CHAPTER 1

Gināns: A Wonderful Tradition

Coursing through cultures and time, tuneful verse has given immediate and moving expression to the human longing for the divine. Poetry strung on sweet melodies, sacred hymns and songs bear testimony to the religious life of the devout and to the sonorous and inspiring vocal artistry of saints and minstrels. Such is the ginān tradition of the Satpanth Khojahs, Indian successors of the Fātimid and Nizārī Ismāʿīlī sect of the Shiʿah Muslims. A heritage of devotional poetry, the ginān tradition is rooted in the musical and poetic matrix of Indian culture where, from village street to temple stage, the human voice sings in love divine. Traditionally recited during daily ritual prayers, gināns have been revered for generations among the Satpanth Ismāʿīlis as sacred compositions (śāstra). The term ginān itself has a double significance: on the one hand, it means religious knowledge or wisdom, analogous to the Sanskrit word jñāna; on the other hand, it means song or recitation, which suggests a link to the Arabic ganna and the Urdu/Hindi gānā, both verbs meaning to sing.¹

The present imām or spiritual head of the “Shia Ismailis Muslims,” His Highness Prince Karim al-Ḥusaynī Āghā Khān IV, has plainly endorsed and recommended the ginān tradition many times to his followers in his directives (farmān). During his visit to Dacca in 1960, he described the gināns as a “wonderful tradition”.²

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. Dacca, 17.10.1960

Four years later, he reminded his followers in Karachi of the unique importance of the tradition:

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Many times I have recommended to my spiritual children that they should remember the *Ginaṁs*, that they should understand the meaning of these *Ginaṁs* 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 special, so unique and so important to my *jamat*. Karachi, 16.12.1964

The Satpanth Ismā‘īlis regard the *ginaṁs* as a sacred corpus of devotional and didactic poetry composed by their *dā’īs* or *pīrs* (revered teachers and guides) who came to the Indian subcontinent between the eleventh and twentieth centuries C.E. to preach Ismā‘īlī Islam. Known as Hind and Sind by medieval Muslim geographers at the time, this area stretched from the highlands of Baluchistan to the Bay of Bengal and from Kashmir to Sri Lanka. The landmass is now divided into the nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. The activities of the Ismā‘īlī *da‘wah* (mission) were mainly concentrated in the northwestern area of the subcontinent, including the provinces of Sind, Punjab, Multan, Gujarat and Mālvā, Kashmir, and present-day Rajasthan, Cutch, and Kāthiawād.

*Ginaṁs* are thus extant in several Indian languages, among which Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Sarāīki, and Sindhi are prominent. *Ginaṁc* vocabulary is also peppered with loan words from Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit. The songs are rich in imagery and symbolism drawn from the spiritual and cultural milieu of the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, they have been so deeply influenced by the distinctive religious idiom and vocabulary of Hindu, Šūfī, and Tāntric traditions that their links to Fāṭimid or Nizārī Ismā‘īlism are not easily discerned. The entire *ginaṁ* corpus consists of about one thousand works whose lengths vary from five to four hundred verses. Less than a tenth of this sizable vernacular South Asian Muslim literature has been edited and translated, much less analyzed.

**Ritual Performance**

The performative context of the *ginaṁs* and their intimate link to the ritual practices of Satpanth Ismā‘īlism demonstrate the central place of this tradition of hymns in the religious life of this South Asian Shi‘ite Muslim community. *Ginaṁ* recitation in the daily communal
services of the Satpanth Isma'īlis represents a long tradition of liturgical prayer. The religious meaning of these hymns is centered in their ritualized performance. Religious benefit is accrued by the actual vocalization or recitation of a ginān, and, thus, it is uncommon for a book of gināns to be silently read in prayer. In the context of Satpanth practice, gināns come to life when they are sung, and to sing a ginān is to pray. Singing is thus ritualized into worship, a characteristic feature of the religious setting of India. The ginān of the Isma'īlī pīr is the Satpanth counterpart of the Hindu geet, bhajan, or kirtan and forms a continuum in the expressive and inspirational aspects of the North Indian Sant and Bhakti traditions in the context of which poetry, melody, and communal worship fuse to create religious ardor. In terms of their ritual role, gināns function primarily as performative texts or songs inasmuch as the spirit of a ginān comes alive when it is being recited.5

