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# Introduction:
# The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in South Asia

This book is a compilation of essays concerning the literary tradition of the Nizari Ismailis of India and Pakistan. These essays introduce readers to various aspects of a rich and unique devotional literature that has, until recently, received little or no attention from students of Islamic or South Asian literatures. Who are the Nizari Ismailis of India and Pakistan? Among the subcontinent's Muslim communities, the Nizari Ismailis are well known for the extensive social, educational and philanthropic activities of their Imams known as the Aga Khans and the various institutions they have established to promote social, economic and cultural development in the region; as well as the community's prominence in financial and trade circles, and for the highly structured nature of its institutions and organizations. Aga Khan III Sir Sulṭan Muḥammad Shāh, the Ismaili Imam from 1885 to 1957, played a prominent leadership role among the Muslims of pre-partition India and in the Pakistan movement. He also served for a short time as the President of the League of Nations, the predecessor to the modern United Nations. Moreover, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, also had his roots in this community.

In terms of religious doctrine, the Nizari Ismailis, in common

with other Shi'i Muslims, hold that upon the death of the Prophet Muḥammad guidance of the Muslim community continued in his progeny through a succession of Imams descended from his daughter Fāṭima and his cousin and son-in-law 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Over the course of time, the Shi'i Muslims crystallized into different factions, mainly based on disputes over succession to the office of Imam and later over differing interpretations of the nature of the institution of Imamate. The Ismailis derive their name from the fact that, following the death of Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq in 148/765, they supported the cause of his eldest son Ismā'īl, while the alternative group, who came eventually to be called the Ithnā'asharīs (Twelvers), followed the line of his brother, Mūsā al-Kāẓim. Similarly, when in 487/1094 there was another dispute concerning succession to the Fatimid Ismaili Imam-caliph al-Mustanṣir, the Nizari Ismailis were those who supported the claims of his son Nizār (d.488/1095), while the Musta'lī Ismailis followed his younger brother, al-Musta'lī.[1] At present, the Nizari Ismailis are the only Shi'i community with a living Imam in the person of Prince Karīm al-Ḥusaynī, Aga Khan IV (b.1936). The Ismailis believe that he is a direct descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, being their 49th Imam through the line of the Imams 'Alī, Ismā'īl and Nizār. As *Ḥāżir Imām* (Present Imam) or *Imām-i Zamān* (Imam of the Age) he has the sole right to interpret the faith and provide authoritative guidance to his followers on spiritual and worldly matters. It is on account of their allegiance to the Aga Khan that the Nizari Ismailis are sometimes called 'Aga Khanis' by other Muslims, a term that the Ismailis never use for themselves.

On the basis of differences in ethnicity, cultural traditions and historical evolution, we can, at present, distinguish two distinct groupings among the Nizari Ismailis of the subcontinent. The first, centred in northern Pakistan, particularly around Hunza, has been strongly influenced by its connections with the Central Asian world; the second has been historically and culturally associated with the western regions of the subcontinent, specifically Gujarat, Sind and Punjab. The essays in this volume focus primarily on the literary traditions of the second group. Members of this group have also been popularly known as Khojas, Shamsis, Momnas or Satpanthis.

The term *satpanth* means 'the true path,' the name under which Nizari Ismailism was preached to them in the past. Today the Nizari Ismailis of the Satpanthi group are found scattered in most parts of modern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. They are specially concentrated in western India around Bombay, in Gujarat and Kutch, and in the Sind region of Pakistan. Many have also migrated to various areas in the Indian Ocean region, in particular East Africa, and more recently to North America and the United Kingdom.

## The Satpanth Ismaili Tradition and its Contexts: Ismaili, Indo-Muslim and Indic

The development of the Nizari Ismaili Satpanth tradition in South Asia can best be understood if it is considered within three overlapping cultural contexts. The first is a transnational or global one, for it places the tradition within the broader historical context of Ismailism as it has manifested itself and evolved in many different cultural areas beyond the Indian subcontinent. Thus, through their institutions such as the *da'wa* (mission) and the Imamate, the Ismailis of South Asia were connected as early as the 4th/10th century to historic centres of Ismaili power in Egypt and later in Iran, where their Imams once resided and from where they directed the affairs of their followers. While transnational or global influences on the development of Nizari Ismailism in the subcontinent have been important through the centuries, they have now become particularly significant as the Nizari Ismailis of the region are inextricably linked to Ismaili communities in other parts of the world through their central administrative headquarters at Aiglemont in France, the residence of the current Imam.

The second context is an Indo-Muslim one, placing the Satpanth Ismaili tradition within the overall framework of the growth of Islamic institutions and movements in the Indian subcontinent as well as the establishment of political rule in the region by various Muslim groups. From the 5th/11th century onwards, when Muslim dynasties of Central Asian or Turkish origin gained political power over parts of northern and western India, several

