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The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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whether geographical, intellectual or religious. With the demise of the Fatimids, however, and the restoration of Sunni Islam as the official religious denomination endorsed by the Ayyubid regime, books that were Twelver Shi'i and/or Ismaili in content are understood to have been destroyed. The purge nevertheless did not prevent the survival of some Shi'i and even Ismaili works which resurfaced decades later in libraries such as, for example, those of Ibn Ṣawūs and the Ashrafiyya.59

For all its triumphs and upheavals, it was ultimately the cultural, religious and economic fluidity that characterised Egypt under the Fatimids that transformed that region from a cultural backwater into a centre of intellectual activity serving as a launch pad for books to boldly go where no volumes had gone before.

On the Cusp of ‘Islamic’ and ‘Hindu’ Worldviews?
The Ginān Literature and the Dialectics of Self and Other
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Framing the Problem

Scholars have long sought to make sense of the multi-layered character of the Satpanth tradition. They have examined such aspects as the sacred vision it propounded, the contours of its rich and intricate worldview, the rituals and social practices its followers observed, the varied sources of inspiration behind its evolution, and the factors that have conditioned its growth over time. But whatever aspect they may have chosen to examine, and whatever sources they may have drawn upon in their quest, hardly any scholar has failed to bring into sharp relief the multivalent nature of its religious complexion. This complex ion is further envisaged to have been largely shaped by the ideas and practices that are now, in a different setting, readily identified with the reified categories of ‘Islam’ and ‘Hinduism’.1 To put it differently, the

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1 This point is illustrated by the following remarks of Françoise Mallison, which were made in connection with the method of preaching adopted by the agents of the Satpanth mission, as well as about the gināns, a major literary output of the tradition (see further on): "The utilization of Hinduism is not limited to points of doctrine but
tradition has now become firmly associated, both in scholarly discourse and popular imagination, with a paradigmatic case of how multiple strands of thought creatively interact and coalesce to form a kind of composite structure, defying the confines of narrowly constituted religious identities.

It is this facet of the legacy of Satpanth that has drawn much public attention and lately caught the interest of the newspapers in India. For instance, amidst the rising wave of communalism that India has experienced in recent times, the tradition (alongside others depicting similar traits) has served as a timely reminder of the country’s primordial ethos of tolerance and co-existence – a place where numerous faiths have flourished and lived together in harmony for centuries. In particular, observers have turned to the case of what is known as the Imamshahi branch of the larger, organic Satpanth - widely regarded as an offshoot of the Indian Nizari Ismaili tradition – to point up the ethos of communal politics in India, along with the attendant alienation and marginalisation of minority groups, notably Muslims. The shrine of the Satpanthi saint, Imām Shāh, at Pirana (a major centre of the Imāmshahi branch of the community, in the final analysis, in a Muslim Community, (Ahmedabad edition), September 19, 2010, p. 16; and ‘Ahmedabad’s sufi shrine Pirana shows unique confluence of faith’, Daily News & Analysis, March 4, 2011.

including the borrowing of metaphors, literary forms and all the ritual and cultural practices, to such an extent that the content of the ginān becomes a witness of contemporary Hindu practices and beliefs; see her ‘Hinduism as Seen by the Nizari Ismā’ili Missionaries of Western India: The Evidence of the Ginān’, in Günther-Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (ed.), Hinduism Reconsidered (rev. ed., New Delhi, 1997), p. 192.

2 See, for example, ‘In Incredible India, many faiths coexist’, Times of India (Ahmedabad edition), September 19, 2010, p. 16; and ‘Ahmedabad’s sufi shrine Pirana shows unique confluence of faith’, Daily News & Analysis, March 4, 2011.

being subjected to an overriding of what are held to be Islamic traces by similarly regarded Hindu symbols. This has simply turned the space into what is often dubbed a ‘mini Ayodhya’, evoking one of the painful chapters of Hindu-Muslim conflict in modern India.3

The direct ramifications of such an image of the multivalent character of Satpanth are nowhere more evident than in what has been made of the exact contours of its religious identity. With its roots going far back in history, the image has sharply divided scholarly opinion in recent times, producing at least two mutually incompatible viewpoints. The first, and a far more entrenched one, has long envisaged Satpanth as a local, Indic expression of what is known as the Nizārī branch of Ismaili tradition, which (as per this viewpoint) evolved on the Indian subcontinent over the course of many centuries through the work of Nizārī missionaries. By this token, the supposedly ‘Hindu’ symbols and ideas reflected in the literary and theological experience of the tradition and ritual life of the community, in the final analysis, were but an ingenious means of attracting Hindus to the Ismaili dispensation in the Indian context.4

Countering this long-held position, another school of thought has lately crystallised around the second viewpoint which sees the forthright identification of Satpanth with the Ismaili tradition as a more recent demarcation. As per this view, the demarcation was mainly


4 There is a long list of works espousing this viewpoint. Among the earlier influential studies, see especially Syed Mustafa Ali, The Origin of the Khoja and their Religious Life Today (Bonn, 1936); and W. Ivanow, ‘Satpanth’, in his Collectanea (Leiden, 1948), pp. 1–54. The viewpoint was further elaborated by a number of subsequent studies. For its more nuanced articulation in some recent works, see Ali S. Asani, ‘From Satpanthi to Ismaili Muslim: The Articulation of Ismaili Khoja Identity in South Asia’, in Farhad Daftary (ed.), A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community (London, 2011), pp. 95–128; and Shafique N. Virani, ‘Taqiyya and Identity in a South Asian Community’, The Journal of Asian Studies, 70 (2011), pp. 99–139.
imposed by the colonial legal apparatus in response to a series of legal disputes that surfaced among the Khojas of Bombay (forming one of the clusters among the followers of Satpanth) around the mid-nineteenth century. Following the logic of this thesis, it was more precisely the well-known Aga Khan Case of 1866 which almost operated like the culprit in what would amount to a plot for redefining the religious identity of the Khojas along different lines. It further holds that so far-reaching were the consequences of the lawsuit that it reshaped the self-image of the Khojas in how henceforth they understood their religious identity as 'Ismaili', an interpretation that was to be sealed by the aforementioned, well-entrenched trend of Satpanth historiography. The logical culmination point of the lawsuit was thus a gradual displacement of multivalent motifs in Satpanth beliefs and practices with a rigid trend of Islamisation during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.\(^5\)

At a deeper level what these two positions have sought to unravel is how the putative 'Islamic' and 'Hindu' symbols have interacted in the life of Satpanth, formulating in turn a particular paradigm. A paradigm that represented, from one standpoint, simply an encoded form of Nizâri Ismaili doctrine, while, from the other, little more than one of the many overlapping religious cults in early modern India, which shared popular modes of devotion centred around charismatic figures, and embraced the then prevalent social ideology against the 'orthodoxies' associated with Islam and Hinduism.

