minimum taxable wealth of 200 silver *dirhams*. Subsequent works written in imitation of Farahi's popular work are also called *nisabs* and generally contain at least 200 verses. The *Khaliq Bari* is perhaps the earliest example of the *nisab* genre in South Asia to include Indic terms. It consists of synonymous or nearly synonymous terms drawn from Persian, Arabic, and what the author calls Hinduwi. The British Library contains dozens of copies in manuscript and print, including a copy prepared at the turn of the eighteenth century by the Oxford professor of Arabic, Thomas Hyde (1636–1703). It remained popular for centuries throughout northern India, inspiring dozens of works in imitation of it. The Urdu poet 'Ghalib' was said to quote from it frequently and even composed his own *nisab* in the final years of his life. As English began replacing Persian as a language of administration, works like the *Nisab-i Inglisi*, a nineteenth-century Persian-Arabic-English vocabulary in manuscript preserved at the British Library, began to proliferate. I will discuss these and other examples of the genre preserved in the British Library, examining their historical significance and their value in documenting linguistic and material changes over their 700-year history.