According to the older religious specialists (al-wa'īzin) within the community, the melodies (rāg) of gināns were set by their composers to create the proper mood and disposition for prayer. The traditional view is that a ginān ought to be recited by heart truly to have effect because singing from a book places undue reliance on an external source and introduces an intermediary between worshipper and God. The most faithful rendition of gināns was once considered to be found in oral memory, not in written manuscripts.6 Hence, elderly ginān teachers of the community (jama'at) put great emphasis on the memorization of gināns, arguing that, as ritual prayer and invocations, they should issue directly from the heart. Only when thus memorized and internalized would gināns manifest the power of sābda (sacred word), a requirement analogous to that held for the efficacious recitation of the Qur’ān and the Vedas.

This unmediated link between the gināns and the believer’s heart is stressed, not only by an emphasis on memorization, but also on the correct receptivity or audition of the gināns. A verse from a ginān attributed to Pīr Šadr al-Dīn describes what impact the recitation of gināns may have on the heart of a devotee:

\[
gināna bolore nītā nūre bharīyā,
evā haḍe tamāre harakhanā māeji
\]

Recite gināns and the self fills with Light!
Thus will your hearts be made blissful.7

Gināns are also believed to have this power to transform and to enlighten if properly attended to. Many stories in the tradition de-
scribe the miraculous conversion to Satpanth of Hindus, bandits, wild beasts, and pigeons upon hearing the sweet and melodious words of the *gināns*. This belief in the transformative power of melodic recitation combined with the fervent chorus of congregational singing has been captured in a popular tale about the late Ismail Ganji. Reputedly an impious Ismāʿili of Junāgadh in Gujarat, he heard a verse of a *ginān* one evening in the *jamaʿat khānah* which so touched him that he burst into tears. Immediately, he repented his wayward ways and began a new life. So thoroughly did he reform himself that he was eventually appointed chief minister in the court of the ruler of Junāgadh.

As an integral part of their communal worship, the recitation of *gināns* in the religious life of the Satpanth Ismāʿilīs has served the multiple purposes of prayer, expressing devotion, and imparting the teachings of Satpanth. It is not surprising, therefore, that *gināns* are a deeply cherished tradition. G. Allana describes an attachment widely shared in the Satpanth Ismāʿilī community for this tradition of devotional singing:

Ever since my early childhood, I recall hearing the sweet music of the *gināns*. When I was a little boy, my mother, Sharfībāi would lift me, put me in her lap and sing to me the *gināns* of Ismailī Pirs. She had a very serene and melodious voice. I did not understand, then, as to what they were all about. I loved my mother, as well as her enchanting voice. My initiation into the realms of poetry and music was through the *gināns*.

Later on, Allana describes the stirring and uplifting mood created by his mother’s predawn recitations of *gināns* in the *jamaʿat khānah* (hall of prayer or assembly):

Everybody listened to her bewitching voice, singing a *ginan*. No other person, as is normally customary, dare join his or her voice with hers to sing in a chorus. . . . The fragrance of that spiritual atmosphere still lingers in my mind. . . . The weight of life’s burdens dissolved.

_Gināns_ are recited daily in the *jamaʿat khānahs* during morning and evening services. Unlike the Ṣūfī practice of _sama_ or the Hindu _kīrtan_, however, _ginān_ recitation is not (presently) accompanied by any musical instruments. A member of the congregation, male or
female, who knows how to recite gināns is usually called upon by the mukhī (chief of ceremonies) to lead the recitation. Although singers may vary in how they embellish the tunes, in general, they follow a simple and uniform melody. In most instances, ginān tunes can be learned without difficulty, and singers rarely have any formal musical or voice training. However, good singers are easily identifiable by their melodious voices, tuneful renderings, and correct pronunciation. Beautiful recitation is praised and encouraged, and it is not uncommon for individual members of the congregation to express personally their feelings of appreciation to ginān reciters. On special festivals, reputed reciters who can sing a large repertoire of gināns, and who have been noted for their moving delivery, are called upon to sing. These individuals, however, do not collectively constitute a special or distinct class of performers within the jamā'at (congregation).  

