Research Article

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Regional and Vernacular Expressions of Shiʿi Theology: The Prophet and the Imam in Satpanth Ismaili Ginans

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Abstract: The belief that religious guidance in the worldly life is mediated through a divinely guided, human leader is central to the theology of several Ṣūfī and Shīʿī traditions in Islam. For Shīʿī Muslims in particular, this guide is recognised as a legitimate leader, or Imām, and along with belief in *nubuwwah* (prophecy), the doctrine of *imāmah* (legitimate leadership) forms the foundations of their theology. For specific Shīʿī groups, like the Ismāʿīlīs, the Imām in his divine authority is believed to know the inner, esoteric teachings of the message delivered by God through the Prophet Muḥammad. This article argues that Ismāʿīlī Shīʿī Muslims from Sindh, Gujarat, and Punjab have reinforced their belief in the doctrines of *nubuwwah* and *imāmah* over several centuries through the preservation and transmission of a genre of vernacular oral poetry known as the *ginān*. The word ginān literally translates to "knowledge" and these lyrical knowledge poems were composed by a hereditary line of mystic teachers who taught through them the central theological ideas of Ismāʿīlī Shīʿa Islam. Exercises in exegesis and translation are undertaken to illustrate how these two central Islamic doctrines are exemplified in the ginān literature through the personalities of the Prophet Muḥammad and Imām ʿAlī. Readers are invited to consider the crucial role that the popular and oral-literary Satpanth tradition has played in the dissemination of Islamic theological ideas across the western regions of North India, and reflect on the possibility of including such Indic languages as Gujarati within the purview of "Islamic literature."

Keywords: Islamic mysticism, Islam in South Asia, Indo-Muslim literature, Ismaili Shi'ism, Ginan, Satpanth

1 Introduction

It is well-known that one of Allāh's ninety-nine Names, *al-Ḥaqq* (Truth, Reality), carries an exceptional significance amongst the mystics of Islam. To quote Martin Lings, in the mystical doctrine, Allāh is the synthesis of all truth, and thus, the creedal proclamation of the Muslims that "there is no god but God" might, in a Ṣūfī articulation, be reformulated to "there is no truth but the Truth."[1] The importance of this mystical notion of God *as* the Truth is also mirrored in how the Ismāʿīlīs, a branch of Shīʿī Muslims, articulate divinity.

The Truth is in fact so central to Ismāʿīlī theology that one might even consider it to be the theocentric crux around which all other doctrines circumvent. Although the word "Ismāʿīlī" is now used by followers of this Shīʿī fold to self-identify, this term only came to describe the sect much later in history. As Heinz Halm notes, in earliest writings the Ismāʿīlīs would instead describe themselves, in Arabic, as "followers of the 'religion of

1 Lings, *What is Sufism?*, 63–4.

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truth' (*dīn al-ḥaqq*) or of the 'knowledge of truth' (*ʿilm al-ḥaqq*); their proclamation was articulated as the 'call to truth' (*da'wat al-ḥaqq*), and their allies were referred to as the 'supporters of truth' (*aṣḥāb* or *ahl al-ḥaqq*)."[2]

It is therefore no surprise that when the Ismāʿīlī tradition arrived from Persia to the western regions of North India and flourished during the late medieval period (ca. thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), it would assume the Sanskrit name *Satpanth*, which literally means "True Path" or "Path of Truth." In common usage, the term Satpanth is used to describe this stream of the Ismāʿīlī movement that arose in Gujarat, Sindh, and Punjab; it is characterised by a lineage of Persian mystic teachers (*pīr*s) who taught the core religious ideas of Ismāʿīlī Shīʿī Islam by composing and singing lyrical poems in the local Indian languages of the regions where they arrived.[3]

These song-poems that were composed by the Satpanth Pīrs are called *ginān*s, a word derived from the Sanskrit *jñāna*, which means knowledge or wisdom. The ginān compositions can, therefore, be described as "knowledge-poems." These lyrical knowledge-poems comprise a vast corpus of literature which continues to be preserved and recited by Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Muslims of the Satpanth tradition, who revere the Pīrs and uphold the knowledge-poems by them as sacred.[4] The Ismāʿīlīs have preserved nearly 900 of these ginān compositions, and although a handful of these song-poems are attributed to later lyricists, over 90% of the corpus is attributed to only five saints who lived during the Indian late medieval period.[5] This roughly corresponds to the early centuries after the fall of the fortress at Alamūt in Persia in 1246 CE, which marks the beginning of what is known as the "post-Alamūt period" in Nizārī Ismāʿīlī history.[6]

The ginān literature constitutes a corpus so vast that the contents of the lyrics naturally cover an array of topics. Some of these lyrics tell us about the travels of the Persian Pīrs, who were sent to India by the living Nizārī Imām to preach the tenets of the Ismāʿīlī religion.[7] While some lines of the gināns are supplicatory, others are devotional. Yet others recount intertextual stories with familiar figures to the Hindu scriptures and the Qurʾān – of, for example, the devotion and piety of the demon-prince Prahlāda, or about how the first human, Adam, was created.[8] The Satpanth Pīrs in this way drew on ideas from different religious streams to fill gaps in the pre-existing theological and literary knowledge of their listeners. By bringing these apparently different religious worlds together, the Pīrs acknowledge the perennial notion that God's revelation had historically surfaced in other languages and different geographical contexts other than Arabia. As we will see in the paragraphs that follow, this point of encounter between religious and literary worlds further allowed for the Hindu scriptures to be rendered by these Pīrs as a "sign" of the fullness of truth as embodied in the figures of the Prophet and the living Imām.

Indeed, this is one of the central messages that recurs across the ginān literature: that listeners should accept the truth of the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad and Imām ʿAlī. The former of these is, of course, the figure through whom the Qurʾān, the final message of Islam, was revealed; the latter is his cousin and son-

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2 Halm, *Shi'ism*, 160. This language of identifying as "people of the truth" is also reflected in the Persian sermons attributed to the thirty-second Nizārī Imām, Mustanṣir bi'llāh II (d. 1480), who would have lived during the flourishing of the Satpanth. Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 433; Daftary, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v., "Pandiyāt-e Javānmardi."

3 In this article, I use the term "Satpanth Pīr" as a collective noun, inclusive of all mystic teachers (*pīr*s, *sayyid*s, *sayyidā*) who composed these lyrical poems. There is, however, a technical distinction often placed between these titles in tradition – Shackle and Moir, *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia*, 6–8. For an introduction to the Ismāʿīlī movement and its arrival to India, refer to Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition*.

4 This article concerns the Nizārīs, who are the largest surviving branch of Ismāʿīlī Muslims, and it is specifically about the tradition of those Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs who adhere to the lyrical teachings of the Satpanth Pīrs. Henceforth, Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs is rendered in this article as Ismāʿīlīs.

5 This count is based on the list of Ismāʿīlī ginān hosted digitally on the database maintained by Karim Tharani at the University of Saskatchewan, which, at the time of writing, numbers to 882 entries. Tharani, "Ginan Master Index." To the following five figures is most of the corpus attributed: Pīr Shams, Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, Sayyid Imām Shāh, and Bāi Buḍhāī.

6 Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 403–9.

7 It is worth noting that the hagiography presented in the ginān is itself used for a didactic purpose; narratives about the lives of the Pīrs teach of the need to abide by the living Imām.