In fostering such portrayals of Satpanth, scholars have frequently (if not exclusively) relied upon the corpus collectively known as the ginân literature. The ginân are primarily a body of sacred lyrics (together with some prose works), composed in a variety of poetic forms, and in languages as diverse as Gujarati, Hindi, Sindhi and Punjabi. Among the Satpanthi communities they are regarded as literary masterpieces, embodying the teachings of individuals who are now revered in the tradition as pîrs and sayyids, the charismatic figures believed to have been active as proselytisers in India for a long time. Indeed, it is in the ginân literature that we find the earliest expression of the cherished ideals that have gone into the making of the Satpanth Weltanschauung\(^6\). Given their salient role in the religious life of the Satpanthi communities, ginâns have been the focus of a number of studies seeking to answer some of the vital questions pertaining to the historical evolution of the tradition.\(^7\)

This paper seeks to problematise the interplay between what are readily postulated as 'Islamic' and 'Hindu' motifs in the formation of the ideals of Satpanth, as seen through the lens of the ginâns. By looking at some specific examples from the ginân literature, I will demonstrate the complexity behind the aforementioned oversimplification, which portrays the interplay largely in terms of a process that seamlessly amalgamated elements from both the traditions either to facilitate a proselytising project, or to ingeniously formulate a structure that could not be easily identified with a narrowly construed religious identity. I will argue on the contrary that in fact one observes disparate planes of interaction between the ideas and cosmologies associated with the two religions operative on various levels in the corpus. They allow us to observe the manner in which different voices in the ginân understood and negotiated their identity vis-à-vis the categories 'Muslim' and 'Hindu'. It is moreover within these planes that we see the collective self of the tradition being articulated and etched against the backdrop of specific dialectics between self and other. All of these modes of interaction, in short, present a far from unified picture of the encounter, one that can be said to be characteristic of the entire corpus, much less the overall tradition. But before discussing the ginâns, it is important to say a few words about the perspective that informs

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\(^6\) Sat-panth literally means the 'True Path'. In the ginân, the idea is also invoked by other (less frequently employed) terms, like sat-dharam ('True Religion').

the approach adopted here towards the compositions in utilising them for the stated purpose of this paper.

Formulating a Perspective

The kind of eclectic vision invariably held to be borne out by the ginâns, along with its implications for the identity formation process of the communities that supposedly participated in this vision, has previously been assessed from diverse viewpoints. For example, some scholars have invoked the concept of 'syncretism' in characterising the phenomenon in question, albeit presenting it in a more positive light, rather than as a random amalgamation of disparate elements. Others have questioned or tended to do away with the problematic terminology explaining the phenomenon (including syncretism), and have proposed more neutral formulations, like 'acculturation', 'cultural adaptation' etc., paying closer attention to larger religio-cultural forces at work. Still others have not hesitated to put forward an overarching theoretical proposition, derived from models used elsewhere, to describe groups as having (at times too readily assumed) 'indeterminate' identities. A conceptual category that has lately found much currency in this connection is that of 'liminality', often employed to describe the religious experience of Indian Nizârî Ismailis.

8 Tazim Kassam illustrates the concept through the figure-ground representation of a goblet and two faces to show how diverse elements from Hindu and Muslim traditions were brought together in a ginân, Brahna Prakâsh, postulated as an ingenious approach adopted for conversion by Nizârî Ismaili preachers in India; see her 'Syncretism on the Model of the Figure-Ground: A Study of Pt' Shams' Brahna Prakâsha', in Katherine Young (ed.), Hermeneutical Paths to the Sacred Worlds of India: Essays in Honour of Robert W. Stevenson (Atlanta, 1994), pp. 231–242.


Indeed, such attempts to question and rethink the conceptual frames deployed to problematise the phenomenon are important and draw attention to many a critical issue that one ought to bear in mind in studying a multi-layered tradition like Satpanth. But a major problem with them is the manner in which they are applied in totality to, and taken as a representative image of, the range of expressions ensuing out of the historical experience of the tradition. For instance, in applying the idea of liminality to the tradition – understood as a threshold position serving as a gateway to multiple worlds – its proponents often overlook the fact that such a conceptual frame necessarily assumes a position halfway between stable, unchanging structures – in this case, the doctrinal systems associated with Hindu and Muslim traditions. When employed for traditions like Satpanth and the processes through which they evolved, the idea is defeated by an inherent logic which seeks to place it in a largely premodern setting, associated with what is seen as a world of fluid religious identities, and contrasted with a colonial/post-colonial epistemic order characterised as representing rigid identities. For what is ignored here is that the presumed stable structure outside the threshold space itself represents a far from fixed condition, in so far as it is formed by different agencies acting within their own set of discursive spaces. The notion of liminality, in short, disregards the fact that the Satpanth tradition (like others) was a product of a long process of negotiation during which certain forms of identity might well have sat (or were believed to have existed) outside the condition of a threshold, even if the logic of the notion (however problematic) were to be accepted. In other words, such forms of identity have constantly been in the making – at best, what has changed is the vantage point whence to assess and understand them. 11

