The Ismaili "Ginan" Tradition from the Indian Subcontinent
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The Ismaili Ginan Tradition from the Indian Subcontinent

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Ginan bolore nit nure bharea;
Evo haide tamare harakh na maeji.

Recite continually the ginans which are filled with light;
Boundless will be the joy in your heart.¹

Introduction

Ginans are devotional songs rooted in the musical and poetic matrix of Indian culture. The term “ginan” carries a double significance: on the one hand, it means “religious knowledge” or “wisdom,” analogous to the Sanskrit word jnana (knowledge).² On the other hand, it means “song” or “recitation,” suggesting a link to the Arabic ghanna and the Urdu/Hindi ghana, both verbs meaning “to sing.”³ For the past seven hundred years, Ismailis from the Indian subcontinent (Satpanth Khoja Ismailis) have been reciting ginans as a part of their daily religious devotions at the congregational hall (Jamat Khana).

The entire ginan corpus comprises about one thousand poems, composed in several Indian languages (especially Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Siraiki and Sindhi), varying in length from five to four hundred verses.⁴ This literature was composed by pirs (preachers) who came to South Asia from Iran to spread the Ismaili dawa (religious mission). For generations, Satpanth Ismailis have revered ginans as sacred compositions (shastras).⁵ The songs are powerful in imagery and symbolism drawn from the spiritual and cultural milieu of the Indian

⁴ Two decades ago, based on a list compiled by Alibhai Nanji of Hyderabad, Azim Nanji estimated the total number of ginans to be about 800. See Azim Nanji, The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (New York, 1978), p. 10.
⁵ Ibid., p. 1.
subcontinent. Indeed, so deeply have they been influenced by distinctive Hindu traditions that their links to Fatimid or Nizari Ismailis are not easily discerned.

Ginan hymns are rooted in north Indian light classical and folk music. Each ginan has a set composition in a particular raga (melodic mode). Specific ginans are indicated for different times and types of prayer, for special occasions, and for various religious ceremonies. Evening prayers, for example, usually commence with ginans emphasizing the importance of the prayer during the auspicious hours of sunset. Other ginans, representing mystical themes, are recommended for Subh-Sadiq (early morning). These ginans are recited before or after periods of meditation in the early morning hours. Other ginans describe the feelings and emotions of particular events.

During his visit to Dhaka in 1960, the 49th Imam of Shia Imami Nizari Muslims, H.H. Prince Karim Aga Khan, issued a farman (special guidance from the community’s spiritual leader) stating “I feel that unless we are able to continue this wonderful tradition...we will lose some of our past which is most important to us and must be kept throughout our lives.”

Almost four years later, he reminded his followers in Karachi of the unique importance of this tradition:

Many times I have recommended to my spiritual children that they should remember the ginans, that they should understand the meaning of these ginans and that they should carry these meanings in their hearts. It is most important that my spiritual children from wherever they may come should, through the ages and from generation to generation, hold to this tradition, which is so unique and so important to my Jamat.

Ismailis in the Indian Subcontinent

The Ismaili Muslim community is the second largest sect of Shia Islam. Ismailis have a long history, and diverse communities in almost twenty-five countries all over the globe. Among them, Ismailis living in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent are called Satpanth Khojas. The word Khoja means lord or master, while Satpanth means “true path,” the exact translation of the Qur‘anic term sirat al-mustaqim. What distinguishes Khoja Ismaili Muslims is their adoption of various cultural and religious rituals from Indic traditions. For this reason, orthodox Sunnis have always criticized the Muslim identity of Khoja Ismailis.

The establishment in North Africa of the Fatimid caliphate in 909 CE doubtless marked the crowning success of the early Ismailis. In 969 CE the Fatimids conquered Egypt and founded Cairo as a centre for learning and

7 Ibid., p. 2.
missionary work.9 During Fatimid rule, the influence of Ismailis greatly increased, spreading to North Africa, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Persia, Sicily, and the Indian subcontinent. Fatimid power extended over two centuries and flourished in trade, art, and scholarship.10 In around 883 C.E., before Fatimid power in Sind, the famous Ismaili dai (missionary), Abu Qassim Ibn Hawshab Mansur al-Yaman, had established an Ismaili base in Yemen. In that same year, he sent his nephew, al-Haytham, to spread the Ismaili dawa (mission) in Sind. Less than a century later, the chief jurist of the Fatimid Caliph al-Muizz, Qadi al-Numan (d. 974 C.E.), recorded in his Risalat ifitah al-dawah (ca. 957 C.E.) that the religious mission in Sind was doing well.11

