

THE GINAN TRADITION AMONG THE NIZARI ISMA'ILIS: ITS VALUE AS A SOURCE OF THEIR HISTORY

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composed and incorporated into the existing corpus. Ginans, in fact, as I was able to determine, continued to be composed until the turn of this century. After that time, no more new material was incorporated, and the existing corpus as now preserved, became "frozen". It is said that about thirty da'is, over the long period of some six centuries, contributed in varying amounts, to the existing sum of ginans, which amount to approximately 800 single compositions, of differing lengths. Of the manuscripts that record ginans, the oldest that came to my attention was copied in 1736 A.D. There is evidence in the existing manuscripts and some external evidence, that the task of recording ginans probably began from at least the sixteenth century.

GINANS AS A SOURCE OF HISTORY

The ginans constitute an important source for the history of da'wa on the Sub-continent because some of them contain testimony about the lives and activities of the various figures involved in the work of conversion. This type of testimony may best be described as hagiographic. Generally speaking, hagiographic works, particularly when they embody oral tradition, have been considered highly suspect in terms of the historical data they provide; and the tendency stems from a perhaps over-anxious desire to seek the "historical", and the eventual, discounting of much of the material as legendary or mythical.

This attitude is reflected by Ivanow who felt that the ginans do not "display any sign of interest in the history of the movement". He failed, in fact, to see that not only were the ginans shot through with historical testimony but also that the data reflected the tradition's own self-image about its development. Like most analysts of hagiographic tradition, Ivanow was too rigid in his demand for "historical facts". Few scholars would to-day put forward an absolute theory of history whose aim was to seek only "actual facts". The search for history is rather a continuous process where interaction takes place between the historian and his facts. This dictum is equally applicable to historians working on written or oral sources, for both require order to arrive at "some approximation to the ultimate historical truth". The attitude, then, that would seem to be most constructive in approaching the ginans as a source of historical material is that the historian confronted by such a tradition

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The attempt to understand Nizari Isma'ilism as it developed on the Sub-continent, must depend largely on the Tradition retained among its adherents there. The term, "Tradition" signifies and encompasses the whole range of the Da'wa activity as revealed in writing, practice, and oral tradition, which emerged and developed against the background of a period stretching from the twelfth century, to the time that the Nizari Isma'ili Imam at was forced to move its residence from Iran to India in the nineteenth century. The texts recorded in writing constitute the largest portion of the preserved Tradition, and the major and most significant component of this recorded element are the Ginans. The word is a popularization of the Sanskrit word *jan* which is generally defined as "contemplative or meditative knowledge". Among the Nizari Isma'ilis, the word has come to refer to that part of their Tradition whose authorship is attributed to the various *Plas* who undertook the work of conversion and preaching. Since the ginans represent not only the major portion of the Tradition, but constitute almost the entire indigenous literary heritage that was developed and preserved by the community, they reflect accordingly the most significant and creative characteristics of the da'wa's achievement. Consequently, the ginans form the focal source for any study of the da'wa's activity on the Sub-continent. The recent printed texts are mostly in the modern Gujarati script, whereas but for a very few recent manuscripts, the entire corpus has survived in the Khojli script, this script being an element unique to the Nizari Isma'ilis in the history of Indo-Muslim literature. Khojli or Khwaja Shindhi as it has also come to be called, represents one of the earliest forms of written Shindhi that has come down to us.

ORIGIN AND PRESERVATION

In the community's self-image, the ginans spring directly from the work of the da'wa, and their authorship is attributed to the various da'is whose activities can be said to have begun at least from the thirteenth century. Until the early part of the present century, the ginans constituted a "living" tradition among the adherents, in the sense that they continued to be

consider himself to be in the same situation as one who studies written sources, in as much as both must interpret and evaluate the data to form a coherent picture of the past. The ginans, however, constitute just one type of source available to us for tracing the history of the da'wa. Ultimately, a methodology of historical reconstruction involves a synthesis of individual methods and a determination of inter-relationships between different classes of data. Once we have understood what the testimony in the ginans means and what its special characteristics are, then we can bring the resulting material into relationship with data gleaned from other sources. But it cannot be unduly emphasized, that a tradition like the ginans, drawing its inspiration as it does from its Isma'ili roots, develops its own concept of history, whose ultimate aim is not to give us information in our search for "authentic" figures, but to present a self-image, a mirror of the Tradition's mind where its thinking about its own development is revealed.

Sermons of Hazrath

Al!

Nahj-ul-Balagha

Nothing in this world is really useful and beneficial to you unless it has some utility and benefit value for the next world. If you at all want to lament over things which you have lost in this world then worry and feel sorry over the loss of things which had immortal values for you.