11 In presenting this critique, I do not disregard the analytical value of the concept of liminality which has been fruitfully applied by Victor Turner and others in the study of a variety of transition forms, particularly rites of passage; see, for example, Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Ithaca, NY, 1977). What I am simply arguing is that, as a conceptual category, it has very limited relevance (if any) for understanding the experience of the Satpanth tradition for the reasons just stated.
This brings us to a connected issue of how the ginâns have been approached by scholars in deducing an image of Satpanth sacrality in premodern times. It is above all symptomatic of an overarching tendency in Satpanth scholarship to seamlessly project the entire spectrum of (roughly) the pre-1840s period (i.e. before the seat of the Nizârî imamate moved to India) as constituting a monolithic temporal space. This space is furthermore seen as reflective of an invariant set of dispositions with respect to the overall character of the tradition. To put it differently, scholars have frequently depicted this premodern Satpanth manifestation as a kind of hybrid of various beliefs that remained unchanged until the rupture following the so-called direct intervention of the Ismaili imams once they settled in India. Moreover, the kernel of this manifestation is believed to have consisted solely in and, therefore, is to be faithfully reconstructed on the basis of, a single literary tradition, namely the ginâns, considered to be the product par excellence of the putative Nizârî Ismaili preaching. This attitude and approach take us far away from a much needed differentiated view of the premodern space in the history of Satpanth, a long period that saw many shifts as the tradition encountered many an internal and external challenge, anchored on the issues of authority, legitimacy, and in some cases survival and assimilation, while responding to the exigencies of its immediate and larger socio-political setting.

One finds this tendency amply evident in how the particular dialectics in individual ginâns (along with their use of specific terminology and narrative strategy) are taken to form a uniform discourse, presumed to operate coherently throughout the corpus. An apt example of this attitude may be seen in a recent work by Teena Purohit on the Aga Khan Case of 1866 who offers an analysis of the Das Avâtâr, a ginân recounting the periodic manifestation of Viṣṇu in bodily form (see the next section) which was a point of discussion and contestation during the trial proceedings. In offering a critique of how Justice Arnould, the presiding judge, viewed (a certain version of) the Das Avâtâr in the lawsuit as an 'Ismaili conversion text', Purohit resorts to deploying a critical reading of the longer version (in particular its tenth section), one that is attributed to Imâm Shâh, ignoring completely the question of what prompted Arnould to examine the Das Avâtâr in the first place, as well as the fact that the plaintiffs had sought to manipulate its true character during the proceedings. This question was tied to perhaps the most important issue in the lawsuit reflective of the respective positions held by the plaintiffs and defendants, namely whether the Khojas were Sunni or Shi'î converts to Islam. Arnould decided this question through an exhaustive enquiry into the history and practices of the Khojas, including what appears to Purohit to be a simplified and problematic reading of the Das Avâtâr, but arguably not of a version (the one ascribed to Imâm Shâh) that she juxtaposes against Arnould's reading, but of a different one (attributed to Sadardin) that configures its own dialectic of the theme. Simply put, the kind of details that the longer version provides and the narrative it weaves together out of them, so vital for the framework Purohit constructs in presenting her arguments, are conspicuously absent in the much shorter, condensed version that Arnould evidently worked with.\footnote{Purohit, The Aga Khan Case. There are other important issues pertaining to methodological aspects of approaching the ginâns, such as their periodisation, the extent to which their discourses may be taken as the lived reality of the Satpanth communities, which are not discussed here. For a discussion of these issues, see Wafi Mo'min, The Formation of the Satpanth Ismaili Tradition in South Asia (PhD dissertation, The University of Chicago, 2016), especially, pp. 48–52, 113–130.}

In presenting an assessment of the ginâns – of how ideas and symbols from many different sources interact in their worldview – I will steer clear of suggesting any new construct that may be applied seamlessly to the corpus as a whole, which may then help us to understand the overall socio-religious evolution of the communities concerned. Instead, I propose to draw attention to a relationship between two notions that mutually inform each other and operate at different levels in the corpus, allowing the exploration of some key variations in ginânic thought overall and beyond. This is the discursive association between the notion of 'identity', a set of markers/symbols used by individuals or social groups to signify the terms of sameness and difference, and that of 'boundaries', the limits set by these agents to ensure the fostering of their identity, and to mark them off from others.\footnote{For some of these observations, I draw upon Fredrik Barth, 'Boundaries and Connections', in Anthony P. Cohen (ed.), Signifying Identities: Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Values (London, 2000), pp. 17–36.}

Approaching the ginâns and the broader history of Satpanth from the viewpoint of an interaction between these two notions – 'identity' and 'boundary making' – allows us to observe that what is invariably
posed as the Hindu-Muslim amalgamative character of the tradition is not a stable norm, but a condition constantly in flux, seemingly responding to the evolving circumstances of the groups concerned whereby a new set of boundaries was constantly being forged in response to a given form of identity privileged and fostered by particular agencies at specific times. Moreover, it is important to make a distinction between this process as taking place in the worldview of the ginâns, and the one outside it in the actual experience of the communities, for the two were not necessarily mirror images of one another. The ginâns at best serve as one of the windows through which this process may be observed. Paying attention to an interaction between these two notions further allows one to focus on particular voices (wherever they are retrievable) and the conditions under which a certain kind of premium was attached to foster a particular facet of an identity. Finally, when viewed from this standpoint, no given form of identity necessarily remains liminal, for the structures against which their liminal state is construed are themselves not stable blocs immune to change – they too are prone to transformations through the same process.

Examining the Ginân Archive

Turning to the archive of the ginâns, the most familiar and somewhat frequently encountered plane of interaction between what is postulated as the 'Islamic' and 'Hindu' worldviews is one where the compositions seek to present a harmonious vision. So pervasive is this mode of interaction that it has left an indelible imprint on the way the ginân literature is commonly envisaged, viz., as sitting on an intermediary terrain between the two religious traditions, with the kind of reductive depiction of Satpanth religiosity as outlined in the beginning of the paper. This form of interaction is more often found in those ginâns which deal with cosmo-eschatological and soteriological themes. However, what is important to bear in mind is that even while making use of such wide-ranging ideas from multiple sources as they do, the ginâns in question hardly circumscribe them under the Islamic/Muslim or Hindu typology, or for that matter any other strict classificatory categories.