Sunni rulers deemed it necessary to physically eliminate Ismailis whom they considered to be heretics and political dissidents.[2] Obviously, such persecution has had significant consequences on the character and nature of the Nizari Ismailism. Unable to declare their tenets openly, adherents were forced to observe *taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation). On the other hand, the tradition has been equally influenced by its complex and often enigmatic relations with other Muslim religious groups in the region, particularly various Sufi orders. In many instances, to circumvent possible persecution, Ismaili *pīrs* (preacher-saints) appear to have adopted the guise of Sufi teachers. Consequently, over time, non-Ismaili populations have come to regard them as holy men in the Sufi tradition rather than in the Ismaili one.[3] The blurring of Sufi and Ismaili boundaries is also evidenced by the strong mystical character of the Satpanth Ismaili literature.[4] And yet, relations between Ismailis and Sufis were not always positive, for we also have evidence of an intense rivalry. For example, in the region of Punjab, particularly around Multan and Ucch, the relationship between the *shaykh*s of the Suhrawardi order and the Ismaili *pīrs* was fraught with friction and tension as a result of competition for adherents.[5] Bahā al-Dīn Zakāriyyā (d. ca. 666/1267), a prominent Suhrawardī *shaykh*, is said to have played an active role in converting Ismaili populations to Sunni Islam.[6] In the contemporary period, Nizari Ismaili identity continues to be profoundly impacted by developments in the Indo-Muslim context, particularly by the emergence of a variety of reform and revivalist movements which promote neo-conservative interpretations of Sunni Islam and monolithic definitions of what it means to be Muslim.[7]

The third context is an Indic one within which the Satpanthi Ismaili tradition interacted at various levels with local cultures and folk traditions as well as indigenous religious groups such as *bhaktas*, *sant*s and Shaivaite ascetics, particularly the Nath *yogis*. Moreover, the corpus of Satpanth Ismaili religious literature was composed in local Indic languages, utilizing poetic forms drawn from various folk traditions. At the level of religious ideas, symbols and concepts from the Indic context permeate the tradition,

albeit in a reformulated form.[8] In some instances, the Ismaili *pīrs*, as representatives of the tradition, are even portrayed as ascetics or *yogīs*. The designation of this context as Indic, rather than Hindu, is deliberate and has a double intent. The first is to avoid the pitfall of several scholars of Satpanth Ismailism who have projected modern notions of religious identity, developed in the context of intense communalism and nationalism in colonial and post-colonial India, onto the study of the past. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the prominent historian of religion, has pointed out, the use of the term 'Hindu' for an adherent of a 'world religion' called 'Hinduism' is a 19th-century construct and originated in the attempt by Westerners in India, especially missionaries, to lump together everything that they found that was not 'Islamic' religiously.[9] Indeed, an examination of the use of the term 'Hindu' in the pre-modern milieu within which the Satpanth Ismaili tradition developed reveals that the term had predominantly a geographic, cultural or ethnic nuance rather than a religious one.[10] A second justification for the use of the term 'Indic' is to circumvent another fallacy that perceives the subcontinent's cultures to be intrinsically 'Hindu,' by projecting a specific religious identity onto indigenous cultural elements such as language, literature, art, music and so on. For instance, the Bengali language, widely spoken by a substantial number of Bengali Muslims, has been perceived by some as a 'Hindu' language and, therefore, a non-Islamic one. Suspicion of the vernacular, the Indic, as non-Islamic among contemporary Muslim groups has had significant consequences on the manner in which many Nizari Ismailis currently relate to the Indic context of their faith. As they assert what is perceived to be a normative Islamic base for their identity, there is also a tendency to distance themselves or to de-emphasize the Indic context.[11]

Historically, each of these three contexts has played a profound role in shaping the evolution of the Satpanth Ismaili tradition in South Asia. Their contributions are manifest in the plurality of strands within the tradition, a plurality that has become increasingly difficult to sustain in the present as these contexts are buffeted by, and respond to, the polarizing forces of religious

nationalism and communalism and changing conceptions of religious identity. Approaching the study of the Satpanth Ismaili tradition within the framework of these three contexts, and appreciating the dynamic and fluid interaction between them, results in an integrated and finely nuanced understanding of the tradition and its ethos.

For instance, many scholars have remarked on the manner in which various elements of the Satpanth Ismaili tradition are acculturated or indigenized to the Indic milieu. They, however, differ widely in their perceptions of the character of the tradition. The pioneer of modern Ismaili studies, Wladimir Ivanow, conceives of the process of acculturation as one during which 'the meaning and spirit of Islam' were separated 'from its hard Arabic shell'[12] and two cultures [religions] welded together into one 'with remarkable tact and intuition.'[13] Others have judged the process to be a syncretistic phenomenon, a random and irrational combination of elements drawn from different religious traditions and have, therefore, raised questions about the identity of adherents. Hence Bernard Lewis, a historian, declared Nizari Ismailis in South Asia as 'Hindus under a light Muslim veneer.'[14] The late Aziz Ahmad, scholar of several works on Islam in South Asia, grouped them with other 'syncretic' sects of indeterminate identity, declaring that their chief interest is as 'curiosities of mushroom religious growth.'[15] Consequently, he declares that the *ginān*s, the tradition's principal literary genre, 'lack the Islamic personality.'[16] Wilferd Madelung, a prominent scholar of Shi'i Islam, considers these hymns in which 'Islamic and Hindu beliefs, especially popular Tantric ones, are freely mixed' to be devoid of theological or credal content.[17] To be sure, there have been other scholars who have reacted against such characterizations by raising serious concerns about the nature of the assumptions that underlie them. Azim Nanji, for instance, questions the use of a vague, unilateral concept of Islam or Ismailism as an index to measure the 'Islamic' character of a movement or literature.[18] Tazim Kassam attempts to show that the syncretism in the tradition is not 'a haphazard mishmash' but an intricate weave of Hindu and Ismaili ideas that creates 'a religious and cultural synthesis that sustained the

fledgling community.'[19] Dominique-Sila Khan argues that the term 'syncreticism' should be discarded altogether, for it is a convenient label employed when 'one does not have a better understanding of the various factors that led to a contemporary phenomenon' and results in 'a reductionist approach.'[20] Quoting M.I. Khan's work on Islam in Kashmir,[21] she proposes that we should not attempt to analyse a tradition such as Satpanth by 'cramping it into pigeon-holes of "cultural synthesis", "syncretism", "orthodoxy" versus "popular religion".'[22]