8 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *pahelāj-nī mātā-e kuṅvar*, vv. 1–15; Pīr Shams, *sāchā merā khālak*, vv. 1–6. The citation method used in this article for the ginān follows a modified version of that employed by Virani in his work "Symphony of Gnosis."

in-law, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661), who is regarded by the Shīʿa to be the first legitimate leader (*Imām*) of the Muslim community after Muḥammad's passing. Belief in Muḥammad as the Prophet, and ʿAlī as the Imām, is ideas that correspond to the respective doctrines in the Islamic tradition of prophecy (*nabuwwah*) and legitimate leadership (*imāmah*).

This article explores how the ginān literature discusses these two doctrines, which are shared by the Ismāʿīlīs with other Shīʿa Muslims. It argues that it was through the recitation and transmission of these knowledge-poems that Indo-Ismāʿīlī Muslims reinforced their belief in the doctrines of prophecy and legitimate leadership for several centuries. It shows that the Pīrs who disseminated the Satpanth teachings did so by translating the theological ideas of the Ismāʿīlī tradition into the languages and religious worlds of those they encountered. Thus, the Prophet is described as the teacher (*gur*, *pīr*) and the Imām as the king (*nar*, *shāh*); the ultimate exemplar of these posts being the Prophet Muḥammad and Imām ʿAlī, respectively. As we will see, the ginān literature in its literary breadth is theologically and artistically creative – while the malleability of the gināns allows for truth to be expressed through the language and popular lore of India, the fullness of this truth is simultaneously presented as being rested in eternal conceptions of the Prophet and the Imām.

The findings of this research are significant for several reasons. The work importantly questions the possibility of regarding Indic literature in languages like Gujarati and Hindi within the threshold of what constitutes "Islamic literature." The article further presents an example, through its theological analyses of the Satpanth tradition, of how the ideas of Islam were spreading across the western regions of North India via popular religion and the verbal arts. Recognition of this relationship between the Satpanth oral literature and theology works to reinforce the findings of Samira Sheikh, who has argued that the Satpanth Ismāʿīlī tradition is underrepresented in South Asian religious and literary history. By examining the lyrics belonging to the sphere of popular religion, the piece also presents a counter-narrative to the often dominant and at times inadequate "religion of the sword" theory of Islam's arrival to India.[9]

2 The Doctrines of *Nubuwwah* and *Imāmah*

The doctrine of *nubuwwah*, or prophecy, in Islam, is concerned with the belief that God chooses special people to communicate His message to humankind, His creation. Some of these divinely chosen persons were also tasked with revealing God's voice through scripture, like Moses who delivered the message of the Torah (*tawrāh*), and Jesus the Gospel (*ʾinjīl*).[10] The concept of prophecy is, however, exemplified in Islam through Muḥammad, who was tasked with delivering the Qurʾān, understood by Muslims to be God's final and most complete message to humankind.

In Shīʿī Islam, this doctrine of prophecy is complemented by an additional doctrine of *imāmah*, or "legitimate leadership." This latter doctrine is rooted in the belief by the Shīʿa that guidance for Muslims was still needed after the Prophet Muḥammad died. Thus, the belief is placed by them in Imāms, or legitimate leaders, after the Prophet passed away, beginning with ʿAlī. The lineage of the successive, patrilineal leaders therefore begins with ʿAlī, who is regarded as the first Imām.[11]

Although ʿAlī is universally accepted as the first, rightful Imām in Shīʿism, various schisms of this branch of Islam would take place over the course of history.[12] The topic of the current article is those

9 Sheikh, "Religious Traditions and Early Ismaili History in South Asia;" Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India."

10 Some Islamic scholars often make a technical distinction between the role of the prophet (*nabī*) and that of the messenger (*rasūl*), where the former is described to be a messenger who delivers scripture. The Qur'an, however, appears to use these two terms interchangeably. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, s.v., "Rasul."

11 Various stories are shared in the collective memory of the Shīʿa which reinforce belief in ʿAlī's succession to Muḥammad. Important of them include specific traditions of the Prophet and verses from the Qurʾān, like the *Ḥadīth al-Thaqalayn*, the *Verse of Tablīgh*, and the *Verse of Ikmāl*. For a rough sketch of some of these important narratives, refer to Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 11–22.

12 For an introduction to Shīʿa Islam, refer to Halm, *Shi'ism*; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*; Haider, *Shi'i Islam*.

Shīʿas belonging to the living branch of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī tradition, who apply the wider Shīʿī doctrine of *imāmah* to Prince Rahim Aga Khan V (b. 1971), their legitimate Imām. This belief in the Aga Khan V as the fiftieth and living Imām works to unite the Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs around the globe, and it distinguishes them from other Shīʿī Muslims.[13]

In addition to an important canon of collective memories and traditions about the relationship of Muḥammad with ʿAlī, and the common belief of the former's appointment of the latter, Shīʿa Muslims have also provided rational and theological justifications for the necessity of Prophets and Imāms. Najam Haider summarises these arguments through the following logic: (i) humans are endowed with reason and intellect (*ʿaql*) so that each person can distinguish between right and wrong, (ii) God is just, and in His divine grace (*luṭf*) it is not possible for Him to leave humankind without guidance, and thus, (iii) God sends Prophets and the Imāms to assist His creation to discern between right and wrong.[14]

Building on Haider's articulation of this Shīʿī theological paradigm, the central role of Imām in Shīʿī mysticism, including within the Ismāʿīlī tradition, is to provide guidance to the religious community – for it is he who is gifted with the ability of allegorical interpretation (*taʾwīl*), and, accordingly, it is he who understands the inner (*bāṭin*) truths of the Qurʾān.[15] Thus, the Imām is understood to assist those who follow his teachings to discern between right and wrong; he supports them in their quest to pursue the right and ultimately come closer to the Truth.

3 Contextualising the Teachings of the Satpanth Pīrs

When placing the medieval Pīrs in the wider context of the history and theology of the Ismāʿīlī movement, it is necessary to emphasise that these mystic teachers lived in the period after the fall of the Alamūt fortress, located in present-day Iran. This fortress served as the headquarters of the Ismāʿīlī movement in Persia and Syria until it was surrendered to the Mongols by the 27th Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Imām, Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh (d. 1256).[16] It was in this post-Alamūt period that the Satpanth Pīrs arrived in India and began to disseminate Ismāʿīlī theological ideas through the gināns they authored. For example, several lyrics attributed to the fourteenth-century ginān composer Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn encourage devotion towards Islām Shāh (d. ca. 1425), the 30th Nizārī Imām, with whom he was a contemporary.[17]

The base language of the gināns, as they have been preserved by the Ismāʿīlīs, reflects the geographical contexts traversed by the Satpanth Pīrs; most lyrics are in a mixture of Gujarati and Hindi with loanwords from other languages like Sindhi, Punjabi, Arabic, and Persian.[18] These lyrics, being predominantly in the local and popular Indian vernacular, contributed to an existing spirit and literary style known as *bhakti* (devotionalism). This style of lyrical expression was also in use by other Indian religious groups, many of which we have come to modernity to associate with distinct religions, like Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism.

Within the wider current of *bhakti*, the ginān literature of the Satpanth Pīrs especially resembles the lyrical saint-teachings of a specific spiritual movement known as the *Sant Mat* ("Teachings of Saints").[19] In examining the contents of the gināns, the early Satpanth Ismāʿīlī tradition appears to have constructed

13 An encompassing history of this sect is found in the seminal work by Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*.