Even a passing glance at the manifold discourses in the ginâns would make it plain that cosmo-eschatological and soteriological imaginings constitute a persistent concern which often takes the form of stories about the creation. The vision of such imaginings is, however, not explained in a systematic fashion in any specific set of ginâns. Rather, it is complex and multi-layered, enunciated throughout the corpus – a principle that also applies to other discourses in the compositions. There are nonetheless some ginâns which dwell exclusively (or predominantly) on such matters, and to illustrate the aforementioned mode of interaction, I will examine here the discourse of one such ginân, namely the Muman Citaveî.\(^{14}\)

In the Muman Citaveî, as in many other ginâns, the moment of primeval creation is first contrasted with an earlier condition when there was nothing save the Godhead, called here Samîji, whose identity is gradually unfolded using different epithets.\(^{15}\) Out of nothingness, Samîji first produced a cosmic egg from his mouth, nurtured it for some time, and then brought forth from it seven levels of earth and ten heavens.\(^{16}\) From the very onset, the text constantly refers to the twin forces of 'affection' (het) and 'pride' (aharînkar), revealing their saliency in the cosmogonic process, as well as that of 'divine play' (lilâ/ramat), often postulated as the reason why creation happened in the first place. Still a 'formless being' (nirâkîr) or 'eternal light' (nîr) – the text frequently alternates these names with others too, such as the 'designer/maker' (sirajânâhâr/kirâtâr) and the 'unstained one' (nîrinân) – the Lord thereafter fashioned four bodies from his light, in addition to forming his own body. From his forehead he created Muhammad,

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\(^{14}\) Composed in Gujarati, the ginân is conventionally attributed to Pir Sadardin. For a detailed analysis of the text, see Momin, _The Formation of the Satpanth Ismaili Tradition_, pp. 132–143 passim. References to manuscripts of the ginân housed at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (London) will be provided by 'KH' followed by the manuscript number, and to those housed at Harvard will follow the system of its catalogue, preceded by the prefix 'HC'. For the Harvard manuscripts, see Ali S. Asani, _The Harvard Collection of Ismaili Literature in Indo Languages: A Descriptive Catalog and Finding Aid_ (Boston, 1992). The collection at the Institute of Ismaili Studies is currently undergoing a systematic cataloguing.

\(^{15}\) Samî (from the Sanskrit svâmi) and Sahêb (from the Arabic sâhib) are two of the most frequently used epithets for the Godhead in the ginân literature.

from his chest Fāṭima, from his eyes Hasan and Husayn, while he himself manifested as 'Ali. He then created from these luminaries the 'Pole Star' (qubṭ tārā), but no sooner had he raised the star into heaven than the latter began to tremble from its brightness. Taking notice of it, the Lord had the name 'Yaʿ Ali' ('O 'Ali') written on its four corners and so made it stable. The star, in this way, became the source of light in the universe well before the sun and the moon were created. 17

The text then takes us through a process of perpetual creative activity on a cosmic scale, spread over hundreds of yugas (‘cosmic epochs’), with long periods of inaction too, in which numerous other beings and constituent elements of the universe were formed. First, the Lord created the Goddess Śakti (alternatively referred to as Māyā/Sarasvati), Brahmā (from the light of Muhammad), Viṣṇu (a manifestation of the Godhead himself) and Mahāsā (Mahāśvara/Siva), who is also depicted as Adam. Ḥawwā’ (Eve) was later created from the left part of Adam’s body (dābā arīg), and the human race thus came from them. Then followed the four Vedas, the angels, the world (sāṁśāra), living creatures (jīva) — their classification into a fourfold scheme, namely svedaja (‘sweat-born’), jarāyujja (‘viviparous’), anḍaja (‘oviparous’) and udbhija (‘sprouting’) — and, to account for their deeds, heaven and hell, as well as the sun, moon, stars, oceans, rivers, vegetation etc. 18

Throughout this process of creation, we constantly witness the divine play at work; for instance, Viṣṇu once makes Śakti believe that she herself is the proud creator of everything in the universe, the supreme deity, but the text alludes to the notion that human life needs to release itself from the illusion (māyā) created by her. 19

The creative agency of the Godhead (whose identity is unequivocally revealed as Viṣṇu) is clearly brought to the fore in the text, and although he often assures Brahmā that the world order was formed from his (Brahmā’s) light, it is Viṣṇu who serves as the raison d’être of the cosmos, Brahmā’s role in the cosmogonic evolution being subsidiary at best. We also find Brahmā time and again admitting his inability to know the secrets of the creation, harbouring doubts and relying frequently on Viṣṇu for comprehending the divine purpose in bringing forth the cosmic order, as well as his ignorance of the Vedas (with which he is entrusted from the onset of their production), whose knowledge Viṣṇu imparts to him. 20

The most striking feature of the text is the formulation of one-to-one equivalence between the Hindu deities and the Muslim luminaries, popularly known as the ‘Five Pure Ones’ (pañjam-i pāk). Thus, Viṣṇu is equated with ‘Ali, Brahmā with Muhammad, Fāṭima with Sarasvati, Adam/Siva with Īsā, while Ḥusayn is depicted as a form of Viṣṇu himself. In this structural typology, whereas one notices a functional similarity, partial as it may be, in (for instance) the roles ascribed to the prophet Muhammad and Brahmā in their respective traditions – both being connected in some ways with acts of creation – one also finds an evidently random association between other mytho-historical figures of the two traditions. Hence, it is hard to find any functional connection in the case of Fāṭima/Sarasvati and Īsā/Adam or Siva, except in so far as it serves to make the typology structurally consistent. 21 It is important to note that the text does not introduce any separate deity or mythological figure to form an equivalence for Ḥusayn. He and ‘Ali are the functional other of the Godhead (Viṣṇu), a pattern unmistakably exhibiting the working of some sort of theology in the background, for Ḥusayn is indeed regarded as an imam in the Imāmī Shi’i tradition, and therefore carries the same functional standing as the other revered imams (Imam ‘Ali included) in the tradition. 22 A functional equivalence is also introduced between