In 965 C.E. the Ismaili missionary Jalam b. Shayban secured Fatimid rule in the city of Multan (located in the Punjab province of eastern Pakistan), where he openly proclaimed the sovereignty of Fatimid caliph al-Muizz,12 thus terminating the dynamic rule of the Banu Sama (former rulers of Sind and Multan). For four decades the khutba (Friday sermon) in Multan was recited in the name of the Fatimid caliphs.13 In 1005 C.E. Mahmud Ghaznavi invaded Multan with the purpose of legitimizing Sunni orthodoxy in the region.14 According to the historian Mubarak Shah "so many Ismailis were killed at Multan that the stream of blood flowed through the Lahore Gate."15 Afterwards, the Ismailis from Multan began to conceal their religious identity, a practice known in Shia Islam as taqiya. Around the same time Ismaili dawa moved to the southern part of Sind where local ruler Habbarid Arab and the Sumras dynasty converted to Fatimid Ismailism.16

Starting as early as the 11th and 12th centuries a series of Ismaili pirs came to the subcontinent from Iran and established Ismaili dawa in Gujarat, Sind and Punjab, converting Hindus to Satpanth, the Indic vernacular term utilized by the pirs to refer to Ismaili Islam.17 It was these pirs who created the ginan literature, and simultaneously founded the Ismaili Satpanth community. Between the 12th

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9 Ibid., p. 64.
10 Kassam, Songs of Wisdom and Circle of Dance, p. 42.
14 Kassam, Songs of Wisdom and Circle of Dance, p. 47.
15 Derryl Maclean, Religion and Society in Arab Sind (Leiden, 1989), p. 139.
and 13th centuries Hindu bhakti and sant movements were arising in the subcontinent, in order to spread messages of love, humility and devotion towards God. The term bhakti, derived from a Sanskrit root meaning “to share,” indicates a passionate love for God. Similarly, the term “Sant,” derived from the Sanskrit verb “to be,” connotes that which is not only real but true as well. Ismaili missionaries, using ginans in the same context, emphasized love and humility rather than orthodox rules and rituals. For these reasons, the historical roots of the ginans are close to bhakti and Sant poetry.

The Pirs, and the Origins of the Ginans

According to historiographers some Ismaili missionaries came to the Indian subcontinent from Iran as early as the eleventh century. Unfortunately, as is the case with many poet-saints (Sants and Sufis) of medieval India, we possess remarkably little accurate historical information. What we do have, rather, are hagiographic and legendary accounts, some of which are incorporated in the ginans themselves. According to these accounts, the pirs were entrusted by the Ismaili Imams, then residing in Iran, with the responsibility of propagating and sustaining the Ismaili form of Islam within the subcontinent. Their target population, largely consisting of the lower classes of rural Gujarat, Sind and Punjab, seems to have been heavily influenced by the Vaisnavite Hindu tradition. Ismaili traditions regard Pir Satgur Nur as the earliest pir; he worked mostly in Sind and Gujarat. The tombstone at the shrine dedicated to him at Navsari in Gujarat gives his death date as 1094 C.E. This historically enigmatic figure, whose name can be translated as “true guide of light,” is mentioned in several local traditions as the pir who founded the Nizari Ismaili community in Gujarat. Satgur Nur is associated with many other names, such as Nur Muhammad, Nur Satgur, Pir Sadat, Sadaji, and Nur al-Din, all apparently referring to the same person. Abdulaziz Sachedina writes that Satgur Nur was sent to Hind (the current Indo-Pakistan subcontinent) by the twenty-third Ismaili Imam, Hasan Aala Dhikrihi’l-salam from Alamut (the Ismaili fort in Iran). Sachedina relates the traditional anecdotes of Satgur Nur landing in a town called Patan in Gujarat, where he performed miracles, and converted local Hindu priests

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19 Ibid.
21 Asani, Ecstasy and Enlightenment, p. 33.
22 Ibid., p. 33.
as well as the famous king Shiddharaj Jayasingha.24 This earliest pir is supposed to have composed at least nine short ginans as well as a granth (a long ginan carrying a title).25