14 Haider, *Shi'i Islam*, 13–50, passim.

15 Radtke, *Encyclopœdia Iranica,* s.v. "Bāṭen"; Poonawala, "Isma'ili *ta'wil* of the Qur'an."

16 On the Mongol invasions of the fortress and its aftermath, refer to Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages*. For the wider historical backdrop, refer to Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 18, 407–53.

17 Daftary, *The Isma'ilis*, 443. One *granth* (book-length ginān) entitled *The Gathering of Infinite Souls* even recounts the story of how Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn and his son Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn travelled from India to visit Islām Shāh in Persia. Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, *āshāji jug patī jug nāth srī īslām shāh* (*anaṅt akhāḍo*), vv. 1–500.

18 Shackle and Moir, *Ismaili Hymns*, 43.

19 For an introduction to the Sant Mat, refer to Schomer and McLeod, *The Sants*.

its collective group identity in conversation with the ideas being disseminated by other northern saints associated with this movement. Some of them, like Kabīr (d. 1518) and Guru Nānak (d. 1539), were likely contemporaries of specific early Satpanth saints.[20] What most crucially distinguishes the theological ideas of figures like Kabīr and Guru Nānak from the Satpanth tradition is the latter's emphasis on perennial ideas of the Truth as articulated through the figures of Muḥammad and ʿAlī. However, the Satpanth Pīrs share with the other mystics of the Sant Mat several, at times almost verbatim, lyrical teachings, along with its general theological orientation towards a formless (*nirguṇa*) and omnipresent God.[21]

In this way, the vernacular form of the ginān literature and the religious ideas of the Satpanth tradition mirror wider Indian streams of devotional expression. Some scholars, acknowledging this fact, have at times rejected attempts that have sought to read the gināns against the Ismāʿīlī theology as articulated in Arabic and Persian sources.[22] While it is indeed true that the creative expression of the Satpanth Pīrs differs in its language and style from the wider Ismāʿīlī theological tradition that came before it, a close examination of the gināns inevitably reveals that the central message, of making the Imām known, is the same. Thus, the difference is only in the medium, and the problem of language is one that is only *perceived*.

This problem, which more widely permeates the study of devotional modalities in diverse Muslim contexts, ultimately concerns which of the world's languages is regarded to be "Islamic."[23] Scholarship in the field of Islamic studies has widely reinforced this ideation, by tending to first privilege the Arabic language, then other languages assumed to be "Islamic" – like Persian, Urdu, and Turkish. This has at times resulted in seeing as improper any attempts which seek to include literature studies in other vernacular languages, like the gināns which are chiefly in a composite of dialect Gujarati and Hindi, into the breadth of what is "Islamic." Tony K. Stewart has elaborated upon this issue in the context of popular Islam in Bengal, especially in his theoretical advancement which proposes translation theory as a hermeneutic. He writes, "For many modern interpreters of South Asian Islam a text is often assumed to be unworthy of study when the technical vocabulary for key theological concepts suggests anything other than a consistent use of Islamic vocabulary that is derived from Urdu or Persian (and ultimately from Arabic)," and thus, "a text that mixes Islamic vocabularies with others, especially those apparently Hindu, can be acknowledged in only a limited way, if at all [...]."[24]

At its core, then, this issue of language, and its associated problems of genre and classification, is one which is concerned with the translation of ideas. The literary breadth of the Satpanth Pīrs, in the form of the ginān, attempts to overcome this problem by locating lexical and conceptual equivalents in the Indian languages for Islamic ideas. We will revisit this discussion on religious translation in the final paragraphs of the next section. For now, however, we summarise the wider position of this article, which shows that the imaginative storytelling of the gināns draws upon pre-existing narratives of Indian mytho-history (*itihāsa*) to teach key ideas of Ismāʿīlī theology. The most important theological idea that lies at the heart of the message of the gināns, which is mirrored in wider Ismāʿīlī theology, is the plea by the Satpanth Pīrs for their listeners to adopt the living Imām. Indeed, summarised concisely in a poetic line by Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn (d. 1416), the very role of the Pīr is to introduce the Imām.[25]

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20 Lorenzen, "Kabir and the Avatars," and the fifth chapter of Visram, "The Path of Truth."

21 It is, however, worth noting that there are several gināns which also offer *saguṇa* (with qualities) oriented devotion towards the Imām. On the *bhakti* theological articulation of the formless God, see Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, s.v. "Nirguṇa ('Without Qualities')."

22 The important aspects of this debate are summarised in Esmail, *A Scent of Sandalwood*, 23–4.

23 The wider argument and discussion in Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*.

24 Stewart, "In Search of Equivalence," 264.

25 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *sāheb baḍā jeṇe sab jug sarjīyā*, v. 6. The life-dates of the *pīr*s in this article reinforce those put forward in the historiography of the Ismāʿīlīs presented by Shackle and Moir, *Ismaili Hymns from South Asia*, 11.

4 The Doctrine of Divine Descent

Some scholars have already noted how the teachings of the Satpanth Pīrs built upon the existing religious myths of the audiences to whom they preached, who were followers of the Indian deity Viṣṇu.[26] The stream of Indian religiosity associated with Viṣṇu is known as Vaiṣṇavism, the followers of Viṣṇu are known as Vaiṣṇavas, and the theology of Vaiṣṇavism is marked by a key doctrine known as the *Daśāvatāra*. The word *Daśāvatāra* literally means "ten descents" and it refers in Indian mythology to the ten times Viṣṇu, the deity of preservation, descends into this world in a living being form, i.e. as an *avatāra*. The religious framework of the *Daśāvatāra* surfaces in Hindu, Sikh, and Jain traditions, and, as we will soon see, it was also central to how the Satpanth Pīrs explained the Islamic doctrines of *nubuwwah* and *imāmah*.

The idea for Viṣṇu's descent into the world is based on wider Indian religious mytho-historical narrations, and it is rooted in a theological teaching of the Bhagavad Gītā.[27] According to the framework as taught in the Gītā and in later Vaiṣṇava tradition, Viṣṇu descends into the world to restore the *dharma* (socio-cosmic and religious order) when there is disorder due to a lack of *dharm*ic upkeep. There are nine important *avatāra*s of Viṣṇu that have already descended over the past three world-ages (*yuga*s) – including such popular deities as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa – but the tenth of these *avatāra*s is depicted in most Indian religious texts as an awaited, eschatological figure named Kalki.

Kalki is described as a messianic figure who will descend in the fourth and final, dark age, that of the Kali Yuga, to fight evil and restore *dharm*ic balance.[28] Popular depictions of Kalki have him riding a white horse and carrying the sword of Viṣṇu (i.e. the *nandaka*) which dispels ignorance through knowledge. The Satpanth Pīrs in their gināns retell this classic story of the earlier Indian traditions, teaching that this awaited figure has already arrived as Imām ʿAlī. Associations are drawn between Kalki and ʿAlī in their lyrics, which have them appear to be the same individual; such symbols of comparison are emphasised in the form of ʿAlī's sword, as well as the white mule named Dulul that ʿAlī and Muḥammad shared.

The retellings of the Satpanth Pīrs suggest in this way both a finality and a continuity. On the one hand, Kalki having already arrived as ʿAlī to support Muḥammad symbolises a sort of completion to the foretold Viṣṇu myth. But the literary complexity of the Satpanth Pīrs allows for the Kalki figure to encompass not only the corporeal ʿAlī, but also the eternal Light of God (*nūr Allāh*) expressed as the living Imām, who never truly dies.[29] Thus is ʿAlī, on the other hand, discussed in the lyrics in ever-living terms – he is not only the historical person who lived in seventh-century Arabia, but also the Imām who carries the Light which illuminates the path towards divine understanding. As such, in the lyrics of Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn the tenth *avatāra* is also described as residing in Persia, as Islām Shāh, the Imām who lived at his time.

