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 Fāṭimid and Nizārī Ismāʿīlī sect of the Shīʿah 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 Ismāʿīlīs 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 Imami Ismaili Muslims,"[2] His Highness Prince Karīm 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 *ginān*s as a "wonderful tradition":[3]

> 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:

> 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 special, so unique and so important to my *jamat.* Karachi, 16.12.1964

The Satpanth Ismāʿīlīs regard the *gināns* as a sacred corpus of devotional and didactic poetry composed by their *dāʿīs* or *pīrs* (revered teachers and guides) who came to the Indian subcontinent between the eleventh and twentieth centuries C.E. to preach Ismāʿīlī 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 Ismāʿīlī *daʿwah* (mission) were mainly concentrated in the northwestern area of the subcontinent, including the provinces of Sind, Punjab, Multan, Gujarat and Mālwā, Kashmir, and present-day Rajasthan, Cutch, and Kāṭhiāwāḍ.

*Ginān*s are thus extant in several Indian languages, among which Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Sarāiki, and Sindhi are prominent. *Ginānic* 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, Ṣūfī, and Tāntric traditions that their links to Fāṭimid or Nizārī Ismāʿīlism are not easily discerned. The entire *ginān* corpus consists of about one thousand works whose lengths vary from five to four hundred verses.[4] 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 *gināns* and their intimate link to the ritual practices of Satpanth Ismāʿīlism demonstrate the central place of this tradition of hymns in the religious life of this South Asian Shīʿite Muslim community. *Ginān* recitation in the daily communal

services of the Satpanth Ismāʿīlīs 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 Ismāʿīlī *pīr* is the Satpanth counterpart of the Hindu *geet, bhajan,* or *kīrtan* 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-wāʿiẓīn*) 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 (*jamāʿat*) 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 *śabda* (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 Ṣadr al-Dīn describes what impact the recitation of *gināns* may have on the heart of a devotee:

> *gīnāna bolore nīta nūre bharīyā,*
> *evā haiḍe tamāre harakhanā māejī*
>
> 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*.[8] 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 Ismāʿīlī of Junāgaḍh in Gujarat, he heard a verse of a *ginān* one evening in the *jamāʿat 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 Junāgaḍh.[9]

As an integral part of their communal worship, the recitation of *gināns* in the religious life of the Satpanth Ismāʿīlīs 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 Ismāʿīlī community for this tradition of devotional singing:

> Ever since my early childhood, I recall hearing the sweet music of the *ginans*. When I was a little boy, my mother, Sharfibai would lift me, put me in her lap and sing to me the *ginans* of Ismaili 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 *ginans*.[10]

Later on, Allana describes the stirring and uplifting mood created by his mother's predawn recitations of *gināns* in the *jamāʿat 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.[11]

Gināns are recited daily in the *jamāʿat khānahs* during morning and evening services. Unlike the Ṣūfī practice of *samāʿ* or the Hindu *kīrtan,* however, *ginān* recitation is not (presently) accompanied by any musical instruments.[12] 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 *jamāʿat* (congregation).[13]

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 Ismāʿīlīs in their *jamāʿat 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.[14] 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. *Ventījo gināns* are recited for the sake of supplication or petition for divine mercy. *Ghaṭpāṭ 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 (*ḥāḍir imām*). Thus, a native taxonomy of *gināns* has been developed within the tradition for specific occasions and ritual usage.[15]

The recitation of *gināns* is not restricted to worship but permeates the personal and communal life of the Satpanth Ismāʿīlīs. 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 mehfil/mushāʿiro* . . . during which professional and amateur singers recite *gināns* to musical accompaniment."[16] With the arrival of the tape recorder in the modern world, many *mushāʿiras* as well as individual singers have been recorded, and it is not uncommon to find prerecorded *ginān* audio tapes constantly replayed at a Satpanth Ismāʿīlī's home to fill it with an atmosphere of devotion and invoke blessings (*barakah*) upon the household.

The significance of *gināns* in the Satpanth Ismāʿīlī tradition derives from this nexus among devotional song, ritual worship, and sacred community.[17] The recitation of *gināns* marks off sacred time and space by creating a feeling of "majestic pathos and beauty,"[18] 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.[19]

Historical Significance

Given its vital role in their daily religious life, clearly the modern Ismāʿīlī community cannot be understood without a historical appreciation of the significance of the *ginān* tradition and of the evolution of Satpanth Ismāʿīlism in the Indian subcontinent. Not only has this cumulative tradition been pivotal to the genesis of a unique South Asian Shīʿite Muslim subculture through the conversion and intermarriage of Ismāʿīlī 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 Ismāʿīlī community in the region of the Indian subcontinent has had economic ramifications that have helped firmly to secure the institutional foundations of the contemporary Ismāʿīlī community. Despite this role, it is a disquieting fact that scholarship on this Shīʿah Muslim sect has yet to appreciate fully the religious and historical significance of Satpanth Ismāʿīlism.

It has been rightly remarked that the Ismāʿīlīs are "a tiny minority of a minority within the Muslim faith."[20] The sect is estimated to be about eight percent of the Shīʿah branch of Islam, itself compris-

ing a mere fifth of the Muslim world. The Ismāʿīlīs form an international community of about fifteen million people spread across more than twenty-five countries. As a result of successive emigrations throughout their history, Ismāʿīlī communities are to be found in many different parts of the world.[21] There are three main subdivisions within the present worldwide Ismāʿīlī 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 Ismāʿīlīs 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 Ismāʿīlī communities.

Of the tributaries of successors of the Fāṭimid and Nizārī Ismāʿīlī tradition, the most visible is the Satpanth Ismāʿīlī 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),[22] these Ismāʿīlīs have played a prominant role in shaping modern Ismāʿīlī history, and in building up its numerous institutions. While this is slowly changing, Ismāʿīlīs of South Asian descent currently occupy the most influential and high-ranking positions of Ismāʿīlī 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 Fāṭimid empire, pockets of Ismāʿīlīs have managed quietly to survive in many discrete areas, and they have embraced over the centuries aspects of their cultural and linguistic environment.[23] However, the existence of this plurality of Ismāʿīlī traditions has yet to have an impact on the prevailing religious structures and mores of the modern Ismāʿīlī community. The prevalent ritual and devotional ethos found among the Ismāʿīlīs today in religious centers and prayer halls across the globe continues to be that of Satpanth Ismāʿīlīsm, the form of Ismāʿīlīsm that evolved in the Indian subcontinent.[24] From showcase Ismāʿīlī edifices, such as the Ismaili Centre at Cromwell Gardens in London and the monumental Burnaby *jamāʿat khānah* 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 *duʿa* 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 Ismāʿīlī 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 Ismāʿīlī Islam and how it spread from the Middle East to the Indian subcontinent through the deft maneuvers of Ismāʿīlī *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 Satgūr Nūr, Pīr Shams appears to have played a seminal role in the establishment of Ismāʿīlism 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 Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī* of the twelfth century.[25]

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 Ismāʿīlī tradition. In general, the successful spread of Ismāʿīlī 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 Ismāʿīlī *pīrs* supposedly won converts to Ismāʿīlī 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 Ismāʿīlism 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 Ismāʿīlism 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 Ismāʿīlism called Satpanth.