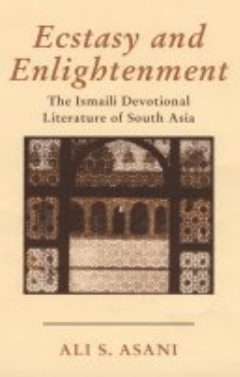
The Institute of Ismaili Studies



Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia

By Ali Asani

London: I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2002. pp xxii + 183.

ISBN: 1 86064 758 8 (Hb)

A Reading Guide*

Asani's work is arranged in an anthology of very readable short essays and an appendix of English translations of several *ginan*s from the Ismaili tradition of the Indian Sub-continent, known in its formative period by the name Satpanth.[1] Asani's analysis of the devotional literature of the Satpanth tradition is divided into seven essays which one might group into three parts: the introduction; an analysis of themes in *ginan*s and *git*s;[2] a history and analysis of the Khojki script.

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[1] The term 'satpanth' literally means 'true-path', familiar in Arabic as *sirat al-mustaqim*. Asani uses the term Satpanth to refer to the particular form of Ismailism in the Indian sub-continent and its diaspora and as a synonym for 'Khoja', a term that is described in note 3 below. In the remainder of this Reading Guide, however, the more general term 'Ismaili' will be used.

Other studies and translations of the *ginans*, the devotional literature that is the subject of Asani's work, include: Aziz Esmail's *Scent of Sandalwood*, London 2002; Christopher Shackle and Zawahir Moir, Zawahir. *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia: An Introduction to the Ginans*. London. 1992; and Tazim Kassam's *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: Hymns from the Satpanth Ismaili Muslim Saint, Pir Shams*. Albany, NY, 1995.

[2] The *git*s are described by Asani as devotional 'folk songs' and unlike *ginan*s are still composed.

Asani argues that the ginans must be read with an awareness of the historical conditions in which they were produced, and identifies three such 'contexts' – the Indo-Muslim, the Indic, and the Ismaili.

The introductory essay defines Asani's scholarly approach to the *ginan*s. He argues that the *ginan*s must be read with an awareness of the historical conditions in which they were produced and identifies three such 'contexts': the Indo-Muslim, the Indic, and the Ismaili. These three 'I's' recur throughout the essays and a sense of the Indic is especially strong in the middle chapters. In Chapter Two, 'The Ginan as Devotional Literature', Asani reviews debates in *ginan* studies: the origins of the *ginan*s; their collection and compilation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; and their relationship to the Qur'an as well as to the vocabulary of Hindu religious movements of the time.

His following chapter, 'Bridal Symbolism in the Ginans', maps the appearance of this ubiquitous trope within the religious landscape of mediaeval North India, while Chapter Four on the *git* tradition relates how love for the Imam continues to be expressed through folk songs in the modern period. Chapter Five examines the issue of the authorship of the *ginan*s. In addition to examining the evidence for various claims of authorship attributed to the *ginan*s, Asani discusses the value of this scholarly inquiry for the community for whom this literature is alive as a practice of devotion.

The last two chapters of the book study the development of the Khojki script, used exclusively by the Khoja Ismailis in the Indian sub-continent, from the eighth to the middle of the 20th century.[3] Here, Asani reviews how Khojki evolved from a mercantile script to one used for recording sacred

[3] The Satpanth Ismailis of the Indian sub-continent included converts of various castes. Tradition has it that the Persian title '*khwaja*' was bestowed upon converts from the Lohana caste by Pir Sadr al-Din (d. 1400 CE). This Persian honorific, meaning 'master', became popularized in Indian vernaculars as 'khoja', the term used to refer to Ismailis of the Satpanth tradition today.

writings. By using archaeological evidence, as well as studying the scripts of the *ginan*s, Asani attempts to discern the role the *pirs* played in the origin and evolution of Khojki. The essays in *Ecstasy and Enlightenment* thus situate the *ginan*s in linguistic, theological as well as historical landscapes, and approach these landscapes through the categories that constitute Asani's tripartite framework of 'contexts'.

As mentioned above, Asani argues that the three contexts in which the ginans must be understood are the Ismaili, the Indo-Muslim and the Indic. Asani, along with others, argues that the Ismaili community in the Indian sub-continent was established through the efforts of missionaries (*da'i*s, referred to as *pirs* in the *ginans*) sent from the seat of the Imamate at the Ismaili state in Alamut, Persia.[4] The missionaries, referred to as *pirs* in the *ginan*s, were sent to India to propagate the Shi'i Ismaili faith. The relationships that were cultivated between Ismaili believers and their *pir*s were not unlike those in Sufi communities of the region, which also valued adherence to a spiritual guide and the development of the individual and ascetic dimensions of religious life.

Followers of Sufi *tariqah*s and other Islamic communities were part of the Indo-Muslim milieu in which the Ismaili tradition evolved. These communities differed in their relationships to the indigenous non-Muslim population, and Asani identifies two broad trends of practice within these relationships: the 'separatist' and the

[4] The dissemination and propagation of Ismailism in northern India has been attributed to the *da'wa*, a network of hierarchically organized missionaries. This institution was sustained by the Ismailis in Iran after the fall of the Fatimid state in North Africa, and sent *da'is* to the Indian sub-continent perhaps as early as the 11th century.