The central religious message of *imāmah* taught by the Satpanth Pīrs was thus dressed in a vernacular that would have been understandable to the Vaiṣṇava audiences to whom they performed and preached. This is not uncommon to how Ismāʿīlī theology adapted and assimilated to the other regional contexts it reached over history. As Wilferd Madelung notes, "Ismāʿīlī doctrine did not borrow indiscriminately but rather selected what it found congenial to its basic convictions and amalgamated it into a coherent synthesis of its own."[30] It is thus worth briefly highlighting the other ways that the Satpanth Pīrs retold the Vaiṣṇava religion as compared to the existing tradition.

Of central importance to their retelling was a repositioning of the Prophet as the Pīr and the guide-teachers (*gur*s) of the age, and the Imām as the king (*shāh*) and tenth descent (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu. They accepted the previous *gur*s as descended forms of Brahmā, as well as earlier *avatāra*s like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa as Imāms (more will be said on this shortly). They further described the essence of the revelation of the final Veda to be

26 Importantly, Nanji, *The Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Tradition*, 110–20; Khakee, "The 'Das Avatara';" Purohit, "Reading Global Islam," 151–67; Momin, "The Idea of Evil," 68–74.

27 Bhagavad Gītā, 4.7.

28 Walker, *Hindu World*, s.v. "Kalki"; Dalal, *Hinduism*, s.v. "Kalki"; Momin, "The Idea of Evil."

29 Figures like Muḥammad and ʿAlī are frequently depicted as symbols of guidance, embodying *nūr Allāh*, in Islamic mystical poetry. This theme is further examined in the pages that follow.

30 Madelung, "Aspects of Ismāʿīlī Theology," 54.

the same as the revelation that was taught by the Prophet Muḥammad and embodied by Imām ʿAlī, i.e. the Qurʾān.[31] Thus, in order to relieve oneself from the karmic cycles (*saṃsāra*) of materiality and release one's soul (*jīva*) from worldly deception for salvation (*mokṣa*), a seeker of the Truth needed to accept the knowledge (*ginān*) of the Prophet Muḥammad that is taught by the living Pīr and embrace the eternal ʿAlī in the form of the living Ismāʿīlī Imām – who has descended in the Dark Age (*Kali Yuga*) for the sake of *dharm*ic upkeep.

What should be stressed in discussing the Satpanth Pīrs' adaption of this Vaiṣṇava framework is the context in which the doctrines of *nubuwwah* and *imāmah* were being made local. The Satpanth Pīrs were storytellers who refashioned these Islamic ideas to oral, mostly agricultural and mercantile, societies in rural parts of Sindh, Gujarat, and the Punjab. These retellings offered by them were meant to be creative and imaginative, delivered in a style that would have been familiar, not foreign, to those they had encountered. Accordingly, the legends and narrative histories of the Satpanth Pīrs are best understood as examples of what Tony Stewart has identified as translations of "dynamic equivalence."[32] While formal equivalence focuses on the message, both in form and in content, dynamic equivalence "[…] aims at complete naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behaviour relevant within the context of his own culture; it does not insist that he understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context in order to comprehend the message."[33]

These imaginative efforts of the Satpanth Pīrs paralleled the dynamic translations that were offered by other Muslim authors in India who also attempted through dynamic equivalence to make Islam intelligible to their audiences. Thus does Ayesha A. Irani's monograph *The Muhammad Avatāra* (2021), which explores the first biography of the Prophet Muḥammad in the Bangla language, by Syed Sultān (d. 1648), offer a comparable example to the lyrical expressions of the Satpanth Pīrs in the western regions of North India. Commenting on the same text of Irani's study, Stewart notes that it was possible for Muslims to use the *avatāra* model because the "[…] prophet functions in an Islamic environment in a way analogous to that of the *avatāra*, that is, to guide people to the proper religious path […]."[34]

5 The Prophet as Teacher and the Imām as King

The Indian religious doctrine of the *avatāra* in its adapted form by the Satpanth Pīrs thus functioned as an explanatory tool to elucidate the Islamic doctrines of *nubuwwah* and *imāmah*. The necessity of both the Prophet and the Imām is repeatedly emphasised across the ginān corpus, and the two are often poetically discussed together as the *Gur-Nar*, the *Shāh-Pīr*, or the *Alī-Nabī*. The words *Gur*, *Pīr*, and *Nabī* speak to the role of the Prophet as the divine teacher, and the words *Nar*, *Shāh*, and *Alī* speak to the role of the Imām as the King. It is worth noting that *Gur-Nar* is derived from Sanskrit, *Shāh-Pīr* from Persian, and the *Alī-Nabī* from Arabic and that these three compound nouns are at times used interchangeably in the ginān̄s of the Satpanth Pīrs.

These are not, however, the only names used for the Prophet and the Imām in the ginān̄s. Several more will surface in the translations that follow. But for now, in discussing the wider Vaiṣṇava frame-story of the ginān̄s, it is necessary to mention that the popular names and ideas for both Indian religious and Islamic concepts are often refashioned by the Pīrs. The preferred name for Kalki in the teachings of the Satpanth Pīrs is, for example, *Nakalank*, which literally means "the one without blemish." This is a term that is not exclusively used by the Satpanth Pīrs; as Dominique-Sila Khan and others note, it seems to be common to other sectarian devotional expressions in North India who also discuss the tenth *avatāra* – and some of these groups may have had historical associations with the Satpanth Ismāʿīlī tradition.[35] Another reformulation by the Satpanth Pīrs is the use of the word *Shāh*, the Persian word for King, which is the preferred term in the ginān̄s

31 On this, refer to Ivanow, "Satpanth," 22–3.
32 Stewart, "In Search for Equivalence."
33 Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 159.
34 Stewart, "In Search for Equivalence," 281.
35 Khan, "The Coming of Nikalank Avatar;" Lorenzen, "Kabir and the Avatars."

for the idea of the Imām. In various gināns lyrics, therefore, do we hear the combinations *Shāh ʿAlī* for Imām ʿAlī, or *Awwal Shāh* for the First Imām.

This reorganisation of the doctrine of *imāmah* in particular allowed for a retelling of the *itihāsa* in a way that it systematically and chronologically framed one strip of time in the world-ages that make up the cosmic cycle (*mahā-yuga*) periodisation of Indian history. In the *maha-yuga* model, known to the wider Indian narration of the past, there are four distinct world-ages (*yuga*s) that make up a cycle.[36] In the retelling by the Satpanth Pīrs, different *avatāra*s of Viṣṇu descended in each of the four world-ages, and one in each is described as the King (*rāy*, *shāh*) and the Lord (*śrī*, *nar*). This Kingly Lord (*sāmī rājā*) descends into the world with the mission of defeating a specific demon (*daitya*, *asura*), and each of these Kings is accompanied by a Guru (*gur*, *pīr*) who teaches the Holy Book (*veda*).[37] Thus, in the same way that King Narasiṃha, the Man-Lion, descended with Guru Brahmā in the first world-age known as the Kṛta Yuga, similarly, King ʿAlī descended with Guru Muḥammad in this final age of the Kali Yuga. One of the central messages in the Satpanth teachings is, therefore, that the dual operating force of the *Shāh-Pīr* has been central throughout history: it has always been the divine teacher (*gur*, *pīr*) who has provided the knowledge (*veda*, *ginān*, *ʿilm*) necessary for salvation, and this teacher has been accompanied by the King (*rāy*, *shāh*) in his mission.