Although there is much to commend a critical examination of the manner in which scholars have perceived the phenomenon of acculturation and the categories they use, what most of these analyses overlook are the causes underlying the process of acculturation in the first place. For this, we need to recognize that these causes may, in fact, lie embedded in the triple contexts within which the Satpanth Ismaili tradition developed, namely the Ismaili, the Indo-Muslim and the Indic. When viewed from this perspective, we see that the acculturation of the tradition is a multifaceted phenomenon and reinforced by a set of factors, derived from diverse contexts, yet working in concurrence.

Within the Ismaili context, the impetus to acculturation can be traced to a fundamental impulse within the community wherever it has manifested itself geographically and historically. The Ismailis, in their attempt to understand the central aspect of their faith – the concept of the Imam – have called on the available tools of various philosophical and religious systems, making them highly adaptable to different political and cultural environments. According to Paul Walker, the Ismailis have:

> tolerated a surprising intellectual flexibility and leeway. That in turn has allowed men of various philosophical temperaments to enter into and promote with enthusiasm this particular kiud of Islam ... This fact may explain why the Ismaili movement attracted a number of brilliant and creative thinkers and also why others of equal brilliance seem to lean iu their direction.[23]

As a result of this ecumenical outlook, multiple motifs from many streams of thought manifest themselves in works by Ismaili authors from the earliest days of the community.[24] For example,

the scholarship of Henry Corbin has shown that during the Fatimid period Ismaili thinkers embarked on a remarkable formulation of Islamic, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Manichaean and Zoroastrian elements to elaborate the concept of the Imam.[25] That the tradition would react similarly to the religious environment of the Indian subcontinent by reformulating the concept of *avatāra*, for example, so that it corresponded with the Ismaili concept of Imam, is, therefore, hardly surprising. The motivation to integrate and reformulate, to acculturate to a different environment is specifically part of the Ismaili legacy.[26]

The Ismailis, however, were not the only Muslims who acculturated their traditions to the local Indian environment. From the very early periods of the development of the Islamic tradition in the subcontinent, we find individual Muslims and religious groups all over the region advocating and promoting the process of acculturation, actively fostering interpretations of Islamic concepts and ideas that could relate to the indigenous religious and cultural contexts.[27] The *shaykhs* of the Chishti Sufi order, for example, promoted the creation of devotional poetry on Islamic mystical themes in local languages which, iu its attitudes, expressions and similes, was strikingly similar to that written by poets influenced by the tradition of *bhakti* devotionalism.[28] 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.[29] Sufi poets in Sind and Punjab appropriated within an Islamic context the theme of *viraha* (love-in-separation) and the symbol of the *virahinī* (the woman longing for her beloved). Both were associated in the Indian devotional tradition with the longing of the *gopī*s (cow-maids), particularly Rādhā, for the *avatāra* 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 Muḥammad.[30] Beyond developing a common poetical language, some Sufis also adapted Indian practices of *yoga* and meditation to those inherited from the classical Arabo-Persian tradition. In an identical spirit, the

authors of the extensive *puthī* literature of medieval Bengal attempted to incorporate various figures of Indian mythology, particularly Krishna, an *avatāra* of the deity Vishnu, into the historical line of Islamic prophets which ends with the Prophet Muḥammad.[31]

Not all Muslims, however, were comfortable with this assimilationist strand, for it was vigorously opposed by those who espoused an exclusivist, separatistic position. Historically associated with the Muslim ruling and intellectual elite of a Turko-Persian origin, adherents of the separatistic strand desired to maintain their privileged status, as well as their ethnic and cultural difference, by disparaging and rejecting all Indian cultural manifestations. Many of the members of the religious elite, in particular, were anxious to prevent their religious identity from being absorbed and overwhelmed by 'an environment which could only be described as an anathema to their cherished ideal of monotheism.'[32] Typical of the separatistic attitude was the 8th/14th century spiritual leader Makhdūm-i Jahāniyān Jahāngasht (d. 787/1385) who prohibited his Muslim followers from using linguistically Indian terms in reference to God.[33] Similar sentiments were echoed several centuries later by Shāh Walīullāh (d. 1176/1762), an important religious reformer, who demanded that the Muslim community of South Asia substitute the customs of the Arabs for the 'foreign' customs they had adopted.[34]

Viewed within this dichotomy of mutually antagonistic stances among Muslim groups over the appropriate attitude to the local Indian environment and the plethora of Indic religious and cultural manifestations, the Satpanth Ismaili position is evident. Historically the tradition clearly belongs to the assimilationist mode, that is, among those whose vision and interpretation of Islam saw no contradiction between a person's religious identity and their full participation in indigenous culture. The fact that many Sufi groups with whom the Satpanthi Ismailis came into contact shared a similar attitude fostered the development of literary traditions with close parallels, particularly in their use of indigenous languages, symbols and motifs. This commonality was also crucial in circumstances when Satpanthi Ismailis had to

conceal their identity by observing *taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation) as Sufis. More recently, in the colonial and post-colonial periods, as notions of religious identity among the subcontinent's Muslims have undergone a radical change, elements of culture have been viewed increasingly from a purely religious perspective. Consequently, groups that were previously assimilationist have been forced to redefine their attitude vis-à-vis their acculturated forms and practices. As a result, there has been a general shift in attitudes towards the separatist pole. It is within this context that one may see significant changes within the contemporary Nizari Ismaili tradition in South Asia as acculturated modes of expression are modified in response to external changes and pressures. For instance, formulations of the faith within a Vaishnavite frame of reference, which were so central to the tradition for several centuries, have now been replaced by those that utilize universally understood Islamic concepts and emphasize the context of Islamic history.[35]