17 Ibid., vv. 8–13 (KH 868, ff. 146r–147r); printed text, pp. 2–3.
19 See, for example, ibid., vv. 107–116 (KH 868, ff. 160v–162r); printed text, pp. 16–17.
20 For references to Viṣṇu imparting knowledge of the Vedas to Brahmā, see ibid., vv. 32–40 (KH 868, ff. 149v–151r); for Brahmā’s ignorance of the creation, and his ‘light’ being the source of all the created elements, see vv. 238–273 (KH 868, ff. 179r–184r); printed text, pp. 5–7, 35–40.
22 It is the equivalence between ‘Ali/Viṣṇu and Muhammad/Brahmā that is consistently employed in the ginān literature, while the others are encountered less frequently.
23 It must be noted that whereas, in various facets of Ismaili thought, Hasan was included in the list of revered imams, among the Nizāris his name was dropped, affording him the status of a ‘trustee’ (mustawda’) imam as opposed to the ‘permanent’ (mustaqarr) one; see Farhad Daftary, The Isma’īlīs: Their History and Doctrines (2nd ed., Cambridge, 2007), p. 97.
the four Vedas of the Hindus and the holy books revered by Muslims and others as authoritative scriptures, embodying the divine revelation. Thus, the Rg, Yajur, Sama and Atharva Vedas are corresponded with the Torah, Psalms, Gospels and Qur’an respectively.23

The account of creation in the Muman Citavēni features many other episodes, connecting the threads of a larger cosmic drama, which need not concern us here. Also, there are motifs enunciated elsewhere in the gīnān corpus which are either missing or not dealt with in greater detail in the Muman Citavēni. But what is evident from this synopsis is that the narrative is set in the framework of what are now commonly known as Hindu creation myths, especially the Purēnic ones.24 Within this overarching framework, different layers of what may be traceable to Biblical/Qur’anic creation themes are carefully integrated into the narrative in order to produce a harmonious worldview of the cosmogonic evolution from the pre-creation state to the eventual eschatological reckoning. This kind of polyphonic vision is vividly depicted in another recurrent motif, in what I term the Avataric paradigm of the gīnāns, recounting the periodic manifestation of the Godhead in bodily form for the fulfilment of a specific soteriological purpose. The paradigm, broadly speaking, follows closely the well-known account of Viṣṇu’s ten incarnations as narrated in the Hindu scriptures, notably the Purāṇas. In the first nine of these forms, he is depicted as destroying the forces of evil, usually epitomised by an arch devil (called daitya, dānava etc.), in order to establish justice and restore the balance of truth in the world, while in the last, awaited form – often called Nakalaṁkī (the Immaculate One) – in the gīnān literature – it is predicted he will appear from the west and perform his cosmic victories.25

Leaving aside for the moment the question of what exactly inspired this seemingly synthetic vision – whether it was some kind of strategic missionary zeal or other factors – it is quite apparent that the Muman Citavēni and other gīnāns that operate within this scheme of interaction do not restrict such ideas to the taxonomy of Hindu or Muslim worldviews. They remain by and large quite indifferent to the precise sources of such ideas – a feature they share with other literary traditions that exhibit a seemingly spontaneous impulse reflective of the premodern performative milieu of India. On the rare occasions that the Muman Citavēni invokes these categories, it is precisely to stress the harmonious character of the salvific history in which both Hindus and Muslims participate as adherents of different religions, albeit created by the same God towards the same purpose in life – the unconditional recognition of Viṣṇu’/Ali as the Lord and Brahma/Muhammad as the archetypal guru and so on.26 What we find at best, in some rare instances, is that some Hindu scriptures (Vedas and Purāṇas) and the Qur’an are alluded to as the authoritative source for certain ideas expressed in the gīnān corpus. For example, while the Purāṇas as a source of creation myths are not mentioned in the Muman Citavēni, their influence on the gīnānic accounts of creation is evident beyond the echoes of shared discursive structures, for in some other compositions they are explicitly acknowledged as the ‘authority’ for certain information included there.27 But beyond this, we rarely find an attempt to limit such ideas (even when they are traceable to Purāṇic, Vedic, Qur’anic or other scriptures) to any narrowly envisaged classification, much less to a teleologically-oriented conception of Islam and Hinduism.

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25 The Avataric paradigm has been the subject of much discussion, with scholars offering differing takes on it. My purpose in drawing attention to it is to highlight the kind of eclectic vision that penetrates through a number of gīnāns. I suggest a different reading of the paradigm in Momin, The Formation of the Satpanth Ismaili Tradition, pp. 141–152 passim.
27 See, for example, the composition Ad to alakāh qilgāh ranīyo (KH 746, ff. 77r–78r) where the nature of the Divine Being, Brahma’s age and other cosmic matters are authenticated from the testimony of the Purāṇas; for the printed version of the gīnān, see Pir Sadaradin, Muhān Ismā’īlī Sanīr Pir Sadaradin Raṣīt Gīnānoro Sanгарah (Mumbai, 1952), gīnān 86, pp. 88–89. On a relevant note, the embodiment of such apparently Purānic themes in the gīnān literature may be approached in terms of reciprocal transformations between the classical Sanskrit Purāṇas and their vernacular adaptations as discussed by Wendy Doniger and others; see Wendy Doniger (ed.), Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jain Texts (Albany, 1993).
In presenting the kind of harmonising discourse sketched above, the gināns at times go a step further and in creative ways adopt the iconic figures and popular lore associated with different religious clusters. It is within this plane of interaction that we find a number of Hindu/Indic mythological or other widely venerated figures embodied into the domain of Satpanth sacrality. However, instead of producing mere structural/functional equivalences – the kind of what we find in the Muman Citaveney and other gināns – whereby A of one tradition becomes B of another, the compositions in this case actively engage with the narratives associated with such figures and modify them to suit their own ends, articulating in the process the quintessential ethos of the tradition. A good example of this appropriation is illustrated in the story of king Hariścandra and his wife Tārā, and deserves our attention here.28

One night, while the king was fast asleep, Tārā prepared to leave for a place called the ‘abode of religion’ (dharam duvār). She wore religious attire putting aside her royal regalia, took the king’s favourite horse, and left the palace, crossing the insurmountable barriers of the palace gate and the Yamuna river through divine intervention. As she reached the designated place, the people who had congregated there rejoiced at her arrival. The queen addressed the audience and conducted religious ceremonies, asking everyone to be quick, for the practice of this faith ought to remain secret from the king. As part of the ceremonies, the king’s favourite horse was slaughtered and its meat was distributed among the participants as a divine grace. Once the ceremonies were concluded, however, the horse was brought back, containing meat and other consecrated items. However, when the tray was shown to the king, the meat and other items had become transformed into oranges, grapes etc. which left him totally bewildered as he himself had witnessed the entire scene at the congregation. Upon witnessing this wonder, Hariścandra asked the queen to tell him the mysteries of the panth she followed. Tārā warned him that the path is a difficult one, and he would have to sacrifice everything to the guru – his own self, his favourite horse, his son, the rule of Ayodhya and so on – before being initiated into it. In spite of this warning, the king remained adamant, and after sacrificing everything, and undergoing certain travails as a testimony to his steadfastness, was eventually initiated into the ‘True Path’.