The second major pir in the Ismaili tradition is the 12th century Pir Shams Sabzwari, a preacher associated with the Ismaili Imam Qassim Shah (c.1310-1370 C.E.).26 Popular tradition has identified Pir Shams with Shams-i Tabrizi, the mysterious mentor of the great Muslim mystic, Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273 C.E.).27 According to the historian Sabt-e-Hassan, Pir Shams was one of the earliest Siraiki and Punjabi poets. A community of his followers in Punjab—the Shamsis—practiced their faith in secret, and came out as Ismailis only in the last century. Pir Shams converted many Hindu villagers at Alvand in Gujarat, where he is said to have joined in their Garba dance during the festival of Navaratri (which literally refers to the “nine nights” of worship and devotion to the Hindu goddess Durga or Mata bhavani, the fearsome Mother).28 Garba is a graceful form of dance among the Gujaratis and it is performed during the festival of Navaratri over nine nights. The mausoleum of Pir Shams is in the Centre of Multan.29 Pir Shams composed almost 106 ginans, including 28 garbis (ginans accompanied by traditional Gujarati dance), and 9 granths in Punjabi, Siraiki, Sindhi, Gujarati and Hindi languages.

One of Pir Shams’s ginans explains the difference between Hindu and Muslim, singling out their ritual peculiarities, while making the deeper contrast between worship of the from heart and worship of externalities:

In my heart He lives, Allah
The Creator, He who fashioned
Nature’s eternal scheme.

Say, O mullah! Say,
O qazi! Who was it
Who made this universe?


25 Ismail K. Poonawala, Bibliography of Ismaili Literature (Malibu, Ca., 1977) p. 298.

26 Asani, Ecstasy and Enlightenment, p. 33.

27 Nanji, Nizari Ismaili Tradition, pp. 61-65.

28 Kassam, Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance, p. 106.

From this dust
Was this entire world made.
Who shall we say
In all this
Is the Hindu? And the Musalman?

The Hindu is he who proceed
To the sixty-eight shrines.
The Musalman, he who proceeds
To the mosque.\(^{30}\)

Pir Sadardin, who lived in the 14th century, is the next most well known Ismaili Pir. His dawa was mostly concentrated in Sind, Punjab, Kutch and Kathiawad. According to Ismaili tradition Pir Sadardin is credited with establishing the first Ismaili Jamat Khana (congregational hall) at Kotdi, Sind.\(^{31}\) Moreover, Pir Sadardin bestowed the title “Khoja,” derived from the Persian word Khwajah (respected gentleman). He is also credited with initiating the Ismaili prayer, dua. He composed approximately 214 ginans and 15 granths. His mausoleum is in Ucch Sharif, close to Multan. In one ginan, Pir Sadardin describes the concept of God:

He has no color or form,
Nor does His name without conform.
Secretly burns His flame;
A million names, but He has no name.\(^{32}\)

In 1470 CE Pir Sadruddin was succeeded by his son, Pir Hassan Kabiruddin, to whom are attributed at least seventy-nine short ginans and seven granths.\(^{33}\) After Pir Hassan Kabiruddin’s death, there was considerable dissension over succession to the office of Pir. His nominated successor and brother, Pir Tajad-din, was rejected by a section of the community in favor of his son, Imam Shah. Pir Tajad-din’s mysterious death plunged the community into crisis. Imam Shah’s son, Nar Muhammad Shah (d.c. 1534 C.E.) assumed his father’s responsibility and organized the Imam Shahi sect following his father’s death. Imam Shah wrote fifteen granths and 162 short ginans while Nar Muhammad

\(^{31}\) Asani, Ecstasy and Enlightenment, p. 33.
\(^{33}\) Poonawala, Bibliography of Ismaili Literature. p. 303.
Shah has two important *granth* to his name. However, on account of the Imam Shahi schism and the Ismaili Imam’s subsequent condemnation of the Imam Shah, the Khojas continuing to recite these compositions regard them to be less authoritative works.

Following the Imam Shahi crisis, the age of the great *pirs* came to an end. However, *ginans* continued to be composed into the early twentieth century by persons known as *sayyids*. The most notable of these is a woman saint, Sayyida Imam Begum (d. 1866) whose ten *ginans* are extremely popular today. She is buried in the Mian Shah cemetery in Karachi.