A significant aspect of the Satpanth Ismaili tradition's acculturation to the Indic milieu was vernacularization. That is to say that the bulk of the tradition's religious literature was written in various vernacular Indic languages and dialects rather than in Arabic or Persian, the traditional languages of Ismaili religious and literary discourse in the Middle East and North Africa. Beyond the use of local languages, Satpanthi literature also employed vernacular literary forms and structures, frequently incorporating imagery and symbols drawn from the Indian environment. Since much Indian devotional poetry in the vernacular is generally sung to specific melodies, the Satpanthi literary tradition also preserved this close association between poetry, music and performance, as is evident in the *ginãns*. We should not attribute the intensely vernacular character of Satpanthi literature to simply the tradition's impulse to acculturate to a local enviroument. Rather, when viewed from the perspective of the Indic context, we observe that the vernacularization of the Ismaili tradition carried, in fact, a much greater significance, for it mirrored trends in the broader Indian milieu.

The period between the 5th/11th and 11th/17th centuries,

during which the Ismaili tradition emerged and consolidated its identity, was a time of great religious ferment all over northern India. The ferment was a result of several popular counter-cultural movements challenging the long-established brahmanical tradition and its emphasis on the authority of the *brāhmins* (priestly class) and the Vedas. Among these movements, *bhakti* stressed love and devotion to the divine (manifested in the form of specific deities, such as Krishna) as the most efficacious mode of attaining salvation. Another, called the *sant* movement, on account of its association with *sants* (poet-saints of subordinate caste origin), rejected priestly and scriptural authority, the caste system, worship of traditional deities, and rituals and sacrifice, in favour of an interior search for the unqualified Absolute through *sādhanā* (meditation) of the divine name under the guidance of the *satguru* (true preceptor).[36] Under the older brahmanical tradition, religious life was dominated by the performance of numerous rites, rituals and strict adherence to *dharma* (correct conduct) within the caste system. Now, as a result of the *bhakti* and *sant* movements, these traditional elements were gradually abandoned in favour of a more egalitarian view that stressed the importance of personal religious experience and interiorized forms of religion over religious authority and ritual.

Integral to the challenge of the *bhakti* and the *sant* movements to the classical brahmanical tradition was the abandonment of Sanskrit, the official language of ritual worship monopolized by the priestly *brāhmins*, in favour of the vernaculars as means of religious expression. Probably inspired by the vernacular compositions of a small, though influential, group of wandering ascetics (the Nath yogis), *bhakti* and *sant* poets began writing poems in various local languages and dialects. Thus, poetry in the vernacular became the principal medium through which they attracted a great deal of mass support and effectively managed to undermine the brahmanical system. Along with newly emerging regional polities in the region which also patronized vernacular languages,[37] these religious movements contributed to the phenomenal blossoming of literatures in a wide range of vernaculars from all over the subcontinent.

Vernacular languages were preferred as vehicles of religious literature by not only the *bhakti* and *sant* movements but also, as we have seen, by the Ismailis and several Indian Sufi groups who employed local languages for composing mystical verse. This common feature among the traditions is, in fact, indicative of a deeper and more complex interrelationship. Increasingly, recent scholarship reveals that the *bhaktas*, *sants*, Sufis and Ismailis were all interconnected, although in precisely what manner is not yet clear.[38] One result of this interrelationship was a shared emphasis among traditions on certain themes: the efficacy of interiorized modes of worship over external ritual; the importance of love on the path to salvation; the power and effectiveness of remembering the divine name; and the pivotal role of the *guru* or spiritual guide. As a result, even though a tradition contained aspects that were doctrinally distinctive, it also had other aspects that resonated with kindred religious traditions. In expressing these analogous concepts, poets from different religious contexts drew from the same common pool of cultural and literary symbols and metaphors which, by not being anchored to a specific religious tradition, lent themselves to an open system of interpretation.[39] Consequently, certain symbols, such as the representation of the soul as a *virahinī* or yearning woman separated from her beloved, became pan-Indian symbols with each group interpreting them within its own frame of reference. For example, depending on the religious context, the *virahinī*'s beloved could be any one of the following: God, the Prophet Muḥammad, the Ismaili Imam, the Sufi *shaykh*, Krishna, Vishnu, the *guru* and so on.[40] The sharing of such 'open' symbols that could be interpreted in multiple, even contradictory, ways resulted in a literary phenomenon that Robin Rinehart, in her study of Punjabi poetry, has termed 'portability.'[41] A poem, hymn or song from one tradition became, in fact, 'portable' since a listener could interpret a central common core of thematic, symbolic and cultural elements within his or her particular religious framework. For our purposes, this would mean that a single poem could, in fact, be interpreted in three different contexts – Ismaili, Indo-Muslim and Indic – provided its symbols were 'open.'