'assimilationist'. The 'separatists' included religious elites and patrons of the various Muslim courts who preferred to keep their 'Turko-Persian' heritage separate from the religious practices of the indigenous population, such as one 14th century religious leader who forbade his Muslim followers from using 'linguistically Indian terms' to refer to God.[5] The 'assimilationist' trend, on the other hand, contained those Muslim groups that borrowed local vocabulary and symbols to express their devotion to God and thereby developed a closer relationship to indigenous practices of piety. Asani describes how Sufi communities, and the Chishti *tariqah* in particular, blended Hindu and Muslim practices of devotion:

> The shaykhs of the Chishti Sufi order, for example, promoted the creation of devotional poetry on Islamic mystical themes in local languages which, in its attitudes, expressions and similes, was strikingly similar to that written by poets influenced by the tradition of *bhakti* devotionalism. In several Hindi-speaking areas of northern India, Chishti patronage led to the development of mystical-romantic epics in various Hindi dialects in which local Indian romances were retold by poets who incorporated within them a mystical symbolism embedded in Sufi ideology. Sufi poets in Sind and Punjab appropriated within an Islamic context the theme of *viraha* (love-in-separation) and the symbol of the *virahini* (the woman longing for her beloved). Both were associated in the Indian devotional tradition with the longing of the *gopis* (cow-maids), particularly Radha, for the *avatara* Krishna. Following the Indic literary conventions, they represented the human soul as a longing wife or bride pining for her beloved who could be God or the Prophet Muhammad.[6]

Like the Chishti Sufis, the Ismaili Muslims developed devotional literature that was permeated by the imagery of Hindu devotional texts. The *ginan*s of the Ismaili tradition were also deeply influenced by the anti-Brahmanical movements ubiquitous in northern India between the 11th and the 17th

[5] See Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment*, 9.

[6] Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment*, 8. The Chishtis being a particular Sufi group or path, known as a *tariqah*, are also renowned throughout the Islamic world for their integration of music into practices of worship; the shrines of past Chishti shaykhs are sites of the recitation of *qawwali*s, devotional poetry sung with instruments. See, for example, Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence. *The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond: Sufi Martyrs of Love*. 2002.

centuries. These movements opposed the priestly Brahmins' monopolization of religious authority and their exclusive use of Sanskrit to express religious devotion. The *bhakti* and *sant* movements, like Satpanth Ismailism and the Chishti *tariqah*, emphasized interior worship over ritual practice, exalted love for the Divine as a means to salvation, valued the remembrance of the Divine name, and asserted the necessity of a spiritual guide (*guru*) as a means to unity with the Divine. Their poetry borrowed from the Indian vocabulary of marriage and kinship to express human relationships with God. As mentioned in the previous citation from Asani's text, one symbol found in the poetry of all these movements is the *virahini* - the woman (bride) longing for her lover (husband). The *virahini*'s beloved could be, depending on the audience, God, the Prophet Muhammad, the Ismaili Imam, a Sufi shaykh, Krishna, or Vishnu – a testament to the remarkable openness and 'portability' of this devotional literature.

The Indic context clearly informed the worldview of the communities that embraced Islam. Asani argues that the spread of Shiʿi Ismaili Islam in northern India entailed the conversion of entire castes or sub-castes via the *pir*s who presented Shiʿi Ismaili Islam as the fulfillment of indigenous religious ideals. The doctrine of Imamate was thus translated into and explained through the religious idiom of Indian tradition. This idiom enabled an understanding of the central institution of Shiʿi Islam, the Imamate, and also offered a vocabulary through which believers could understand their relationship to the Imam. Metaphors of vision and light are examples of traditions used to capture the relationship between the believer and the divine. In Ismailism, the devotee longs

for a vision, *darshan*, of the divine light, *nur,* that is bequeathed to each new Imam through his sacred genealogy descending from the Prophet Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law Ali, the first Shiʿi Imam and his daughter Fatima. As in the other Indian traditions, the longing for the vision of this *nur* is represented through the *virahini*'s desire to see her beloved:

I thirst for a vision (*darshan*) of You, O my Beloved!
Fulfil my heart's desire, O my Beloved!
I thirst in hope for You;
Yet, why do You not show the slightest concern for me?
I serve you with total devotion;
So why then, Beloved do you turn away (from me) so angrily?
. . .
A fish out of water, how can it survive without its beloved (water)?
For the sake of its beloved, it gives up its life.
A fish out of water is so lonely;
See how it writhes and dies (in agony)!
It writes and convulses in vain,
While the fisherman shows no mercy.

Consider the love of the bee to be false!
For this is certainly not the way to gain the vision of the Beloved!
Consider the love of the bee to be false!
It flits from one flower to another, sipping nectar.
Such are the ways of careless and blind people, devoid of virtues,
(So self-centred) that they cannot sacrifice their lives for the Beloved.

