



NEZĀRI QOHESTĀNI

NEZĀRI QOHESTĀNI, ḤAKIM SA'D-AL-DIN b. Šams-al-Din (or Jalāl-al-Din) b. Moḥammad (b. [Birjand](#), 645/1247; d. Birjand, 720/1320-21), a Persian poet of Nezāri [Isma'ili](#) affiliation. Nezāri was born in Birjand, a commercial town in Qohestān, southern Khorasan, and an important center under the governorship of the Nezāri Isma'ilis (Willey, pp. 168–89). The [Mongol](#) incursions into Qohestān in the 650s/1250s ended Isma'ili control of the area, bringing about a devastation of their lands, destruction of irrigation systems, and a dismantlement of many of their fortresses. Nezāri, born into a landowning Isma'ili family (*Kolliyāt*, St. Petersburg, fol. 326a; Baybordi, 1966, tr., pp. 44-45), was witness to the tumultuous social, political, and economic effects of these incursions. His own family lands were destroyed, and much of his wealth was lost (Nezāri, *Divān*, ed. Moṣaffā, p. 22; Rypka, p. 255). Soon the entire region of Khorasan was brought temporarily under the control of the Sunni Karts, vassals of the [Il-Khanid](#) Mongols, with their capital at [Herat](#).

Medieval Persian sources have provided a very sketchy image of Nezāri's life. The first reference to Nezāri Qohestāni was by [Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi](#), who, in a brief note on Birjand, mentions that the poet Nezāri was born there (*Nozhat al-qolub*, p. 144, tr., p. 143). Nezāri's poetic skills and his wisdom was praised by his contemporary authors. 'Abd al-Rašid b. Shaikh 'Abd-Allāh Ḳalavi, one of the earliest calligraphers of Nezāri's *Divān*, refers to him as “the king of poets, sovereign of the philosophers, leader of the mystics, and counselor of princes, amirs, and viziers” (*Kolliyāt*, St. Petersburg, fol. 488a; Moṣaffā, in Nezāri, *Divān*, p. 13, n. 10; Lewisohn, p. 231). ['Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi](#) (d. 898/1492)



compared Nezāri's poetic skill to that of [Ḥāfez](#) (Jāmi, p. 148; Ṣafā, III, p. 740).

It was, however, Nezāri's pen name (*taḵallos*) and his religious affiliations that seemed to elicit much speculation among writers. Kātebi Nišāpuri or Torṣezi, (d. 838/1434) was the first one to write about Nezāri's connection to the Isma'īlis. In his *Divān*, he advised his son to emulate famous poets like [Ferdowsi](#), ['Aṭṭār](#), and [Jalāl-al-Din Mawlawi Rumi](#), but not Nezāri, whom he claimed to have been troubled throughout his life because of his connection to the Isma'īli [Imam](#) (Baybordi, 1966, tr., pp. 24-25). This connection to the Nezāri Isma'īlis was further supported by [Dawlatšāh Samarqandī](#) (d. 893/1488), who presented two theories explaining the pen name Nezāri: (a) some claim he was called so because he was a lean (*nezār*) man, and (b) the poet took this name to honor his allegiance to the Nezāri Isma'īli *kalifa*, which Dawlatšāh believed was closer to the truth (for a discussion of his affiliation to the Isma'īli Nezār, see Ṣafā, III, pp. 734-35). Dawlatšāh described Nezāri as a gentle-tempered man of wise (*ḥakim*) disposition, possibly a reference to his title of *ḥakim* (Dawlatšāh, p. 233). Later authors, such as Moḥammad Mirḳ'ānd (d. 903/1498) and his grandson Ġiyāt-al-Dīn Ḳ'āndamir (d. 942/1535-36) reaffirmed this position regarding Nezāri's allegiance (Mirḳ'ānd, IV, p. 193; Ḳ'āndamir, II, p. 457).