Besides these significant points of difference which concern the necessity of the Prophet and the Imām for one's salvation, the Pīrs were otherwise teaching their message in a very similar manner to the other Indian mystic-poets, the *sant*s and *bhakta*s, who composed and taught religious ideas in other regions of India during their time. In the way that the Satpanth Pīrs preferred the name of the tenth *avatāra*, the *Nakalank* or ʿAlī, as the chief object of devotion, similarly the preferred salvific name for Kabīr was that of the seventh *avatāra* Rāma, and for Surdās (d. 1583), it was the eighth *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa. While the names Rāma and Kṛṣṇa appear in the ginān, the figures themselves are instead acknowledged as the Kings of their respective world-ages, and thus, an abidance to the current Shāh ʿAlī and Guru Muḥammad is rendered necessary.

The re-adaption of the religious framework and language of the Vaiṣṇavas by the Satpanth Pīrs is interesting, and although, as we have discussed, there are clear points of difference in how the Pīrs explain the Vaiṣṇava ideas which separate their ideas from those of other *sant* teachings, their use of the tenth *avatāra* of Viṣṇu is by no means unique. The return of Kalki is, as Dominique-Sila Khan notes, a trope that is also picked up by other groups in Gujarat and Rajasthan especially, and as the recent research by Ayesha A. Irani earlier discussed shows, the use of the doctrine of divine descent and other Vaiṣṇava ideas were also central to the methods of early translators of Muslim literature in Bengal.[38]

Having now summarised the wider Indic framework used in the Satpanth storytelling tradition for the doctrines of *nubuwwah* and *imāmah*, it must be emphasised that Vaiṣṇavism provided only one religio-linguistic register through which the Satpanth Pīrs expressed the central Ismāʿīlī ideas of prophecy and legitimate leadership. Other religious streams were also drawn upon by them. Often underemphasised in exegesis and literary analysis, imagery and symbols from wider Sant, Yogī, and Ṣūfī religious streams also appear in the lyrical canon of ginān to discuss the Prophet and the Imām. A characteristic title common to the wider Sant tradition, of the *Satgur* (True Guide) is, for example, appropriately used by the Pīrs – for it is the *Satgur* who is described as explaining the inner teachings of the *Satpanth* (Path of Truth).

Similarly, the word *Nāth* is used in various ginān, at times either for the Pīr or for the Imām, and it is likely that this term was brought into the ginān teachings from interactions of the Satpanth Pīrs with the Nāth Yogīs. These Yogīs were Shaiva ascetics who are critiqued in the song-poems of Kabīr and Guru Nānak, as well as in the ginān teachings of the Satpanth Pīrs, for their form of worldly renunciation and asceticism.[39] From

36 Reimann, *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, s.v. "Cosmic Cycles, Cosmology, and Cosmography."

37 This forms part of the wider storytelling of the Satpanth tradition, which is discussed at greater length in the third chapter of my DPhil thesis: Visram, "The Path of Truth." On a general reference to Muḥammad as Brahmā in the ginān, refer to the example verses in Sayyid Imām Shāh, *ād nirīnjan avatāreā* (*muman chetāmṇī; cheto rikhīsaro*), vv. 72, 101, 117.

38 Khan, "The Coming of Nikalank Avatar;" Irani, *The Muhammad Avatāra*.

39 In contrast, the Ismāʿīlī and Sikh philosophies emphasise the importance of following the middle path, i.e. of balancing the duties of worldly and spiritual life. An introductory discussion on Kabīr's interaction with the Nāth Yogīs is found in the seminal study by Briggs, *Gorakhnāth and the Kānphaṭa Yogīs*, 236–9.

the religious stream of Arabo-Persian Islam, the word *Shāh*, and others like *Mahdī*, *Qāyam*, and *Murshid-Kāmil* that surface in the gināns to describe the Imām, are characteristically Shīʿī-Ṣūfī. The Qurʾān was also another direct source of inspiration to the Satpanth Pīrs, as evidenced through poetic lines in gināns which resemble maxims from the Qurʾān so closely that it is difficult to imagine the influence to be from any other source.[40] One helpful way to explore the various religious registers used to discuss the Prophet and the Imām in the gināns is, however, by exploring how the figures of Muḥammad and ʿAlī are depicted in the literature.

6 Muḥammad and ʿAlī in the Teachings of the Satpanth Pīrs

Lines from different ginān lyrics will be directly translated in the final two sections of this article, to provide concrete examples, in the words of the Pīrs, of how Muḥammad and ʿAlī are depicted in the lyrics. For now, however, I first provide an overview of some of the central religious ideas that surface in the gināns that are shared with other, especially Shīʿī-Ṣūfī, streams of religiosity, and which we will later encounter in the translations.

One important motif which surfaces in several ginān lyrics is a plea by the Satpanth Pīrs who ask their listeners to wake up from this false world. Often described as "achieving death in this life," it is an idea that extends to several ginān lyrics, and it echoes the popular *ḥadīth* of Muḥammad that is revered in Ṣūfī traditions: "Die before you die."[41] Within the gināns, however, liberation through death in this life is sought from the cycles of 8,400,000 births, a doctrine familiar to both Sant and Vaiṣṇava traditions.[42]

Another theme that surfaces in the gināns, shared with the broader mystical tradition and previously alluded to, is the association of ʿAlī – and especially Muḥammad – with the Divine Light. The imagery of the Light of Muḥammad (*nūr Muḥammad*) is a common mystical idea that appears in the broader poetical traditions of Islam, where Muḥammad has been interpreted as the "lamp" that features in the Qurʾānic Verse of Light (24:35), for "through him the Divine Light could shine in the world, and through him mankind was guided to the origin of this Light."[43] The nature of this Light has also played a significant role in commentaries on the Qurʾān, which have often portrayed it as a favour to humankind, and as a simile for His truth and guidance.[44]

In terms of symbolism, this provides insight into how the Imām is also depicted within the gināns using light imagery. The Imām as a manifestation of the Light is a depiction that is in keeping with the early doctrine of the Shīʿa, and it traces back to a teaching of the Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 743). This teaching highlights the hereditary peculiarities of designation (*naṣṣ*): the Imām-of-the-Time inherits and possesses both the knowledge (*ʿilm*) and light (*nūr*). As Lalani explains al-Bāqir's teaching: "*nūr Muḥammad* gives the recipient the potential to become an Imām, but the actuality appears only when he receives *nūr Allāh* by means of *naṣṣ*."[45] This teaching has also been accounted for such that ʿAlī inherited the light of Muḥammad (*nūr Muḥammad*) at the time of birth, and they were both created from the same Prophetic light which was passed on through their ancestors.[46]

At times, Muḥammad is named "Brahmā" within the ginān compositions.[47] This is not surprising, since, as we have discussed, it fits the wider Vaiṣṇava storytelling of the Satpanth Pīrs wherein ʿAlī is described as the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. This should however be noted as a brilliant use of religious translation in the Satpanth storytelling tradition, since Brahmā is understood in Indian ideas to be tied to pre-existence and creation,

40 Refer to the plentiful examples in Muhammad and Kamaluddin, *Qur'ān and Ginān*.

41 On this *ḥadīth* and its use in Ṣūfī traditions, see Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 13–24.

42 Hence, for example, is the prayer made by Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn in *sāmī rājā jampudīpe umāyo*, v. 4: "Put an end to the cycles of 8,400,000 births, o Kingly Lord, and save the souls of the believers."