Serving perhaps as a kind of etiological tale, explaining how Hariścandra became an archetypal devotee in the Satpanth imagining – for he is time and again portrayed as an exemplary deliverer of seven crore of souls – the ginānic narrative clearly modifies the well-known account of the king’s travails in order to suit its own ends.29 The most striking modification is the inversion of the main thread – it is not the Brahman Viśvāmitra who is responsible for Hariścandra’s ordeal, as we find it in the Sanskrit accounts. Rather, it is the king’s own desire to embrace Satpanth and know its mysteries – a transformation that he underwent after witnessing the wonders performed by the queen as an

28 While scattered references to various motifs from the story are found in quite a few compositions, there is one ginān that dwells at length on the narrative; see Sejādiye suto re raja niindri dhari (KH 860, ff. 2r–6r). The manuscript version of the ginān has fewer verses than the printed one, the latter adding various details to the overall narrative which remains by and large the same in both the versions; for the printed version, see Sadaradin, Sarhgrah, ginān 174, pp. 185–193. See also the composition Anar te ayo more shāhuṇji (HC, Ms Ism K 22, ff. 368v–369r) which presents some of the threads from the story; the printed version appears in Sadaradin, Sarhgrah, ginān 189, pp. 206–208.

29 Aside from the Sanskrit accounts of Hariścandra’s ordeal, we find many vernacular versions of the story that correspond closely to the ginānic retelling; see, for example, Kathleen M. Erndl, Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol (New York, 1993), pp. 93–96.
adherent of the ‘True Path’ – that induced him to forsake all the worldly glory and possessions in favour of the True Path’s arduous practice.

What we thus observe in many a ginān bearing this kind of interaction of ideas is that the collective self of the tradition is subtly formulated through an integration of multiple threads, many of which resonate with Purāṇic/Vedic and Biblical/Qur’anic accounts, without necessarily giving an impression of imposing something alien. The threads are thus not viewed internally as if they formed part of something supervening, in particular that which is now rigidly identified with the taxonomy of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’. Rather they are infused into the larger world of Satpanth Weltanschauung in a manner so as to form its integral part, without creating a demarcation between self and ‘other’, even when the latter is identifiable with a specific religious strand.

Moving on, another major plane of interaction is to be seen in those gināns which comment on the waning spirit of the socio-religious order of the time, and offer their own assessment with regard to its idealised code of conduct. In other words, we find a number of gināns within this scheme exhibiting an overwhelming concern with the prevalent modes of sacrality and social structure, while offering a sharp criticism of their practices and ideals. It is against this backdrop that we observe how many gināns simply dissociate the path they propound from that followed by either Muslims or Hindus, naming at times sub-clusters within these larger categories. In fact, the ‘other’ here becomes the very site against which the collective self and quintessential ethos of the tradition are spelt out and formulated in terms of a unique path that promises (among other things) deliverance from the endless cycles of rebirth, as well as alternate solutions to the mundane problems of life. This kind of engagement and criticism reminds us, in many ways, of the Sufis and North Indian poet-saints, known as sants and bhaktas – the likes of Ravidās, Kabīr, Guru Nānak, Mīrābāī etc. – who advocated the practice of unmediated, direct devotion to the Divine Being, disregarding the role of any clerical authority, such as the Brahmans and the ‘ulamā’.

In presenting its criticism, the ginān repertoire employs a straightforward, matter of fact language, anchoring the whole discourse around the quest for truth, a property depicted as the core feature of the Satpanth ideology. In this context, a somewhat recurrent denunciation encountered in the gināns is of excessive ritualism, an infatuation with religious practices on the part of Pāṇḍits, Brahmans, Mullahs, Qādis, Yogīs and the like, without any realisation of the real intent behind the external form of religious worship. In criticising the superficiality of ritual acts, the gināns at times pose a rhetorical question and ask the audience if such ritual behaviour would yield the intended result. One ginān warns the pilgrims frequenting Kāshi as follows:

Visiting Kāshi and bathing in the Ganges,
what good is this watery pilgrimage?
If one were to attain salvation only by bathing,  
fish would be the first one to get it.  
Fish, even while living in the Ganges,  
only stink in time.31

The rhetorical device in the gināns is further reinforced by the use of such expressions as munivar (saint), rikhisar (great sage), mu‘min (believer) etc. to address their listeners, infusing in them a strange sense of irony, for in spite of being endowed with the qualities of sagacity and piety as these appellations imply, the gināns constantly remind them of the fallacies pervading their acts, as well as their ignorance of reality.32 Similarly, the target of such criticism is not just mindless preoccupation with ritualism; it is also levelled against those who preach in favour of such acts in the first place, claiming to have attained the ultimate truth, which in ginānic parlance is simply a delusion. Hence, the religious clerics now associated with Muslim and Hindu traditions are often censured for their pretentious learning, which amounts to nothing more than a form of self-deception.

30 For an accessible introduction to the ideas propounded by some of the well-known poet-saints of India, see John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer (tr.), Songs of the Saints of India (New Delhi, 2004).

31 See the composition Dhanīdhukārāni sāṁkh bhunāye, vv. 4–6 (HC, Ms Ism K 22, ff. 376v–376v), printed version, Sadaradin, Saṁgrah, ginān 183, pp. 201–202.