Speculations about Nezāri's religious affiliations have continued in Persian, European, and American sources. Some scholars speculated that he was given the name by either the Kart Sunni rulers due to his lean physique (Borodin, pp. 180-82) or by the Mehrabanid rulers (Moṣaffā, in Nezāri, *Divān*, p. 25). Still others claimed that he was a Twelver Shi'ite, writing in a state of duress (Mojtahedzāda Birjandi, p. 4), because of which he made no explicit reference to the name of the Imam of the time; or that he was perhaps an Isma'īli in his early youth, but later in life became a Twelver Shi'ite with a mystic tendency (Purjawādi, in Nezāri, *Monāẓara*, pp. i-v); or that, based on fusion of Sufi spirituality into Isma'īli theosophy, Nezāri was "a kind of Sufi Isma'īli or Isma'īli Sufi" (Lewisohn, pp. 237, 242). However, recent scholarship is unanimous in accepting his allegiance to the Isma'īli Imam (Browne, III, p. 154; Ivanow, 1963, p. 138; Nezāri, *Dastur-nāma*, ed. Bertels, p. 45; Baybordi, 1966, tr., pp. 62-66; Jamal, p. 105-7; Virani, pp. 60-70; 'Abbās Eqbāl p. 170; 'Ali-Rezā Mojtahedzāda, pp. 13-17; Moṣaffā, in Nezāri, *Divān*, pp. 25-26). Ḍabiḥ-Allāh Ṣafā further alleged on the basis of the Fasiḥ Ḳ'āfi that Nezāri was a title used by other members of his family as an indication of their loyalty to [Nezār b. Mostanṣer](#), the claimant to the Isma'īli imamate, or that Nezāri was possibly

the brother of the Ismaʿili Imam Rokn-al-Din Koršāh (Şafā, III, p. 735, and n. 2; Faṣiḥ K̄āfi, III, p. 33).

Most of what we know of the poet's life and outlook can be gleaned from his own poetry. Nezāri attended a local *maktab* in Birjand and then a local *madrasa*, where he studied literature as well as religious and other scholarly sciences of the time. According to Maẓāher Moşaffā (in Nezāri, *Divān*, pp. 314-45), the poet that had a great impact on him is Saʿdi (d. 691/1292).

Nezāri stresses in his writing that his father, a Nezāri Ismaʿili, was his first real teacher and played a major role in the formulation of his world view, his allegiance to the *family of the Prophet*, the descendants of Imam ʿAli, and his allegiance to the Nezāri Imam. He also mentions that he had begun his training in the hierarchical Ismaʿili *daʿwa* structure as a *mostajib* (neophyte), then *maʿdun* (licentiate), *moʿallem* (teacher), and continuing through many arduous years of hard work to reach finally the status of a *dāʿi* (summoner) when he was around thirty-three years old (Nezāri, *Safar-nāma*, p. 67). Furthermore, it is evident from his works that he most probably studied the works of Ismaʿili thinkers, such as Nāşer-e Kōsrow (d. ca. 470/1077) and Ḥasan-e Şabbāḥ (d. 518/1124), incorporating some of their conceptual frameworks into his work (Nezāri, *Dastur-nāma*, ed. Bertels, pp. 44-45, 67; Borodin, p. 186; Jamal, p. 105; Behnāmfar, ed., pp. 1,213 ff, 2,228 ff).

Due to the harsh circumstances surrounding the major cities of Qohestān, lack of water, devastation, and depopulation, Nezāri moved to Herat around 669/1270 to find employment. There he served in the treasury of Malek Şams-al-Din Moḥammad Kart (r. 643-76/1245-77) as an administrator (Borodin, p. 190). In the course of his work, he traveled extensively throughout Khorasan, Iraq, and Hejaz, detailing the social, economic, and political circumstances in which he found himself. His longest journey, during 678-81/1280-82, was undertaken in the company of Tāj-al-Din ʿAmid, a high-ranking official, commencing with a trip from Tun in Qohestān to Isfahan and continuing to Tabriz, where he joined the retinue of Şams-al-Din Jovayni, the Il-khanid grand vizier, in whose company he also traveled to Arrān, Armenia, and Baku in Georgia (Şafā, III, p. 738). The account of this journey was recorded in his first work, titled the *Safar-nāma*. It is a didactical *matnawi* of 1,200 verses in the meter (see ʿARUŻ) *ramal*, dedicated to an individual, referred to as the “essence of the Divine Light of reality,” the Şayk al-Şoyuk Amin-al-Din or Amin-al-Din al-Maʿādi (Nezāri, *Safar-nāma*, p. 172). This poem, while providing brief anecdotal information of the political, social, and economic conditions in the



regions he visited, is particularly rich in the telling of ethical tales and stories reaffirming Nezāri's beliefs (Behnāmfar, ed., pp. 832 ff., 983 ff). Nezāri explains that his purpose in writing this travelogue was to remember friends and events, but it must also contain details of his journey to visit the Imam of the Isma'īlis, Šams-al-Din Moḥammad, who was then living in Tabriz (Jamal, p. 135; Daftary, pp. 411-12).