43 Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, 124.

44 Hamza et al., *An Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries*, 349.

45 Lalani, *Early Shīʿī Thought*, 78–81. Also see Rubin, "Pre-Existence and Light," 65–6.

46 Ibid., 81–2. Karamustafa notes that many Islamic mystics who discussed light imagery may very well have been engaging with Shīʿa ideas. Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 42–7, 52 n. 18.

47 Sayyid Imām Shāh, *ād nirīnjan avatāreā* (*muman chetāmṇī; cheto rikhīsaro*), vv. 72, 101, 117.

just like the *nūr Muḥammad* is in wider Islamic mysticism.[48] Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva are also often named together in several ginān compositions, the third of these with a preference for the term *maheśvar* ("Great God").[49] Although it is not explicitly mentioned, the interactions of the Satpanth Pīrs with the Shaiva Nāths and the ginānic use of Nāth Yogī meditative techniques suggest that Maheśvar might be rendered as one of God's names, in order to complete the Trimūrti (i.e. the great triad of Hindu deities).[50]

Another way the gināns emphasise the figures of Muḥammad and ʿAlī is by centralising the importance of professing the Islamic creed (*kalmā*). As earlier discussed, the Qurʾān is also often understood in localised terms within the Satpanth as the final Vedic revelation – and in other lyrics, the "Four Vedas" (*chār ved*) and "Four Books" (*chār kitāb*) are mentioned,[51] which are presumably references to both the four Vedas (Ṛgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda) and the four revealed books of God in Islam (Torah, Psalms, Gospel, and Qurʾān). Thus, when Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn explains that "The Vedas of the past are not to be held onto/ Their teachings will not lead to liberation,"[52] this Ismāʿīlī teaching can be contextualised, in the terms of chronological duality which structures the ginānic tradition, as a reference to the religious books that came prior to the Qurʾān. In the ringing declaration of Sayyid Imām Shāh:

> I have searched the Four Vedas and Four Books:
> the True Guide is present within them all.
> Allāh sent the knowledge and has commanded
> of the unique one within the Qurʾān.[53]

In this way, Muḥammad is associated in the gināns closely with the revelation of the Qurʾān. He is, however, also used to discuss the importance of abiding by the teachings of ʿAlī. We will soon see in the below analysis how Imām ʿAlī in the gināns provides an example of the Shīʿa Muslim ethos that the Ismāʿīlī Satpanth tradition embodies. As has been alluded to in the preceding paragraphs, he is recognised by Ismāʿīlīs as the paradigmatic expression of the Shīʿa doctrine of *imāmah*: ʿAlī is not just *an* Imām, but a perfect embodiment of the *concept* of *imāmah*. He is, thus understood, in the living Nizāri Ismāʿīlī tradition, to be of the same essence as the forty-nine Imāms who have come after him. Themes and motifs associated with ʿAlī that appear within the gināns – especially, of recognising the Imām in his human form, and of attaining liberation in union with him through self-actualisation – reflect this paradigmatic status.

Although it is atypical in the wider ginān canon, a few compositions from the corpus of gināns share life narrations of the figures of Muḥammad and ʿAlī – but even these oscillate between legends of them as historical persons, and praise of them as figures who embody the *nūr Allāh*. An example of this is an account of ʿAlī's nativity that is found in a *granth* (book-length lyric) by Sayyid Imām Shāh entitled *Muman Chetāmṇī* ("A Caution to Believers"). In this lyric of 630 verses, ʿAlī is described by several names, including: ʿAlī the Favourite (*murtazā alī*), Manifestation of the Unseen (*ād niraṅjaṇ-nu avtār*), ʿAlī the Doer (*alī kirtār*), Master ʿAlī (*māwlā alī*), Brave Lion (*haydar karrār*), and Sire ʿAlī (*āli janāb*). The narration of his birth as recounted in this *granth* can be translated as follows:[54]

> Having gone to The House of God (*bitullāh;* i.e., the Kaʾbah) in the city of Mecca (*shaher mekā*) for prayer, the mother realised that the time of her son's birth was near. Worried about not being able to return home, a house behind her became apparent, which she entered, and where two angels (*hūrā*) arrived to assist her in delivery. For seven days after his birth, ʿAlī did not open his eyes, until the Prophet Muḥammad came and greeted him (*salām kīdhā*). After finally opening his eyes, ʿAlī took the

48 Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, 29–60; Rubin, "Pre-Existence and Light," 65–6.

49 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *āsamānī taṁbal vajīyā*, v. 5; Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, *allāh ek khasam sabukā*, v. 16; Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *kartā juge dwār utar dīse huaḍā*, v. 4.

50 For an explanation on the Trimurti and its place in Hinduism, refer to Rigopoulos, *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*, s.v., "Trimūrti". Also see the discussion in Momin, "On the Cusp of 'Islamic' and 'Hindu' Worldviews?," 439.

51 Pīr Shams, *nar kāsam shāh nā farmān-thī* (garbī 17), v. 13; Sayyid Imām Shāh, *ād nirīnjan avatāreā* (*muman chetāmṇī; cheto rikhīsaro*), v. 8.

52 Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, *sarve jivuṅnā jyāre*, v. 7.

53 Sayyid Imām Shāh, *ād nirīnjan avatāreā* (*muman chetāmṇī; cheto rikhīsaro*), v. 8.

54 Ibid., vv. 79–88.

vision (*dīdār*) of Muḥammad and returned the Prophet's greeting with a smile. The Prophet put his tongue into the mouth of the new-born, through which ʿAlī heard the inner secrets (*bhed*) of the four revealed books (*chār kitāb*). The Prophet then congratulated the mother and the father of ʿAlī.

After this, the narrative in this *granth* shifts to a dialogue between the Prophet and a group of angels (*malāek*) who descend to ask Muḥammad about this experience.[55] Explaining to them the miracle he saw in the mouth of ʿAlī, and of how he delivered his own secrets to the infant, the angels then ask the Prophet to give them the vision (*dīdār*) of ʿAlī. Muḥammad takes them to the house of ʾAbū Ṭālib where they "saw the Light of the Formless" (*nūr dhīṭho nirākār-no*).[56]

However, such narrations about figures from the wider Islamic tradition do not number in the gināns to as many as those from the Vaiṣṇava tradition. Nevertheless, their inclusion in the corpus is noteworthy; they cover such accounts as the creation of Adam, the invitation of Moses to host God for a dinner, the birth of Muḥammad, a conversation between Muḥammad and the Angel Gabriel, etc.[57]

Sometimes, these stories use central authoritative figures, like the Pīr or the Prophet, to reinforce the function and role of the Imām. Thus, in the nativity narrative of ʿAlī described above, Muḥammad's role is primarily used to define him as the Imām of the community, emphasising the religious knowledge that was passed onto him, and of the Imām's stature in holding the Light of guidance.

7 A Note on the Translations

The remaining two sections of this article analyse the literary repertoire of the Pīrs in order to illustrate the various ways that both Muḥammad and ʿAlī are discussed in the ginān compositions. While the Vaiṣṇava framework earlier discussed is central to understanding how the Pīrs articulated the concepts of prophecy and legitimate leadership, the remaining pages of this article illustrate several Shīʿī-Ṣūfī modes of expressing the Prophet and the Imām – in a language that is, perhaps, even more congruent with how the Ismāʿīlīs see themselves today as Shīʿa Muslims.