32 Kabīr used a similar rhetorical strategy by employing the term saṅh to address his audience whom he then assailed for the emptiness of this pretention; see Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh (tr.), The Bijak of Kabīr (New York, 2002), pp. xii passim.
For example, one ginān addresses the pretentions of Pandits and Brahmans in these words:

Oh brothers! Pandit became weary reading the scriptures, yet he couldn't find the secret of the Divine; Dismissing God (Allāh) and Muhammad from his mind, so was Brahman led astray from the true calling.33

The alternative that the gināns offer to the prevailing forms of religiosity, when commenting on them, is not too drastically different from the same modes of expressions they criticise. In other words, the overall fabric of the alternative vision draws its basis from some of the religious structures widely prevalent at the time, conventionally associated with the devotional fervour of the medieval sants, bhaktas and Sufis. Hence, we often find the corpus cherishing the ideals of Satpanth by comparing them to those of other panths or dārśanas ('philosophical schools'). In this context, the most important feature that the ginānic vision shares with other traditions is that of an unwavering allegiance to the guru, who for the most part remains unidentified. However, we sometimes encounter a conscious effort to draw a functional similarity between the guru, on the one hand, and Muhammad/ Brahman or a pir, on the other, depicted in some cases as the archetypal guide (as, for instance, in the Muman Citaventions). While a distinction is often drawn between the concepts of guru/pir and nar/shah, seen as referring respectively to the institutions of pirship and imamate, in an effort to create a neat typology of religious ranking and authority in the Satpanth sacral vision, there is a great deal of overlapping in these ideals too, for even the concepts of imām and nar are frequently depicted in terms of the 'True Guide' (satguru).34

It must be noted here that the gināns do not merely criticise the prevalent modes of piety or sacred dispensations. Rather, in pointing out shortcomings in the practices associated with different religious clusters, they go a step further and comment on what their ideal rules of conduct ought to be. What we see in such cases is not so much a rejection of other socio-religious collectives by plainly declaring the superficiality of their observances, but an effort towards creating affinity between their ethos and values and those of the Satpanth religious ideals. This dialectic vividly manifests itself in an interesting ginān called the Khat Darashan, apparently taking its name from the well-known six 'orthodox' schools (saddarsanas) of Indian philosophy. However, far from being an exposition of the philosophical ideas connected with these schools, as the name might suggest, a better part of the Khat Darashan actually provides a kind of didactic commentary on how the self-proclaimed adherents of some of the prevalent religious and social groups ought to conduct themselves so that they might live up to the collective ideals of their fraternities.

In this vein, the Khat Darashan touches upon not only the ideal comportment of some social/religious fraternities, like Vairāgi, Vaishnava, Jaṅgam (Lingāyat priest), Jogī (Yogi), Sanyāsī, Muni, Jain, Brahmacāri, Satī, Brahman, Pandit, Sufi, Qāḍi, Musalmān, Pativrata (devoted wife), Gharbārī (householder) etc., but even discusses the traits of the Lord (śāmi) and his true devotee (sevak).35 For example, the qualities of an ideal Sanyāsī are sketched in these words:

Sanyāsī, he who praises Śiva, forsakes the worldly temptations, partakes in nothing but rightful alms, being firm upon the posture (āśan), realises, deep in his heart, what good are ashes? True Sanyāsī, so says Gur Sohodev, he is indeed!36

Elsewhere, the Jogi is admonished in these words concerning the true practice of yoga:

O ascetic! Make the way [to the divine] your sack, contentment your [begging] bowl, and make your thoughts as strong as a staff;

33 Pustak padi padi pandit thākā, vv. 1–2, KH 871, p. 37; printed version (with variation) in Pir Hasan Kabiradin et al., Mahān Ismāʻīlī Sainī Pir Hasan Kabiradin ane Bījā Sattahbāri Pirn Rucit Ginānosan Sariqraph (Mumbai, n.d.), ginān 29, p. 52.
34 For the typology, see Shacide and Moir, Ismāʻīlī Hymns from South Asia, pp. 21–22; for an example of the overlapping between these ideas, see Mulabandhano Achoło (attributed to Pir Shams), vv. 1–10 (KH 831, pp. 1–2).
35 The text is attributed to Pir Sadardin; see Khat Darashan, esp. vv. 1–23 (KH 426, ff. 70v–73r).
36 Ibid., v. 8 (KH 426, ff. 71[a]v–71[b]r). Sohodev is now commonly regarded as an epithet of Pir Sadardin, but this may not actually have been the case in the past.
I now turn to discuss the final set of gināns to underscore yet another layer of interaction between the ideas and categories associated with the terms 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'. Being subtly present in the corpus, this layer has largely been overshadowed by others discussed above, and hence has escaped the notice of scholars. What we find in these examples is an attitude of distancing from what are regarded as the Hindu practices, and a self-conscious association with a form of what might be described as 'Muslimness'. An interesting example of this dialectic formulation can be seen in a series of gināns ascribed to Imām Shāh and his sister Bāī Bu<lhai, presented in the form of a dialogue (sāhvād). The compositions in question are essentially a narrative of Bāī Budhāi's initiation to the mysteries of the Satpanth practice. Through the course of the dialogue, she inquires about a number of religious and moral problems. Responding to her questions, Imām Shāh tries to dispel her doubts at each stage and make it possible for the discussion to progress to the next level. Towards the end of their conversation, Bāī Budhāi asks about the Hindus: Who are Rām and Kṛṣṇa? And, why do people worship them in the form of idols? In her enquiry, she exhibits a vivid consciousness of being a Muslim, and shows her bewilderment as to why the path she follows is associated with that of the Hindu 'other', whose practice of frequenting temples, worshipping idols etc. she views as 'worthless' (khoṭā). Imām Shāh's response, in many ways, is in line with the harmonising attitude towards the two traditions that I have previously discussed. While criticising Hindus for the worship of idols, he makes it plain that all this is in vain, for the real manifestation of Rām and Kṛṣṇa resides in the 'west', in the form of 'All'. In revealing the truth about the ten incarnations, he creates the kind of structural/functional equivalences between the mytho-historical figures associated with the two traditions that we see in the Muman Citavei and other gināns, Thus, Prahlād (a mythical figure) is portrayed as Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Harīścandra as Mūsā (Moses), and Hindus of earlier times as Muslims of today, being reborn in Satpanth as part of their reward for previous deeds.