On his return to Birjand, Nezāri married, and he had three sons, Nošrat, Šahanšāh, and Moḥammad (who died in infancy). Due to turbulent political circumstances in Qohestān and the rising fortunes of the Mehrabanid rulers in eastern Persia, Nezāri was forced to rely on both his poetic and administrative skills to secure a position with the new rulers. By 688/1289, the Mehrabanid Malek Nāšer-al-Din Moḥammad (r. 653-718/1255-1318) had conquered all of Qohestān and had given it as an appanage to his son Šams-al-Din 'Ali (r. 688-708/1289-1308). The encampment of the Mehrabanid rulers in Birjand provided a chance for Nezāri, who was recruited by Šams-al-Din 'Ali (also referred to as 'Ališāh or Šāh-'Alī), the ruler of Qohestān, to work at his court. He composed much of his panegyric poetry during this service, glorifying his patron in his odes (*qašida*). Nezāri also describes various occasions, celebrations, and festivities which occurred during this time. Several odes were dedicated to Tāj-al-Dīn 'Ali, the son and successor of Šams-al-Din 'Ali, and to several high-ranking officials of the court (Mošaffā, in Nezāri, *Dīvan*, pp. 110 ff.). He, however, devoted much of his time to the composition of *Adab-nāma*, a didactic *matnawi* in *motaqāreb* meter composed in 695/1295-96; it follows in the tradition of “[Mirror for Princes](#)” literature and is similar to Sa'di's *Bustān*. Nezāri's poetry reflects his concerns about societal issues and the economic conditions of his time. His worries concerning his surroundings, the destruction and insecurity, his concern for the poor and needy, his anger at the abuses conducted by those in power, and his moral outrage are all profusely reflected in his poetry. The *Adab-nāma*, divided into twelve chapters, is addressed to the ruler, the *moḥtaseb* (supervisor of the [bazaar](#)), the *faqih*s (jurisconsult), the *qāzis* (religious judge), and courtiers. The poem provides an outspoken critique of and protest against the political and societal ills of the time, particularly oppression, injustice, corruption and abuse, greed, hypocrisy, and self-absorption, while, at the same time, promoting the virtues of justice, humility, mercy, and submission (Behnāmfar, ed., pp. 49 ff., 222 ff.).

Nezāri's critique did not endear him to those around him at the court, especially the Sunni religious leaders (*'olamā*). However, possibly it was his

direct critique of the ruler that led to his being charged with treason and dismissed from court when he was about fifty years old. He spent the remaining years of his life confined to a small, dilapidated property in Birjand that was given to him by the ruler in compensation for his services. During this time, Nezāri composed several of his works and also spent time traveling around Qohestān.

The first poem he wrote in this period is titled *Monāzara-ye ruz o šab*, which is his third *maṭnawī*. This poem, written in 700/1300 and comprising 550 couplets, was dedicated to the Mehrabanid ruler Šams-al-Din ‘Ali and his son Tāj-al-Din ‘Ali. It is in the form of an allegorical contest between the forces of night and day, and was composed on the *Nowruz* eve at a time when the ruler Šams-al-Din ‘Ali was having his New Year feast. The poem was a possible attempt to glorify and thus appease the ruler, who is likened to the sun in the poem, since Nezāri had found himself excluded from the festivities (Purjawādi, in Nezāri, *Monāzara*, pp. iv-v). Like much of Nezāri’s poetry, this poem is steeped in mystical phraseology, which was so common at this time. The 13th and 14th centuries saw a growth in Sufi orders, Shi‘ite communities, and messianic movements, with veneration of the family of the Prophet and worship of saints becoming popular. The trend towards mysticism pervaded every aspect of Persian culture, literature, and language, a reflection of which was the common use of metaphorical and symbolic allusions among esoteric traditions with their own interpretations. It is this coalescence (Daftary, p. 412; Jamal, pp. 84 ff.; Lewisohn, pp. 236 ff.) that often made it difficult to define the exact identity of an individual’s religious affiliation.

