



ISMA'ILISM XIV. ISMA'ILISM IN GINĀN LITERATURE

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A conspicuous feature in the intellectual history of Nezāri Isma'ili Shi'ism has been the fundamental impulse to translate the concept of the Imam, which is the central aspect of their faith, within the frameworks of the various philosophical and theological systems it encountered as the movement spread geographically. As a result, Isma'ili religious texts are frequently characterized by their use of motifs from multiple streams of thought. Thus, works written during the political heyday of Fatimid Isma'ili rule in Egypt and North Africa in the 9th and 10th centuries draw upon Islamic, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, and Manichean elements to elaborate the concept of the Imam. Similarly, Isma'ili treatises written in Persia and Central Asia from the 15th century onward explain the significance of the Imam utilizing the Sufi discourse that had become so widespread in these areas.

Not surprisingly, Nezāri Isma'ili texts from the Indian Subcontinent exhibit a similar adaptive response to the region's complex religious, literary, and cultural environment. A significant element in this response was the creation of a unique genre of devotional songs called *gināns*. The Indic term *ginān* is commonly believed to be derived from Sanskrit *jñāna* "knowledge derived



from meditation.” Composed in the several northwestern Indic languages (such as Gujarati, Sindhi, Punjabi, Hindi) and sung in various Indian *rāgas*, or melodies, *gināns* form an important element in the liturgy and devotional life of the subcontinent’s Nezāri Isma‘ili communities to our day. The authorship of these devotional hymns is traditionally attributed to Isma‘ili *dā‘īs* (q.v.), or *pirs*, of Persian ancestry who were sent to the subcontinent by Isma‘ili Imams living in Persia, in order to propagate the Is-ma‘ili form of Islam and to provide spiritual guidance to Isma‘ili communities living there (Daftary, pp. 414-15, 442-43).

There is very little accurate information about the reputed authors of the *gināns* and their activities, as most of what we know about them derives from hagiographic accounts. As a result, we are not certain about significant biographical details such as birth and death dates of many *pirs*, particularly the earlier ones. In any case, the vast majority of *gināns* are attributed to the four great *pirs* who lived between the 12th and 15th centuries: Pir Satgur Nur, Pir Šams, Pir Šadr-al-Din, and Pir Ḥasan Kabir-al-Din. A fifth figure, Emāmšāh, who lived in the late 15th and early 16th century, was allegedly the founder of a “schismatic” movement that broke away from the main group to form a separate sect. Each *pir* was regarded as a tangible symbol of the Imams’ authority in the subcontinent, the “door” to the Imam, without whose guidance and instruction access to religious truths would be impossible. Hagiographic accounts assert that, to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers between themselves and the local populations, the Isma‘ili *pirs* composed songs to explain fundamental Isma‘ili doctrines to Indian disciples in their native languages and idioms. It is these songs that eventually came to constitute the corpus of what is now called the *ginān* literature.

In more recent times, community traditions have come to regard these compositions as providing the faithful with an understanding of the “true meaning” of the Qur’ān and serving to penetrate its inner or spiritual (*bāṭen*, q.v.) significance. The *pirs* were not ordinary missionaries and evangelists; in the community’s understanding they were spiritually enlightened individuals whose religious authority had been endorsed by the Imams living in the “west” (i.e., Persia). In order that their Indian disciples should fully comprehend the theological significance of the Imam, the *pirs* taught that the Imam, specifically ‘Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb (q.v.), was the long-awaited tenth incarnation (*avatāra*) of the deity Vishnu. In this manner they created an ostensible correspondence, or bridge, between the Is-ma‘ili concept of the



Imam with the concept of *avatāra* as understood in the Vaishnavite form of Hinduism. The translation of the Isma‘ili concept of Imam into a Vaisnavite framework is best represented in the classic *ginān*, *Dasa Avatāra* “Ten Incarnations,” of which there are several versions attributed to different *pirs* (see Khakee).

In the *gināns* the *pirs* exhort their disciples to follow *Satpanth* “the true path,” the name used in the texts to refer to the Isma‘ili tradition. The essence of Satpanth lay in its emphasis on the esoteric and spiritual over the exoteric and material, and the interiorized form of religious practice over mere ritual practice. Satpanth teachings asserted that attachment to the material and transitory world along with negative, egotistical qualities such as anger, greed, and jealousy result in individual souls being trapped in endless cycles of rebirth in the material world. The spiritual enlightenment that is necessary to break these cycles of rebirth is, however, possible only through the allegiance to the Imam (often called *Sat Guru* “True Guru” or *moršed* “[Spiritual] Guide”) and his representatives the *pirs*. It is the *Sat Guru* who provides the guidance necessary for an ethical and moral life and who also bestows on the disciple the sacred word (*shabd/nam/bol*) on which to meditate. If successful in the spiritual quest, the disciple would be blessed with the vision (*didār/darshan* [< Sk. darśana]) of the Divine Light, the most sublime experience of the spiritual life.

A key aspect of Satpanth Isma‘ili tradition is the spiritual relationship between the Imam and the individual disciple (*rikhīsar* [Ind.], *mo‘men*, *morid*), often portrayed as a bond of love. Indeed, the tradition views love and devotion to the Imam as important preconditions for spiritual enlightenment and salvation. Borrowing images and metaphors from the realm of human love, the *pirs* frequently invoke in *gināns* the symbol of the *virahinī* (Ind.), or woman separated from her beloved, and the *viraha*, or the longing she feels for him. Based on this symbolism, many *gināns* represent the disciples of the Imam as *virahinīs* longing for their beloved Imam. While the representation of the soul as a female longing for vision (*didār/darshan*) of the Imam is certainly unusual by the standards of the Arabic and Persian literary traditions, it is perfectly in keeping with local Indian literary conventions. Traditions of Indian devotional poetry contemporaneous with the *gināns*, such as the *sant*, *bhakti*, or Sikh traditions, all employ the symbol of the *virahinī*. Even Sufi poetry written in the Indian vernacular languages adopts this Indic topos. In this way, the *gināns* explicate core Isma‘ili ideas about the Imam within



religious and devotional frameworks that strongly resonated with the broader Indian religious ethos.

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