The ginān translations presented in these sections are my own.[58] The methodology I employ is shaped by the approaches of both Aziz Esmail and Shafique Virani. In his published anthology of translated gināns, Esmail chooses to only include those compositions whose tunes he could "hear in mind."[59] Perhaps without even realising it, the approach that he chooses to take speaks to his own exposure to, and immersion in, a living literary world of the gināns – a world crafted by his own experiences and interactions with the lyrics. I mirror this approach against the method used by Virani, in his chapter entitled "Symphony of Gnosis."[60] In this piece, rather than translating an entire ginān lyric, Virani eloquently weaves together lines from several different gināns to render a single piece of prose. His work explores the Ismāʿīlī gināns and recounts specific themes within them, in an attempt to illustrate how the literature, as a whole, self-defines.

When brought together, these methods reinforce the aural, canonical, and scriptural orientation through which the corpus is engaged by contemporary Ismāʿīlīs.[61] For example, it is common for Indo-Ismāʿīlīs to

55 Ibid., vv. 89–95.

56 On the relationship between the Indian religious idea of *darshan* and the Ṣūfī idea of *didār*, refer to Boivin, *The Hindu Sufis of South Asia*.

57 Pīr Shams, *sāchā merā khālak*, vv. 1–6; Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *sāt sarag nā kāṅy khuliyā chhe*, vv. 1–21; Pīr Shams, *suno suno momano*, vv. 1–12.

58 Short sections of this article, including the translations, are taken and revised from the second chapter of my unpublished DPhil thesis. Visram, "The Path of Truth."

59 Esmail, *A Scent of Sandalwood*, 47.

60 Virani, "Symphony of Gnosis."

61 On the gināns as religious texts, and on their scriptural importance, refer to Asani, "The Ismaili gināns as Devotional Literature;" Asani, "The Gināns;" Kassam, "The Living Tradition of Ismaili Ginans;" Kassam, "Reframing Ginānic Studies."

discuss different compositions against each other – referencing a line from a specific ginān, or a story from another ginān – often without paying attention to, or providing historical indications of, who authored the song. Thus, in the following sections, several lines from different ginān are translated in order to explore how the Prophet and the Imām are depicted in the literature.

8 Prophet Muḥammad: The Moon-Lit Lamp, the Beloved of God

The Prophet is usually referenced by his first name or by one of his titles as the Messenger of God: Payghambar, Rasūl, or Nabī.[62] He is described as the Beloved of God,[63] the True Prophet,[64] and the chief of all 124,000 prophets.[65] He is often synonymised in several lyrics to Guru Brahmā.[66] Similar to how God describes Muḥammad in the Qurʾān as a bright, shining lamp (33:45–46), the Prophet is compared to a moon-lit lamp whose Light guides the way: whosoever keeps this Light with them, it is as if they are holding the lamp in their own two hands.[67] As the light of the moon luminously shines in the night sky, similarly, the Prophetic Light is present in this world – and in the hearts of those who know this, the signs of the Light illuminate.[68]

In the imagery found in one lyric, Muḥammad is likened to a gardener who waters, inferring the showering of his unbounded mercy:

> O Lord, in your garden Muḥammad is the one who dutifully waters. In the nine continents, he has watered and sowed abundantly. O Lord, he waters without limits.
>
> Two plants from a single lake were watered: one grew green and fresh, and the other bone-dry. Without a Guide, an aspirant is unable to attain the Path, and without the Truth, o brother, he will also remain dry.[69]

Those who follow the way of Muḥammad are, therefore, under the protection of his mercy. It is, after all, the intercession of the Prophet that will support an individual at the time of their death.[70] When the Lord takes account, it is only one's deeds that will have accompanied their soul – and Muḥammad, next to Allāh, will be the vizier.[71] At that time, there will be neither ruler nor headman: the king and the beggar will be understood on equal terms.[72] One must, then, accept the True Religion of Prophet Muḥammad if they wish to succeed in this dark age known as the Kali Yuga.[73] As Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn advises:

> Do not forget the plea of Muḥammad and the Imām
> that has been made in this dark age of the Kali Yuga.

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62 Payghambar being the Urdu for "one who prophesies"; Rasūl and Nabī for "messenger" and "prophet," from the Arabic. For examples in specific lyric, refer to Pīr Shams, *uṅchathī āyo baṅde*, v. 1; Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *sāmīne sāchu karīne srevīye*, v. 10; Sayyid Fāzal Shāh, *kāchi kāyā mīṭakī*, v. 2; Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, *allāh ek khasam sabukā*, v. 2.

63 Pīr Shams, *sachā merā khālak*, v. 2.

64 Pīr Shams, *kāyam dāyam tuṅ moro sāmī*, v. 2.

65 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *sāmīne sāchu karī-ne srevīye*, v. 10.

66 Sayyid Imām Shāh, *ād nirīnjan avatāreā* (*muman chetāmṇī; cheto rikhīsaro*), vv. 72, 101, 117.

67 Sayyid Sāleh, *mīṭhā nām mahamad kā*, v. 9.

68 Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, *ek jire sāmi āsh tamārī tribhovaranā sāmī* vv. 3–4.

69 Pīr Shams, *sāmī tamārī vāḍī māṅhe*, vv. 1–2.

70 Pīr Shams, *uṅchathī āyo baṅde*, v. 1; Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, *ek jire sāmi āsh tamārī tribhovaranā sāmī* v. 3; Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *sāmīne sāchu karīne srevīye*, v. 10.

71 Pīr Shams, *e sabhāgā har puj nit niravāṇ* v. 7; Pīr Shams, *shāh-nī srevāye tame*, v. 5.

72 Pīr Shams, *shāh-nī srevāye tame*, v. 6.

73 Sayyid Muḥammad Shāh, *chīlā chhoḍī dīnkā ghāṅchā mat*, v. 3.

> Within the Vedas and the Qurʾān, all evidence is given:
> The Signs that have been forewarned therein, have indeed arrived!
> Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn says: 'Contemplate on this *ginān* (knowledge).'[74]

It is imperative, therefore, to recite the Qurʾān and to profess the testimonial creed of the Prophet.[75] The Prophet is the Giver of Life for those who recite the creed; reciting it slays all sins and poisons.[76] If one recites the creed with a pure heart, all difficulties will be alleviated.[77]

The Prophet's name is sweet, like sugar mixed with milk.[78] Repeat the name of Allāh and the Prophet with love, from the heart, and with admiration.[79] Obey ʿAlī and the Prophet and recite the creed from the depth of your heart, otherwise the end will be a very dark night.[80] If one does not recite the creed and keeps evil in their heart instead, then the angel of death will keep them hanging in this deceitful world forever.[81] But if a believer is to worship from the heart, then the fruits of Allāh, ʿAlī, and the Prophet will be obtained: take the creedal key and open the lock of the heart to see.[82]

By focusing the heart, mind, and eyes in the direction of where the soul will travel alone, one can arrive at the house of ʿAlī and Muḥammad.[83] Those who choose to walk the Path of ʿAlī and the Prophet will always be accepted.[84] Together, ʿAlī and the Prophet are the Crown of the Head; without them, there remains no one else.[85]