While the recitation of a ginān constitutes a ritual in itself, gināns also play a vital role in the conduct of other rites of worship performed by Satpanth Ismā'īlis in their jamā'at khānahs. This intimate relationship to rituals is indicated by the classification and arrangement of gināns found in several ginān manuscripts and printed editions. Specific gināns are indicated for different times and types of prayer, for special occasions, and for various religious ceremonies. Evening prayers, for example, usually commence with gināns that emphasize the importance of prayer during the auspicious hours of sunset. Certain gināns that dwell upon mystical themes are recommended for the subhu sādkhak (literally, the quester before dawn). These gināns are recited before or after periods of meditation in the early morning hours. Ventiño gināns are recited for the sake of supplication or petition for divine mercy. Ghaṭpāt gināns accompany the ritual of drinking holy water, and a subcategory of these are sung when the water is actually sanctified. Similarly, select gināns are recited at funeral assemblies, during the celebrations of Navrūz (the Persian New Year), and to commemorate the installation of the Imām of the time (hādīr imām). Thus, a native taxonomy of gināns has been developed within the tradition for specific occasions and ritual usage.

The recitation of gināns is not restricted to worship but permeates the personal and communal life of the Satpanth Ismā'īlis. Frequently, social functions and festive occasions commence with a recitation of a Qur'ānic verse followed by a few verses of a ginān. Various councils that administer to the religious and secular needs of the community may similarly begin their meetings with a ginān.
recitation. In addition to sponsoring ginān competitions to encourage beautiful recitation and correct pronunciation, the community occasionally holds “special concerts or ginān mehfīl mushā‘īro . . . during which professional and amateur singers recite gināns to musical accompaniment.”15 With the arrival of the tape recorder in the modern world, many mushā‘iras as well as individual singers have been recorded, and it is not uncommon to find prerecorded ginān audio tapes constantly replayed at a Satpanth Ismā‘īlī’s home to fill it with an atmosphere of devotion and invoke blessings (barakah) upon the household.

The significance of gināns in the Satpanth Ismā‘īlī tradition derives from this nexus among devotional song, ritual worship, and sacred community.16 The recitation of gināns marks off sacred time and space by creating a feeling of “majestic pathos and beauty,”17 while it also gives expression to a sense of communal identity and fraternity. Binding its participants to an experience of listening, singing, and feeling, this performative aspect of the ginān tradition has played a crucial role in sustaining the spirit of the Satpanth tradition and its teachings.18

**Historical Significance**

Given its vital role in their daily religious life, clearly the modern Ismā‘īlī community cannot be understood without a historical appreciation of the significance of the ginān tradition and of the evolution of Satpanth Ismā‘īlism in the Indian subcontinent. Not only has this cumulative tradition been pivotal to the genesis of a unique South Asian Shi‘ite Muslim subculture through the conversion and intermarriage of Ismā‘īlī Muslims with Hindus, it has also sustained and preserved a small and generally beleaguered religio-ethnic community over a period of some eight centuries. Furthermore, the successful creation and establishment of the Satpanth Ismā‘īlī community in the region of the Indian subcontinent has had economic ramifications that have helped firmly to secure the institutional foundations of the contemporary Ismā‘īlī community. Despite this role, it is a disquieting fact that scholarship on this Shi‘ah Muslim sect has yet to appreciate fully the religious and historical significance of Satpanth Ismā‘īlism.

It has been rightly remarked that the Ismā‘īlis are “a tiny minority of a minority within the Muslim faith.”19 The sect is estimated to be about eight percent of the Shi‘ah branch of Islam, itself compris-
ing a mere fifth of the Muslim world. The Isma'ili is an international community of about fifteen million people spread across more than twenty-five countries. As a result of successive emigrations throughout their history, Isma'ili communities are to be found in many different parts of the world. There are three main subdivisions within the present worldwide Isma'ili community based on ethnic origin, a common history, and cultural tradition: Middle Eastern, Central and East Asian, and South Asian. For many centuries, however, fearing persecution on account of their religious identity, the Isma'ili of Central and East Asia (Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Chinese and Russian Turkestan) and parts of the Middle East (Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Kuwait) have lived in secrecy. Hence, to date, little is known about the regionally specific religious practices and traditions of these Isma'ili communities.