Interestingly, manuscripts recording Ismaili devotional literature in Khojkī, a script unique to the subcontinent's Nizari Ismailis, show evidence of such 'portability' when they juxtapose poems originating from both the Indo-Muslim and the Indic contexts with Ismaili *ginān*s and other texts of Ismaili provenance.[42] Presumably, these poems of non-Ismaili origin, on acconnt of their language, structure and symbolism, could be interpreted by Ismaili audiences within an Ismaili framework. Similarly we can document instances of *ginān*s being 'transported' beyond formal Ismaili settings and their message being interpreted and appreciated within entirely different theological contexts. For example, in the 1950s, Mr Aziz Tejpar, a renowned *ginān* singer in East Africa recited *ginān*s in public forums much to the acclaim of Hindu and Sikh members of the audience who were able to relate to the poems within their respective religious frameworks. In a pamphlet celebrating the activities of Mr Tejpar's *ginān*-singing group, the Chairman of the Sikh Gurndwara at Arusha in Tanzania writes: 'We have enjoyed "Ginans" so much that we invite Mr Tejpar to sing some at our temples, we shall welcome him.' Seth Maganlal Rugnath Jeram, President of the Nakuru Indian Association, who presumably was Hindu by faith, comments: 'Ismaili Ginans are rich in philosophy and music. I request Mr Aziz Tejpar to stay longer at [*sic*] Nakuru and give us the opportunity to become hosts of the Ginan Party. The Indian Association of Nakuru will be happy to arrange a large function for such event. I assure you your short stay has not satisfied us, we wish to hear many more Ginans which were wonderful.'[43] These concrete examples underscore the dynamic interplay between the triple contexts within which the Satpanth Ismaili tradition is located.

## Conversion to Satpanth: Some Unanswered Questions

Although, presently, the Nizari Ismailis constitute a significant subgroup among the Muslim communities of South Asia, we are not at all certain about the actual processes by which Ismaili ideas spread in the region, or the reasons why the Satpanth tradition attracted adherents. The history of its origin and development is

confused and complicated by the fact that the traditional accounts of the *pīr*s, the preacher-saints commonly believed to have been responsible for converting local inhabitants to the Ismaili cause, are embedded in layers of myth and hagiography. Furthermore, since the preaching of Ismaili ideas was carried out in an inconspicuous manner in order not to attract undue attention and possible persecution, works by non-Ismaili Muslim authors contain almost no specific references to the Satpanthi Ismaili tradition and its adherents.

It is commonly assumed that the presence of Ismailis in the region was the result of the activities of a unique Ismaili institution, the *daʿwa* (mission), a formal, highly organized and effective system to propagate the Ismaili interpretation of Islam. The contemporary Nizari Ismaili community in South Asia traces the origins of the Satpanth tradition to the *daʿwa* originating in Iran. In the 5th/11th century, after a dispute over succession to the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt, supporters of Nizār (the Nizārīs), the eldest son of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustanṣir (d. 487/1094), broke all ties with the declining Fatimids and established an independent state centred at the fortress of Alamūt in northern Iran where the descendants of Nizār were proclaimed to be the rightful Imams. As a Shiʿi enclave in a predominantly Sunni environment, the state of Alamūt was constantly attacked by the Saljuqs who saw its presence as a threat to their suzerainty. Although Alamūt survived these attacks, it suffered a serious blow during the Mongol invasions of the 7th/13th century when it was forced to capitulate to the forces of the Mongol general, Hülegü, in 654/1256, with the Ismaili Imam, Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh, subsequently being murdered. Notwithstanding this disaster, Nizari Ismailism in Iran continued to survive under the guise of a Sufi order with the Imam as its *shaykh* or *pīr*. In the 9th/15th century, a new Ismaili centre of Ismaili activity emerged in Anjudān, central Iran, where the Nizari Imams took up residence.

Throughout these turmoils, Ismaili tradition claims, the Imams in Iran continued the *daʿwa* in the subcontinent through *dāʿī*s, also known as *pīr*s. Unfortunately, we have little historically reliable information about these *pīr*s, especially the earlier ones who

seem to have been active in the region of Gujarat and Sind from perhaps as early as the 5th/11th century. In the case of many *pīrs* we cannot be sure of even basic biographical details, such as dates of birth and death.[44] To add to the confusion, some of them seemed to have had Persian as well as one or more Indian names as a strategy for *taqiyya* and their desire to appear close to the indigenous population.[45] Significant questions relating to the organization of the *daʿwa* remain unanswered. We are not sure whether the *pīrs* worked alone or with the help of disciples. Did they receive specific instructions from Iran or did they operate more or less independently? Was there any central organization in the subcontinent or were there small isolated pockets of adherents with ties to the Imams in Iran, who were eventually consolidated into a larger community?