What is interesting about this dialogue is not just the voice of Bāī Budhāi, distancing herself from the Hindus and their practices, or that of Imām Shāh, offering a therapeutic perspective to her anxiety. But what is equally interesting is the voice of the absent composer, moderating the whole dialogue and bringing to the fore, in the voice of a female character, concerns that seem to have prevailed about the nature of the Satpanth practice and its relationship to what are envisaged in this case as Hindu observances and ideals, conceived by the protagonist Bāī Budhāi here as undesirable and worthless. 

In another set of gināns, narrating the travels of Pir Shams and his two disciples through various places, we find a similar cognisance of the Hindu other. In one of his sojourns, the pir is said to have encountered a group of pilgrims who had camped near a village to take the ritual bath. His disciples Vīmrās and Surbhān (portrayed as young boys) also went to the river and incidentally caused some drops of water to fall on a Brahman, named Dēvrām. He shouted, 'I am a Brahman and you are Muslims (musāli); you have committed a wicked act', and rushed to the village, which was inhabited entirely by the Hindus. The people of the village accordingly gathered to punish Vīmrās and Surbhān for their sinful act. One of them approached the boys and enquired about their superior - he was referred to Pir Shams. The villagers came to the saint and asked about the 'birth-group' (jīt) of his disciples who had polluted the Brahman. When the pir asked why what seemed to him a trivial matter was of serious concern, the Brahman replied that he would now have to bathe in the Ganges in order to become purified. The pir at once caused the Ganges to flow


38 See ginān 59–71 of the 'dialogue', KH 558, ff. 363v–382r; for the printed version, see Saiyyad Imām Shāh and Bāī Budhāi, Saiyyād Imāmshāh tathā Bāī Budhāiyo Sāhvād ansa Ginān 10 Gugarinān (2nd ed., Mumbai, 1926), pp. 40–50. In the manuscripts, I have found two versions of the dialogue, a shorter one with 21 and a longer one with 71 gināns. Though very likely, it is difficult to suggest definitively (at this stage) if the longer version contains gināns incorporated later on. On Bāī Budhāi, see also [E. J.] Varateji, Satapamthani Deviyō (2nd ed., Mumbai, 1926), pp. 6–12.
through the village, and so the Brahman and other (Hindu) villagers bathed and embraced Satpanth.39

What is important about this hagiographic tale is the depiction of Pir Shams and his disciples as Muslims, marking them off from the Hindus, the latter defined with respect to certain customs – the need for ritual purification resulting from pollution, caste affiliation and so forth. This is rather significant, for whereas the gināns are unequivocal in their criticism of external religious observances practiced by both 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' groups, as was seen earlier, this attitude of what would amount to distancing, as ascribed to the revered agents of Satpanth preaching, is largely exhibited towards the Hindus. In other words, whereas the gināns on occasion identify these agents as 'Muslims', one hardly comes across an instance where we see the same agents being identified as 'Hindus', envisaged as a religious group. Hence, within this larger plane of interaction, we observe the collective self of the tradition being carved in terms of a Muslim identity by contrasting it against a Hindu one. This configuration in the ginānic worldview, often overlooked, has major implications when we assess the collective literary heritage of the tradition in dealing with the larger question of the formation of the identities of Satpanth adherents.40

Concluding Observations

Although the sources at our disposal (including the gināns) do not always allow us to sketch a neat portrait of varied modes of transformation through which the Satpanth tradition evolved over its long history, the contours of this transformation have nonetheless come to be painted by scholars in broad strokes. They are generally demarcated, rather unsatisfactorily, in a way that the British colonial institutions are seen as the ones that brought about a rupture in how the Satpanthi communities (the Khojas in particular) envisaged their identity in exclusivist terms at a critical juncture in their history, thus departing significantly from the premodern amalgamative texture of the tradition. As some

recent studies tend to argue, this new way of conceptualising identity was the consequence of a rigid, legal definition of the Khojas as 'Ismails' around the mid-nineteenth century which was antithetical to an earlier, precolonial mode, harbouring a more assimilative spirit.

It is hard to say with any degree of certainty if the cross-fertilisation of ideas and symbols associated with what have been defined as Muslim and Hindu worldviews – frequently invoked as being characteristic of the gināns, and hence indelible evidence of the standpoint mentioned above – was something that the tradition as a whole invariably experienced, much less in its embryonic stage. For, as I have argued elsewhere, the formation of the tradition, moving from a more organic practice, harbouring multiple streams of thought, to a more bounded structure (expressed in different sectarian terms) is a process that ought to be understood by taking into account the interplay of a multitude of factors and agencies that carved their own discursive spaces within which the ideological basis of the tradition was formulated – a process that is not necessarily, and not in its entirety, self-evident from the gināns.

Nonetheless, the analysis of selected gināns here points to multiple forms of interaction between the cosmologies associated with the categories 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', which do not lend themselves to any kind of overarching, uniform discourse. In many cases, the ginānic attitude towards the prescribed religious ideals is highly amalgamative, displaying a rich cross-fertilisation of putative Hindu and Muslim ideas in a harmonious manner. But there are other configurations of identity too – the dialectics between the collective self of the tradition and the 'other' – which show at one extreme an uneasiness with the presence of what are held to be Hindu elements in Satpanth religiosity and practice, and on the other a disassociation with either Hindu or Muslim forms of faith, transcending in the process any narrowly conceived religious affiliation, and concerned solely with the discipline and purity of the inner self and a commitment towards truth. What this means is that the very roots of what was to transpire in the colonial period, with respect to the religious texture of Satpanth and its communities, was already embodied in the premodern practice of the tradition. To be sure, the colonial period saw the transformation and channelling of this worldview in new directions, but it was not a complete departure from that earlier moment, rather its creative refashioning in a new era by a new set of factors and agencies that closely identified themselves with the tradition.

39 See the compositions Pir shamas sadhavītā, in Shams, Saṅgrah, ginān 67, p. 71; and Vājatā brahman bolītā, in Shams, Saṅgrah, ginān 68, p. 72.
40 See Momin, The Formation of the Satpanth Ismaili Tradition.