The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Religious Traditions and Early Ismaili History in South Asia: Some Historical Perspectives on Satpanthi Literature and the Ginans

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groups is closely bound up with the transformation and evolution of local polities and societies. From the ninth century, Ismaili preachers were active in Sindh and from the late 11th century onwards there is evidence that the Ismailis had established small areas of influence all over northern India. Meanwhile, the political landscape was transforming. Local pastoralist chieftaincies were replaced or subdued by the Delhi Sultanate (1297-1526 CE) which sent armies over large parts of the subcontinent. Many local rulers were defeated and supplanted by governors from Delhi – as in Gujarat – while other chieftains retained their holdings on payment of tribute. Pastoralist clans migrated to Gujarat, Sindh and Rajasthan, settling and clearing new territories and establishing new principalities. Over time, many of these were incorporated into a widening network of clans who intermarried and established a hierarchy of status amongst themselves – later collectively called Rajputs. Other clans, some of whomh.2.1(arsl)7.2ncef nws.

the Caulukya king of Gujarat, Siddharaja (reigned 1094-1143 CE), is a good example of this genre. Here, the *da'i* Satgur Nur is said to have made the idol in the royal temple appear to dance

as marginal to the history of religious identity in South Asia. They are seen as lacking importance in the history of both Hinduism and Islam.[xxii] However, it is now becoming clear that such groups were much more significant than formerly believed and also commanded a widespread lay allegiance in South Asia. Further, medieval sectarian religiosity is closely bound up with the processes of caste and state-formation in Western India. Several indications and illustrations of these processes may be discerned in the Ginans and Satpanthi compositions.

Ginans and Other Contemporary Literature

To what extent was Nizari Ismailism in South Asia, usually known in the region as the Satpanth or 'the true path', a unified tradition? It has already been suggested that the search for continuities with the Fatimid tradition has its limitations and that the Satpanth was created out of uniquely sub-continental religious experiences.[xxiii] While it is clear that there are striking similarities in the

and religious themes, it may also help clarify aspects of mutual literary appropriation between traditions.

or Satpanthi groups continued to be active, they were more successful among groups that were marginal to the dominant networks of Rajputs in Rajasthan, who increasingly adopted high-caste Hindu practices. For example, the Ismaili-influenced Pranami sect became important in 16th-century Bundelkhand, then ruled by the marginal Bundela Rajputs.[xxxii] What then, was the nature of Ismaili influence on the history of such groups? Can clues be found in the ballad compositions?

5. The last and least explored area of possible comparison is the relation of the Satpanthi corpus with its contemporary Sanskrit literature, especially the Puranas.[xxxiii] While it might seem that the world of Satpanthi literature and its adherents belonged to a non-Sanskritic world, there are nevertheless links with the Sanskrit tradition that have not yet been explicated. How did figures

Conclusion

The history of the Ismailis in medieval South Asia cannot be de-linked from the history of

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[xxi] Khan, *Ramdev Pir*, passim.

[xxii] Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Subcontinent*. Oxford, 1964, p. 140.

[xxiii] Kassam, *Songs*, pp. 19-22.

[xxiv] Ali S. Asani, *Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia*, London, 2002, pp. 29-31.

[xxv] See among others, Khan, *Ramdev Pir*; Mallison, "Saints and Sacred Places in Saurashtra and Kutch"; Mallison, and Moir, "'Recontrer l'Absolu, O Ami'", p. 335.

[xxvi] Daftary, pp. 452-455.

[xxvii] , Hafiz Mahmud Shirani, "Gujari: Solahvin Sadi Isvi Men (Gujari: In the sixteenth century)," *Maqalat-i Sherani* II, Lahore, 1966.

[xxviii] Hugh van Skyhawk, "Sufi influence in the Ekanathi-bhagavat", *Devotional Literature in South Asia, Current Research, 1985-1988*, ed. R.S. McGregor, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 77-78, see fn. 23.

[xxix] Khan, *Ramdev Pir,* pp. 254-257.

[xxx] — —, pp. 76-77 and, Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking India's Oral and Classical Epics: Draupadi among Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits*, Chicago, 1999, pp. 2-4 and passim.

[xxxi] Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, passim.

[xxxii] Dominique-Sila Khan, "The Mahdi of Panna: A Short History of the Pranamis, Parts I-II", *Indian Journal of Secularism*, 6-7 (2003).

[xxxiii] Hiltebeitel explores the version of the Alha story in the Bhavishya Purana. See Hiltebeitel, *Draupadi*, passim.

[xxxiv] See, for example, the inscription of Brahmanwada (1175 C.E.) in G.V. Acharya*, Historical Inscriptions of Gujarat*, Bombay, 1933-1942, vol. III, No. 157B, and Patan (1199 C.E.) in A. S. Gadre, *Important Inscriptions from Baroda State*, vol. I, Baroda, 1943, p. 71.

[xxxv] Maclean, *Arab Sind,* p.132.

[xxxvi] D. R. Bhandarkar, "Ghatiyala Inscriptions of Kakkuka, S. 918", *Epigraphia Indica*, IX (1907-1908).

[xxxvii] Ludo Rocher, ed., *The Puranas, A History of Indian Literature* II, Fasc. 3, Wiesbaden, 1986, p. 132.

[xxxviii] — —, p. 133.

[xxxix] *Tirtha* and *sthala-mahatmyas* (compositions in praise of shrines or sacred places) were often attributed to the *Skanda Purana*.