A great deal of ambiguity also surrounds the factors that may have attracted local populations to the Ismaili *pīrs* and their teachings. While there certainly were religious motivations, primarily of a soteriological nature, scholars have proposed a variety of additional explanations. Wladimir Ivanow attributes the success of the Ismaili *daʿwa* not only to religious zeal and enthusiasm of the preachers, but also to socio-economic circumstances such as the hard conditions of the masses, economic distress, poor administration and their acute discontent with the established order.[46] Tazim Kassam, on the other hand, based on the presence of what she refers to as 'political' allusions in the *ginān*s (such as references to kings, queens, armies and warfare), postulates that the initial impulse of the *daʿwa* was essentially political. Hence, she interprets the phrase *'pār utāro'* ('deliver to the [other] shore') a standard metaphor for religious salvation in medieval Indian devotional literatures, as also being a reference to 'political liberation' – local Hindu rulers seeking help from the Ismaili Imam in Iran to rescue them from their Sunni oppressors.[47] She therefore suggests that in its initial phases Satpanth embraced the ideals of a political liberation movement before it evolved into a pacifist and mystically-oriented form.[48] In contrast, Azim Nanji asserts that the *daʿwa* was non-political in its orientation and that references to the conversion of rulers probably 'reflect the urge to revive the

ambition in symbolic terms ... .'[49] He argues that since the *ginān*s belong to the category of esoteric literature, its statements appear in 'mythical state or are couched in symbolism.'[50] Concerning the process of conversion, he suggests that the Ismaili *pīr*s may have been closely associated with pre-existing Hindu caste groups of an 'intermediate' rank.[51] These groups, he asserts, tended to be professional units such as goldsmiths, farmers, traders, and that it was the economic strength of such units that may have played a role in attracting additional converts.[52] Dominique-Sila Khan believes that the Ismaili *pīr*s were perceived as charismatic holy men, similar to Sufi *shaykh*s, with powers to aid individuals with their worldly problems, and that their appeal was to the untouchables and lower castes. Ishtiaq Hussein Qureshi agrees that the initial appeal was based not on dogma or belief but rather by impressing on the potential convert the spiritual greatness of some person, usually the Ismaili 'missionary.'[53] The varying explanations given by these scholars indicate that the matter is too complex to have a single definitive answer. Given the paucity of concrete evidence, we may never really know what combination of factors motivated individuals to become Satpanthis.

In terms of the techniques, we know that the *pīr*s presented Ismaili concepts to Indian audiences in acculturated forms that were accessible to them within their indigenous cultural and religious milieu. And yet, we are not certain of the actual mechanics by which the *pīr*s approached potential converts. A 4th/10th century Arabic treatise describing the manner in which Ismaili *dāʿī*s engaged in proselytization in a Middle Eastern context reveals that the method adopted was 'secretive and individualized, not public and mass.'[54] The incognito *dāʿī* would identify a likely candidate and then gradually lead him through various pedagogical stages to the esoteric meaning of Ismailism.[55] While this text describes the operation of a paradigmatic *dāʿī* working on his own, Wladimir Ivanow dismisses this method as being totally impractical. He asks: 'How many thousands of such extraordinarily clever, tactful and learned missionaries would be required to convert a Berber tribe, or the inhabitants of one Persian or Indian village?'[56]

The pattern of preaching described in this text does not seem

relevant to the South Asian context on another count. Through descriptions in the *gināns*, we see that prosleytization to an acculturated form of Ismailism took place at a mass level. For example, the *garbīs* attributed to Pīr Shams consistently portray him addressing large groups of people or entire villages.[57] Given the Indian social context, it is logical to assume that the *pīrs* had to preach to entire castes rather than to individuals. In this regard, Wladimir Ivanow observes that since the spirit of caste in Indian society is 'much stronger than any religious principle,' it is unlikely that any individual would act alone and risk social ostracization.[58] The fact that individuals responded to the *pīrs*' teachings *en masse*, however, raises questions about whether this process could be called 'conversion' in the usual sense of the word. The modern usage of the word implies choice – an individual consciously choosing one belief system over another. And yet, as Ivanow points out, mass conversion is rarely a question of personal initiative or even personal conviction. Under such circumstances, religious considerations, however inspiring and attractive, rarely outweigh economic, political, social and other motives.[59]

The inadequacy of the term 'conversion' is also apparent when we examine the acculturated forms in which Ismailism was presented in the Satpanth tradition. As remarked earlier, the Ismaili *pīr* introduced his teachings as a natural culmination of local belief systems without totally 'rejecting the conceptual and even social framework of the society he has penetrated.'[60] Intrinsic to this approach was the acceptance by the individual of both his original beliefs and the newer ones in an integrated manner. If the individual still retained previous beliefs and practices and did not see the new faith as something radically different from the old, could this process be called conversion, a term that usually implies complete abandonment of the old in favour of the new? To describe this complex situation, scholars have proposed using terms such as 'incomplete conversion'[61] or 'adhesion.'[62] Dominique-Sila Khan, however, points out such terms imply value-judgements based on the perspective of the scholar and ignores the perspective of the participant. She prefers looking at the religious identity of such groups as being 'liminal.'[63] At some point in their history,

she argues, groups with liminal religious identity are subjected to processes of 'reIslamization' or 'reHinduization.'[64] These processes are initiated when they come into contact with external agents who have their own ideological index of religious identity by which they judge others. Under these circumstances, it is, therefore, more appropriate to view the process of conversion or acculturation as not a sudden act but rather a slow and gradual process, perhaps involving several generations, during which adherents respond to changing contexts, be they religious, socio-economic, cultural or political. Indeed, the recent history of the Nizari Ismaili community in the subcontinent bears witness to the gradual processes by which it has had to redefine its identity in the face of changing contexts.[65]

The fact that there are so mauy unanswered questions concerning the establishment and spread of the Ismaili Satpanth tradition no doubt indicates the extent of scholarly research that still needs to be undertaken before we fully understand the processes at work. One approach would be to examine the manner in which other Muslim groups in the subcontinent propagated their ideas and gained adherents. Unfortunately, the spread of the Islamic tradition in the subcontinent, too, is a process not fully understood. Moreover, colonial, religious, nationalist and communalist agenda have so influenced perspectives on this subject that Peter Hardy comments: 'to attempt to penetrate the field of the study of the growth of Muslim population in South Asia is to attempt to penetrate a political minefield.'[66] Traditionally, various theories have been advanced: people converted either under duress at the point of the sword, or to acquire political and economic patronage, or to escape the evils of the Indian caste system. None of these theories are adequate, for they are not supported by sufficiently convincing historical and sociological evidence.[67]