The *ginans* were transmitted largely through oral tradition. They appear to have been put into writing only much later in their history. Many questions about *ginan* authorship as well as their transmission remain unresolved. Authorship attributions of many *ginans* can be challenged on linguistic and literary grounds. Wladimir Ivanow believed that few *ginans* were actually written by the old *pirs*, holding that they were produced instead by later devotees. Likewise, Azim Nanji wrote that *ginan* compositions might have been the work of later disciples. Further research is required in order to understand better the origins of these religious poems, and to answer questions that seem at present to be unanswerable.

**Islamic and Hindu Aspects of the Ginans**

Research in ginanic literature suggests that Ismailis in India were originally Hindus, probably Vaisnavites, or devotees of the deities of Ram and Krishna. Some historians argue that the *ginans* employ Indian or Hindu mythological and theological concepts to present religious ideas, and question their “Islamic” character. But, as Farhad Daftry mentions, most of early Ismaili history was written by anti-Ismailis, for the major conquerors were Sunni Muslims, and hatred of Ismailis arose all over the Muslim world with the decline of the Fatimid Empire. It is thus very hard to locate positive aspects of Ismaili

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34 Ibid., pp. 304-6.
missions in these histories. As a response to Sunni persecutions, Ismailis observed taqiya, living sometimes as Sufis, and sometimes as Hindus.

Wladimir Ivanow, a prominent scholar of Ismaili history, published a seminal monograph on Satpanth Ismailism, in which he investigates the reasons for the success of Ismaili dawa in the subcontinent and surveys Satpanth literature and religious practice. He attributes the success of the Ismaili preachers to the following strategies:

Either by intuition, or sound and clever reasoning, the Nizari Ismaili missionaries devised…methods depending on two principals. One was their bold tactics in separating the meaning and spirit of Islam from its hard Arabic shell. The other was their concentration of efforts on a few definite castes.

Likewise, Sabt-e-Hassan mentions:

The best strategy of Ismaili missionaries was that they always merged and blended Islamic teaching into local culture. Due to pluralistic strategies of Ismaili missionaries, Hindus did not see Islam as an anti-religion or culture. The Ismaili missionaries used the simple Islamic concepts in the easiest local languages of the Indian subcontinent. They never required local people to learn Arabic or adopt Arab culture. Sometimes Ismaili missionaries did not pressure Hindus to exchange their names for Muslim ones. It was truly the Ismaili mission work that converted large numbers of Hindus to Islam and because of their positive nature and pluralistic approach, the earliest tribe, Sumro, became Muslim, and after that Samah converted to Islam.

As Ali Asani has explained, pirs presented Islam, in its Nizari Ismaili form, in languages, terms and concepts that were familiar to their Indic audience. In a religiously diverse environment, pirs used an indigenous Sanskritic term panth (path, doctrine, or sect) to refer to the religion they were preaching. Their preferred term for Ismaili Islam was therefore Satpanth, the true or correct path, and a term that echoes the Quranic concept of sirat al-mustaqim, the right and straight path. The most dramatic instance of this controversial “mixing” of traditions occurs in the “classic” Dasa Avatars, which, through a process of mythopoiesis, seeks to create an ostensible correspondence between the Vaisnava

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40 Kassam, Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance, p. 71.
Hindu concept of *Avatar* (reincarnation) and the *Ismaili* concept of the *Imam*. Hindu tradition held that Lord Visnu would be reincarnated on earth ten times. Of these ten reincarnations, Lord *Rama* was believed to be the seventh, Lord *Krishna*, the eighth, and *Buddha*, the ninth, while the tenth, called *Kalki*, was still awaited. It was believed that the *Kalki*’s mount would be a horse and his weapon would be a sword. Attributes of this tenth *Avatara* of the Hindu deity *Visnu*, renamed *Nakalanki* (the unblemished One) in the *ginan* tradition, match exactly with the Imam *Ali*, the first Shi’i Imam.44

A prominent scholar of South Asian Islam, the late Aziz Ahmed, felt that the *ginans* possessed a “literary personality” that is “un-Islamic,” presumably on account of their vernacular and “syncretistic” characteristics.45 Such judgments have, in turn, provoked debate within the Ismaili community concerning the validity of using what are perceived as the externals of culture—such as language and idiom—as yardsticks for measuring Islamic identity. Yet, when the religious identity of the *Khoja* community was the subject of intense dispute, the courts of colonial British India drew on evidence from the *ginans* to determine that the *Khojas* were indeed Muslims of the Nizari Ismaili persuasion.46