Of the tributaries of successors of the Fa'timid and Nizari Isma'ili tradition, the most visible is the Satpanth Isma'ili community of the Indian subcontinent whose offspring are found in South Asia (Pakistan, India, Indonesia), Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, West and South Africa) and the West (Europe, Britain, Canada, Australia, and the U.S.A.). Mainly descendants of the Khojahs (the name of the Indian converts to Satpanth), these Isma'ilis have played a prominent role in shaping modern Isma'ili history, and in building up its numerous institutions. While this is slowly changing, Isma'ilis of South Asian descent currently occupy the most influential and high-ranking positions of Isma'ili regional and international councils, and constitute the main economic base of the community.

As political changes occur in Central and East Asia, Russia, and the Middle East, it has become increasingly apparent that, since the decline of the Fa'timid empire, pockets of Isma'ilis have managed quietly to survive in many discrete areas, and they have embraced over the centuries aspects of their cultural and linguistic environment. However, the existence of this plurality of Isma'ili traditions has yet to have an impact on the prevailing religious structures and mores of the modern Isma'ili community. The prevalent ritual and devotional ethos found among the Isma'ilis today in religious centers and prayer halls across the globe continues to be that of Satpanth Isma'ilism, the form of Isma'ilism that evolved in the Indian subcontinent. From showcase Isma'ili edifices, such as the Ismaili Centre at Cromwell Gardens in London and the monumental Burnaby jama'at khana'h in Vancouver, to simpler places of prayer and communal gathering spread across East Africa, Pakistan, and the Indian subcontinent, with the exception of the central du'a which is recited
in Arabic, religious ceremonies are conducted mainly in Gujarati or Urdu and follow the practice of the Satpanth tradition. In a world marked by constant and dramatic changes, particularly in the last two centuries, this heritage of Satpanth Ismā‘īlī devotions and practices has provided a liturgical language of continuity, stability, and cohesion to an otherwise scattered and often oppressed religious minority.

As noted earlier, despite the formative historical role of the Satpanth tradition, it has barely received the scholarly attention it deserves. This book is but a small step towards remedying this situation. Too little is known about the foundations of this stream of Ismā‘īlī Islam and how it spread from the Middle East to the Indian subcontinent through the deft maneuvers of Ismā‘īlī pīrs or preacher-poets. To investigate this early period, I have focused attention on the gināns attributed to one of the first preachers of the tradition, Pīr Shams. Next to an obscure figure who may have preceded him called Satgīr Nūr, Pīr Shams appears to have played a seminal role in the establishment of Ismā‘īlism in Sind. Part II of this work makes available for the first time a complete translation of an anthology of 106 gināns attributed to this venerable Ismā‘īlī dā‘ī of the twelfth century.  

In the first part of this book, I advance a theory of the origins of Satpanth that significantly revises current views concerning the formative period of the Satpanth Ismā‘īlī tradition. In general, the successful spread of Ismā‘īlī ideas in the Indian subcontinent has been viewed in terms of the literary activity and preaching of the pīrs which gave rise to the ginān tradition. That is, the Ismā‘īlī pīrs supposedly won converts to Ismā‘īlī teachings, which they called satpanth (true path), by conveying them in hymns using Hindu symbols and themes. However, a careful reconstruction of the historical period marking the entry of Ismā‘īlism into the Indian subcontinent and a cautious but trenchant reading of allusions preserved in the gināns associated with the name of Pīr Shams strongly suggests that the origin of Satpanth Ismā‘īlism was a much more complex affair involving not just religious but also political realities. I will attempt to demonstrate that, in addition to the inspirational oral teachings of the pīrs embodied by the ginān tradition, a number of social and political factors played a crucial role in giving birth to the unique form of Ismā‘īlism called Satpanth.