The Sufis have also been regarded as 'missionaries,' responsible for the peaceful spread of Islam in South Asia, using folk poetry in the vernacular languages as the primary medium through which they affected conversion among the masses. Recent scholarship has, however, raised important questions on the issue of conversion to Islam, particularly the role of Sufis in this process. As a

result, the function of Sufi folk poetry as being explicitly composed to convert people to Islam has been questioned. Carl Ernst, on the basis of his study of the Chishti Sufis of Khuldabad, observes that their vernacular compositions are so heavily laden with Islamic material that 'it is difficult to imagine them as devices to impart a knowledge of Islam to non-Muslims.' He argues that the verses could only be directed at an audience already familiar with the Islamic tradition.[68] On the other hand, Richard Eaton, in his study of Sufi orders in the Deccan, contends that the authors of Dakkani folk songs, whose lyrics contained various Islamic teachings, primarily desired to secure for themselves the role of mediators or intermediaries between God and the people who recited these songs. If, in the process of singing these songs, he writes, local populations became familiar with or acculturated to popular forms of Islamic practice, the phenomenon should not be construed as 'conversion' in the sense of a 'self-conscious turning around in religious conviction.' Nor should the authors be considered missionaries, or 'self-conscious propagators,' even though this is the general context in which Sufis often tend to be viewed.[69] In another study on the spread of Islam in Bengal, Eaton traces the diffusion of Islamic ideas to the spread of agrarian civilization. Here, too, he feels that in the context of pre-modern Bengal, it is inappropriate to speak of 'conversion' of 'Hindus' to Islam or of specific moments of 'conversion' when peoples saw themselves as having made a dramatic break with the past.[70] Instead, he sees the process of Islamization as a gradual and imperceptible process during which a community moves through various stages: inclusion, identification and displacement.[71] He further writes:

> Viewed historically, religious systems are created, cultural artifacts, and not timeless structures lying beyond human societies. As such they are continuously reinterpreted and readapted to particular sociocultural environments.[72]

Many of these observations are pertinent to our understanding of the development and spread of Satpanth Ismailism. Perhaps the most interesting concerns the role of literature in the

propagation of the faith. Although Sufi folk literatures may not have been explicitly written for conversion purposes, their role in acculturating populations to Islamic ideas is difficult to deny. Similarly, the Ismaili *ginān*s were also instrumental in spreading awareness of acculturated forms of Ismailism among populations, although we must be careful not to term this process as conversion. And yet, beyond their didactic role, the *ginān*s and the literary culture associated with them play a multifaceted role in the devotional life of the Satpanth Ismaili community. It is in consideration of this role that we now turn to the essays which follow.

## Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of the historical and doctrinal development of Ismailism, see Farhad Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990); and for a more synoptic view, his *A Short History of the Ismailis* (Edinburgh, 1998).

2. Azim Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (Delmar, NY, 1978), p. 68.

3. During my various research trips to the subcontinent, I found that many of the Ismaili *pīr*s buried in Punjab and Sind are considered by the general population to have been Sunni *shaykh*s of Sufi orders.

4. See Ali S. Asani, The *Būjh Niranjan: An Ismaili Mystical Poem* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), pp. 37–41, and Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition*, pp. 120–30.

5. There are several legendary accounts concerning the confrontation of the Suhrawardi shaykh Bahā al-Dīn Zakāriyyā and the Ismaili *pīr* Shams. See Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition*, pp. 53–4, and Dominique-Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities: Ramdev Pir and the Ismailis of Rajasthan* (New Delhi, 1997), pp. 35–7. During a visit to the Punjab in 1982, I found that the Ismailis of the region still consider the Suhrawardī *shaykh* Rukn-i ʿĀlam (d. 735/1334) to be 'an enemy of the faith.'

6. Ishtiaq Hussein Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610–1947),* (Karachi, 1977), p. 50.

7. See Ali S. Asani, 'The Khojahs of South Asia: Defining a Space of their Own,' *Cultural Dynamics,* 13, no. 2 (2001), pp. 155–68.

8. See Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition*, pp. 110–20; Tazim Kassam, 'Syncretism on the Model of Figure-Ground: A Study of Pir Shams' Brahmā Prakāsa,' in K.K. Young, ed., *Hermeneutical Paths to the Sacred Worlds*

*of India* (Atlanta, 1994), pp. 231–42; and Gulshan Khakee, 'The Dasa Avatāra of the Satpanthi Ismailis and Imam Shahis of Indo-Pakistan' (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1972).

9. Wilfred C. Smith, 'The Crystallization of Religious Communities in Mughul India,' in M. Minovi and I. Afshar, ed., *Yād-Nāme-ye Irānī-ye Minorsky* (Tehran, 1969), p. 22.

10. Carl Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany, NY, 1992), pp. 22–37.

11. See Ali S. Asani, 'The Khojahs of Indo-Pakistan: The Quest for an Islamic Identity,' *JIMMA*, 8, no. 1 (1987), pp. 31–41, and his 'The Khojahs of South Asia: Making a Space of their Own,' pp. 160–2.