Musical sounds play a vital role in the religious rituals and social life of South Asian peoples. Recitation of religious scripture and devotional poetry is foundational to the Sikh (*shabad and kirtan*), the Hindu (*bhajan*) and the Muslim (*qawwali, Kafi* and *ginan*). In all three cases, words set to music become a persuasive medium for articulating an emotional religious message. The beauty of poetry and tunes of devotional songs are able to attract those who hear and recite them into a community where the devotees share their devotion through listening and sharing religious songs. Beyond devotion, *ginans* incorporating Hindu religious metaphors were effectively used to convert South Asian Hindus to Shia Islam, enabling Ismaili missionaries to make a major contribution to the spread of Islam in India. In the same manner Sufis also used many Indic ideas to spread the message of Islam to the masses of the Indian subcontinent. However, the message of *ginans* is ultimately derived from Islamic principles.

**A Selected List of Performers and Recordings**


44 Ibid., p. 62.


46 See, for example, the famous *Khoja* Case of 1866, presided over by the Bombay High Court Judge Sir Joseph Arnold, described in Asaf A.A. Fyzee, *Cases in the Muhammadan Law of India and Pakistan* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 504-49.
sung with utmost humility), and a garbi. Singing in several languages, including Gujarati, Hindi, and Punjabi, she is accompanied by Indian and western musical instruments, including tabla, harmonium, keyboard, and guitar. The CD is available by email request; contact Anil Balolia: abalolia@busybeetools.com.


Sultana, too, is originally from East Africa, and currently living in Canada. On this recording, she incorporates some Middle Eastern instruments to underscore Ismaili connections to Egypt. Most of the selection is based on the popular ginans, except one, Kalame Mowl (sayings of Hazrat Ali, in Hindi). Instrumental arrangements include keyboards, winds, and percussion. Available from World Chart Records: (514) 276-4760/Fax: (514) 276-5033.


Anar Kanji is originally from East Africa, and currently lives in Vancouver. Her classical vocal style is very different from that of the above singers. In addition, she uses traditional Indian musical instruments to express the connection between ginan tradition and other musical traditions of the subcontinent. Accompanying her performance are harmonium, tabla, percussion, violin, and santoor. While she sings some of the popular ginans, most of her selection conveys the strong message of love of God, mystical experiences, and devotion to the Imam. Available through the Ismaili community in Vancouver, or email Karim Gillani, kgillani@ualberta.ca.


Dr. Hyder Alidina is a classically trained musician from Pakistan, who has been exploring the ginan tradition for the past forty years. In these two volumes, Dr. Hyder presents ginans together with gurus of classical music, such as Ustad Vilayat Ali, Ustad Bashir Khan, and Ustad Salam Hussain. His ginan performance is accompanied by Indian musical instruments including tabla, Indian flute (bansuri), sitar, manjira (percussion) and harmonium. Dr. Hyder’s mission is to standardize the centuries-old ginan tradition in its original form. Before each ginan recording, he describes the raag (melodic mode), and taal (rhythmic cycle). Trained singers, such as Mrs. Khursheed Bhaloo and Taufeeq Karamali, sing in chorus. Available in Karachi, Pakistan, or email Karim Gillani, kgillani@ualberta.ca.

Most of the ginans presented on this CD contain the message of eternal life, love, and devotion to the Imam. All ginans are sung in a very traditional style, without accompanying musical instruments. An important feature of this CD is the inclusion of translations by Dr. Tazim Kassam. Contact dmsproductions@shaw.ca. Also available from Dr. Tazim Kassam, tkassam@svr.edu.


   In this collection, Zarina has made a significant contribution by recording and preserving more than six hundred ginans. Like Hyder Alidena, she aims to standardize ginan tunes through preservation. The tunes of some of her recorded ginans are slightly different from the way they are traditionally recited within the community. For the past eleven years, she has daily taught ginans to hundreds of students in Karachi. CDs are available from the performer; contact: kamalzar@svber.net.pk.


   Shabnam is originally from Pakistan and learned ginans from the legendary ginan guru Jafer Sadiq Surmawala. She is also a professional ghazal singer. Most of her selections of ginans contain the message of salvation, love and meditation. She is currently dedicated to preserving the five hundred quatrains of Anant Akhado, written and composed by Pir Hassan Kabiruddin in the 15th century. Contact Shabnam Merali, asmerali@telusplanet.net.

**Websites:**

- www.iis.ac.uk/library_iis/gallery/ginans/ginans.htm
- www.ismaili.net/hegina.html
- www.salmanspiritual.com/ginans.html