There is little doubt that Nezāri’s works are Shi‘ite in their outlook. Nezāri was profuse in his veneration of the *ahl al-bayt*, devotion and allegiance to the offsprings of Imam ‘Ali down to Imam Ja‘far al-Šādeq, using terms such as, *wali*, or *nur-e Āl-e Moḥammad*, or *nur-e Āl-e ‘Ali*, which were particularly common among the Shi‘i as well as Sufi communities. Nezāri also used terms (e.g., *pir*, *moršed*, *qoṭb*) that were applied by Sufis to denote their spiritual guide. It is worth noting that his use and understanding of technical terms are particularly associated with Isma‘ili notions such as the relationship between *zāher* and *bāṭen* (exoteric and esoteric), *ta’wil* (esoteric interpretation), *arbāb-e ta’wil*, *ta’lim* (teaching), *dā’i* (summoner), *mostawda‘* (temporary [imam]), and *mostaqarr* (permanent [imam]) in reference to the Imam, as well as his spiritual interpretation of Paradise and Hell (Behnāmfar, ed., pp. 682-739; Daftary, p. 413). Particularly significant is Nezāri’s emphasis of recognition of



the reality through recognition of and allegiance to the Imam of the time (*Imam-e waqt*), the *qā'em*. (*Kolliyāt*, St. Petersburg, fols. 81b, 82b-83a; Baybordi, 1966, tr., pp. 69-79; Virani, p. 67). The symbolic language of the *Monāzara-ye ruz o šab* lends itself to the notion that this poem was written as a contest between Sunnism, or exoteric Islam as night, and Shi'ism, particularly its Isma'ili esoteric interpretation, as day.

The dedication of this poem earned him some support from Šams-al-Din 'Ali, who called him back to the court, but his association with the court was shortlived, and after a year he returned to his garden. In a final attempt to regain his position, he wrote his fourth *maṭnawī*, an epic romantic poem titled *Azhar o Mazhar*, the tale of two lovers composed in 10,000 verses in the style of Nezāmi Ganjavi's *Ākosrow o Širin* and inspired by 'Aṭṭār's *Ākosrow-nāma*. Set in the background of the Arabian desert, it is a highly symbolic tale of divine love. Baybordi observes that this is a spiritual work reflecting Nezāri's Isma'ili beliefs (Baybordi, 1966, tr., pp. 191 ff.).

There is very little information about the final years of Nezāri's life. All that is known is that his wife died before him. In 710/1310, Nezāri composed his last *maṭnawī*, the *Dastur-nāma*, a poem of 576 verses in the *motāqāreb* meter arranged in a similar format as the *Golestān* of Sa'di. It was apparently meant to serve as advice to Nezāri's own sons, ostensibly concerning the culture and ritual of wine drinking and polite social conversation. It is a poem in praise of wine (see *SĀQI-NĀMA*), but, like his other poems, it is infused with mystical implications. Like that of other Persian poets, such as 'Aṭṭār, the outward references to wine are often associated with spiritual experiences (Lewisohn, p. 233).

As a poet, Nezāri has received little recognition by modern authors, although he has been referred to by Chengiz Borodin (p. 187) as one of the most important poets of his time. However, more recently there has been a growing interest in the life, as well as the literary and historical significance of his contribution to the panorama of Persian poetry. His views on religion and ethics, his political, economic, and social critique, his nostalgia for the pre-Mongol era of Qohestān, and his influence on medieval poets have been discussed. There has been particular investigation into the various facets of his thought, his views on the place of the intellect, on the concept of Imam, on love, and on wine. This interest has been stimulated by the production of several editions of his work, as well as by a conference held by the University of Birjand in 2014, where a good number of papers were presented, and a

voluminous book of over 2,500 pages was published online. Thus far, this is the most comprehensive study of the life and works of Nezāri in a single volume (ed. Behnāmfar). These scholarly articles provide valuable insight into the work of this Nezāri Ismaʿili poet, particularly showcasing how he became one of the earliest Ismaʿili writers to adopt a vocabulary shared by both the Sufis and Ismaʿilis in order to express his esoteric thought.

Nezāri died in 720/1320. He was buried in Birjand, but his grave was destroyed when the cemetery of Birjand was turned into a park. In recent times, a new mausoleum has been constructed in Birjand honoring Nezāri.

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