Consider the love of the moth to be true!
For this is the way to gain the vision of the Beloved!
Consider the love of the moth to be true,
As it deliriously gives up its body.
On account of a single candle,
So many moths offer their lives![7]

Asani explains that according to the cosmology of esoteric traditions within Islam, longing for union with the Divine, the way the moth longs for the flame, is considered a re-union, since the Divine is the Origin of all souls with which He made a primordial covenant.[8] Thus this excerpt from one *ginan* carries imagery that is reminiscent of both the Qur'an and the vernacular

[7] Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment*, 162.
[8] See, for example, Asani (59): "The concepts of a primordial gathering … allude to a verse in the Qur'an (7:172), where God called the future humanity (out of the loins of the yet uncreated Adam) and addressed them with the words 'Am I not your Lord (*alastu bi rabbikum*)?' and they answered, 'Yes, we witness it (*bala shahadna*).' The idea of this primordial covenant between God and man is one that has made a deep impression on the spiritual outlook of Muslims…This event in pre-eternity commemorates the establishment of a lasting bond or relationship between God and His creation. It is a relationship that the Muslim mystic conceives of being based on love and obedience."

devotional poetry of medieval north India.

Just as the symbols of the *ginan*s are 'open' and portable amongst different traditions, the provenance of script in which they were recorded attests to the permeable boundaries between religious traditions of the time. While the Khojki (or Khojaki) script came to be used exclusively by the Nizari Ismailis of Sind, Gujarat and Punjab, it appears to have developed from a script in use in the eighth century, Lohanaki, used by the Hindu Lohana caste.[9]

Khojki was part of a group of scripts used primarily for keeping shop accounts and had all of the problems of other mercantile scripts of its time and place. Thus, while the *ginan*s attribute the invention of the script to Pir Sadr al-Din (d. 1400 CE), Asani argues that it is rather more likely that he contributed to its refinement to make it suitable for literary expression.[10] In addition to preserving the overlap in cultures of trade and religious devotion, the Khojki manuscripts preserve a variety of religious texts other than the *ginan*s. The manuscripts record legends about the prophets, lamentations over the martyrdom of Shia Imams, numerous amulets, magical formulae and folk remedies, and do so in several languages, including Sindhi, Gujarati and Hindi. Asani remarks on the tremendous value of these manuscripts for the collective memory of the Khoja Ismailis:

> The presence of this medley of literature in the Khojki manuscripts throws light upon the diverse cultural and religious strands present in the Nizari Ismaili community of the subcontinent until the early 20th century when it experienced a gradual transformation of its identity. As a written record reflecting a bygone era and its religious mores, the Khojki manuscript tradition provides our only glimpse into an aspect of

[9] Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment*, 101.

[10] Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment*, 101.

Khoja religious life which otherwise would have been lost.[11]

While one must turn to Khojki manuscripts to capture the religious mores of a 'bygone era' in Ismaili history, the ethos of the tradition is still alive in its *git*s, or folk songs, as well as the *ginan*s. Devotion to the Imam is expressed in the modern *git* tradition which continues to be produced in South Asian languages and recited on festivals in the Indian sub-continent as well as in the international diaspora of South Asian Ismailis.

The value placed on being blessed with the vision of the *nur* of the Imam is very much alive within the community today. The *ginan*s are indeed a valuable cultural legacy of religious tolerance and pluralism, especially in a time where extremists want to sow division and conflict between 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'.[12] Asani has written elsewhere about the role of the *ginan*s in their relationship to the changes in Ismaili identity in the sub-continent in the twentieth century.[13] In *Ecstasy and Enlightenment*, however, his remarks on the authorship of the *ginan*s, the role of the *ginan*s as commentaries on the Qur'an, and the modern changes to the language of the *ginan*s are also valuable for understanding how this religious literature and the community that reveres it is changing in the modern period.

At the dawn of the 21st century, religious affiliation continues to be

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[11] Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment*, 144.

[12] To understand the fluidity of religious traditions in medieval India see Dominique-Sila Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia*, London, 2004.

[13] Asani, Ali. 'The Khojas of Indo-Pakistan: The Quest for an Islamic identity" JIMMA, 8, no.1 (1987), pp.31 – 41.

an important marker of identity for people throughout the globe. The devotional literature of the South Asian Ismailis is a living tradition. Some examples are available through the IIS website: (http://www.iis.ac.uk/library_iis/gallery/ginans/ginans.htm)

As the *ginan*s circle the globe they risk being dissociated from the context of their origins. Ali Asani's *Ecstasy and Enlightenment* is therefore an invaluable and timely guide to the history and ethos of this unique South Asian Muslim tradition and prepares one to think about the challenges it encounters in the modern world.

Questions to Consider

1) Are devotional songs and poetry unique to South Asian Muslims? Give some examples of melodic recitation from other Muslim communities.
2) What memories does listening to the *ginan*s or reciting them evoke for you?
3) To what extent is the language of devotional literature central to its meaning in an individual's religious life?

The Geographical Provenance of the Ginans. Map reprinted with permission from A. Nanji, *The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*. Delmar, 1978.