12. Wladimir Ivanow, 'Satpanth (Indian Ismailism),' in W. Ivanow, ed., *Collectanea*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1948), p. 21.

13. Ibid., p. 27.

14. Bernard Lewis, quoted by Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, 'How Does Islam Stand?' in Gustav E. Grunebaum, ed., *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization* (Chicago, 1955), p. 8.

15. Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Delhi, 1964), p. 156.

16. Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India* (Edinburgh, 1969), p. 126.

17. Wilferd Madelung, 'Shi'ism: Ismā'īlīyab,' in Mircea Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 1987), vol. 13, p. 257.

18. Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismā'īlī Tradition*, pp. 131–5.

19. Tazim Kassam, *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: Hymns of the Satpanth Ismā'īlī Muslim Saint, Pīr Shams* (Albany, NY, 1995), p. 119.

20. Dominique-Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities*, p. 23.

21. Mohammad Ishaq Khan, *Kashmir's Transition to Islam: The Role of Muslim Rishis, 15th–18th Century* (New Delhi, 1994).

22. Ibid., p. 24.

23. Paul Walker, 'Abū Ya'qub al-Sijistānī and the Development of Ismaili Neoplatonism' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1974), p. 8.

24. Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismā'īlī Tradition*, p. 132.

25. Henry Corbin, 'Le Temps cyclique dans le Mazdéisme et dans l'Ismaélisme,' *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 20 (1951); 'Epiphanie Divine et naissance spirituelle dans la Gnose Ismaélienne,' *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 23 (1954); 'De la gnose antique à la gnose Ismaélienne,' in *Oriente ed Occidente nel Medio Evo* (Rome, 1957); 'Herméneutique spirituelle comparée,' *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 33 (1964). English translations of the first three articles appear

36. For a brief description of the characteristics of the *sant* and *bhakti* movements, see Charlotte Vaudeville, 'Sant Mat: Santism as the Universal Path to Sanctity,' in Karine Schomer and W.H. McLeod, ed., *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Berkeley, Calif., and Delhi, 1987), pp. 21–40.

37. See Sheldon Pollock, 'India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000–1500,' paper presented at the Center for International Affairs South Asia Seminar, Harvard University, 1997.

38. See, for example, Dominique-Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities*.

39. A.K. Ramanujan identifies a similar process at work in the retelling of the *Rāmāyana* during which authors 'dipped' into a 'common pool of signifiers' but emerge with different interpretations of 'crystallizations.' See A.K. Ramanujan, 'Three Hundred *Rāmāyana*s: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation,' in Paula Richman, ed., *Many Rāmāyanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Delhi, 1994), p. 46.

40. Ali S. Asani, *The Ismāʿīlī Ginān Literature: Its Structure and Love Symbolism* (B.A. thesis, Harvard University, 1977), pp. 43–50.

41. Robin Rinehart, 'The Portable Bullhe Shah: Biography, Authorship, and Categorization in the Study of Punjabi Sufi Poetry,' paper presented at Seventh International Conference on Early Literature in New Indo-Aryan Languages, Venice, 1997.

42. See Ali S. Asani, *The Harvard Collection of Ismaili Literature in Indic Languages: A Descriptive Catalog and Finding Aid* (Boston, 1992), pp. 21–2.

43. *First Anniversary of the Ginan Mandal, 'A Tract on Ginan Party'* (Dar-es-Salaam, 1956,) pp. 28–9.

44. For a reconstruction of the history of the *daʿwa* in the subcontinent, see Azim Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition*, pp. 33–96.

45. Dominique-Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities*, p. 48.

46. Ivanow, 'Satpanth,' p. 20.

47. Kassam, *Songs of Wisdom*, pp. 96–8.

48. Ibid., p. 122. For a critique of Tazim Kassam's theory, see Ali S. Asani's review of her *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance* in *JAOS*, 119 (1999), pp. 327–8.

49. Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition*, p. 68.

50. Ibid., p. 101.

51. Ibid., p. 68.

52. Ibid., p. 76.

53. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*, p. 41.

54. Derryl Maclean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind* (Leiden, 1989), p. 149.

55. Ibid., p. 149.

56. Ivanow, 'Satpanth,' p. 22.

57. See translations in Kassam, *Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance*, pp. 320–70.

58. Wladimir Ivanow, 'The Sect of Imam Shah in Gujrat,' *JBBRAS*, New Series, 14 (1936), p. 60.

59. Ivanow, 'Satpanth,' p. 22.

60. Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition*, p. 101.

61. Sachedina Nanjiani, *Khojā vrttant* (Ahmedabad, 1918), p. 14.

62. Maclean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind*, p. 151, where he defines adhesion 'as the adding on of additional beliefs to the converts' original system of beliefs or rituals.'

63. Dominique-Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities*, p. 163.

64. Ibid., pp. 164–7.

65. See Asani, 'The Khojahs of South Asia: Defining a Space of their Own.'

66. Peter Hardy, 'Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature,' in Nehemia Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam* (New York, London, 1979), p. 70.

67. For a detailed description and critique of these theories, see Hardy, 'Modern Europeau and Muslim Explanatious of Conversion to Islam in South Asia,' pp. 68–99 and Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (Berkeley, London, 1993) pp. 113–34.

68. Carl Ernst, *Eternal Garden*, pp. 166–8.

69. Richard Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300–1700* (Princeton, NJ, 1978), pp. 172–3.

70. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, p. 310.

71. Ibid., pp. 269–303.

72. Ibid., p. 314.