9 Depictions of Imām ʿAlī: The Master, True Guide, and King

Some of the most common words used for the Imām in the gināns include the King, the Master, Hari, and the Ever-Living One.[86] The Imām is described as the Cleric, the Judge, and the gateway to the Vedas and the Qurʾān.[87] The concept of the Imām is, in the gināns, concretised with the name of ʿAlī. ʿAlī knows the prayers of the heart; he is the in-dwelling witness, and he knows the heart's feelings.[88] He is the First Imām,[89] the Saviour,[90] the Spiritual Preceptor,[91] and the King of the Soul.[92] When one attains a holy glimpse of Imām ʿAlī, it pleases their heart.[93] Those who attain the vision of ʿAlī are rid of all pain and worry;[94] those who remember and recite his name will be assisted in crossing the ocean of material existence.[95]

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74 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *āsamānī tambal vajīyā*, vv. 13–5.
75 Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, *āsh punī ham shāh*, v. 6; Pir Satgur Nūr, *kalmā kahore momano*, vv. 1–29.
76 Pir Satgur Nūr, *kalmā kahore momano*, vv. 3, 23.
77 Ibid., v. 4.
78 Sayyid Sāleh, *mīṭhā nām mahamad kā*, v. 1; Pir Satgur Nūr, *kalmā kahore momano*, v. 10.
79 Pir Satgur Nūr, *kalmā kahore momano*, v. 4.
80 Ibid., v. 6.
81 Ibid., v. 16.
82 Ibid., vv. 3, 13.
83 Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, *is duniyā meṅ tuṅ bhulī kem jāve*, vv. 11–12.
84 Ibid., v. 1.
85 Sayyidā Imām Begum, *satgur milīyā mune āj*, v. 6; Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *lāvo lāvo ghāṅs*, v. 5.
86 Hari is an epithet of Viṣṇu that means "the one who takes away (obstacles)." It might in the ginānic rendering be a religious translation of the commonly used Shīʿī title for "Alī, *mushkil-kushā*, which means 'the one who removes difficulties."
87 Pīr Shams, *e sabhāgā har puj nit nīravāṇ*, v. 8.
88 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *bhāī tīnī vireṅ jīuṅ umeduṅ āsuṅ*, v. 4.
89 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *ānaṅd ānaṅd karīyo*, v. 1.
90 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *tārīye tuṅ tāraṇhār khudāvaṅd*, v. 1.
91 The use of "*sāmī*" in the gināns is numerous. Some examples include: Pīr Shams, *sāmī tamārī vāḍī māṅhe*, v. 1; Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *sāmi teje sirjaṇhār* (*khat darshan*), v. 1; Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *āvā gurnar sāmīne sirevīye*, v. 1.
92 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *satanā sarovar sarāsar bhariyā*, v. 2.
93 Pīr Shams, *suno suno bhāīve momano*, v. 13.
94 I cite the verse here as it is remembered and recited by memory, with slight modifications from the written text: '*jab darshan dekhuṅ terā re yā alī / sab dukh bisare chiṅt-thī merā*. In translation: "When I receive your *darshan*, o ʿAlī / All pain is extinguished from my mind." Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *atī acharat kahuṅ* (*buj niranjan*; *re tuṅhī*), Part 32.
95 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *kahore paṅḍaito jīv kīs ghar*, vv. 8–9.

The Pīr urges believers to know the self and follow the Name of the Companion.[96] Those who do not recognise the Perfect Master are asleep in this world, like the blind.[97] If the believer recognises Him within the depths of his heart, however, his heart will become pure like the moon.[98]

Those with bad companions are described as being left behind, like those who were part of a caravan but were forgotten at the rest stop.[99] One should thus aim to embrace a companion who can show them the path – and in whose company, no doubt arises in the heart.[100] Such a companion can be met if one gives up the egotistic "I am, I am," offering all things to the Beloved and always reciting "You alone."[101] Make your Guru he, in whose company no other is sought; repeat such a name, which does not require you to remember anyone else:

> Recite ʿAlī, recite ʿAlī, o dearest brother believer,[102]
> Upon ʿAlī's feet, put your concentration and bring your united heart.[103]

In one composition, Pīr Shams beautifully reiterates the importance of remembering ʿAlī, adopting his companionship and unifying with him, through the simile of a lion – bringing to one's mind the honorific title of Imām ʿAlī, *Asadallāh* ("Lion of God").[104] There once was a lion who, living in the accompaniment of goats, believed that he, too, was a goat; he had forgotten his lionish form. In a similar manner, the soul in this world forgets its purpose. The remedy for this state – of being deceived of one's own form – is to dispel all delusion, let go of the ego, and call on the name of ʿAlī. If one is to forsake this illusionary existence, he will attain his true Lionish Form.[105] The state of being a goat will be removed from his heart, and he will not fall asleep in delusion again. The ignorance of the soul can be forgotten by uniting with Imām ʿAlī, the Perfect Guide, in whose presence the reality of the heart is understood.[106]

Elsewhere, reminiscent of the *Ḥadīth* of Noah's Ark, ʿAlī is likened to the captain of a ship. On Mawlā ʿAlī's boat, there is plenty of space.[107] King ʿAlī's boat is the best, it is the most stable.[108] It is the boat of truth.[109] That soul which is fond of practising the remembrance of God will board the boat of the King easily.[110]

10 Conclusions

Through theological engagement with the ginān literature, this article has illustrated how the knowledge-poems of the Satpanth Pīrs have played a vital role in reinforcing central Shīʿī Islamic doctrines for the community of Ismāʿīlī Muslims who sing them. At the heart of the message of these Satpanth Pīrs teachings,

96 Sayyid Imām Shāh, *āpaṇuṅ āp pichhāṇore*, v. 1. Cf. the *ḥadīth* commonly quoted by Ṣūfīs: *man ʿarafa nafsahu fa-qad ʿarafa rabbahu* ("He who knows himself knows his Lord") – refer to Shah-Kazemi, "The Notion and Significance of Ma'rifa in Sufism," 158.
97 Sayyid Imām Shāh, *āpaṇuṅ āp pichhāṇore*, v. 11. The term *murshid-kāmil* that appears here also carries strong Ṣūfī resonances. Jāmī's use of it in Lingwood, *Politics, Poetry, and Sufism in Medieval Iran*, 137. Also compare it to the Ṣūfī concept of *insān-i kāmil* or "perfect man," discussed, for example, in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 280–3; Morrissey, *Sufism and the Perfect Human*.
98 Sayyid Imām Shāh, *āpaṇuṅ āp pichhāṇore*, v. 12.
99 Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn, *is duniyā meṅ tuṅ bhulī kem jāve*, v. 9.
100 Sayyid Muḥammad Shāh, *chīlā chhoḍī dīnkā ghāṅchā mat*, v. 2. Cf. the idea of *satsaṅg* that is shared with the ginān and the wider Sant tradition.
101 Ibid., v. 3.
102 In text editions of this ginān, the lyric reads *harī bolo* but it is frequently remembered and recited as *alī bolo*; similarly, the word *jaṇ* (individual) is usually recited as *jān* (loved one).
103 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *kahore paṅḍaito jīv kīs ghar*, vv. 6, 8.
104 Pīr Shams, *kesarī siṅh svaroop bhulāyo*, vv. 1–2.
105 The words *sānhī* (beloved) and *siṅh* (lion) in this ginān are often substituted interchangeably by the reciter.
106 Pīr Shams, *kesarī siṅh svaroop bhulāyo*, v. 4.
107 Pīr Shams, *suno suno bhāīve momano*, v. 11.
108 Ibid.
109 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *sāheb baḍā jeṇe sab jug sarjīyā,* v.1.
110 Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn, *pīr puchhī tame paṅth kamāvo*, v. 3.

which remain alive in the voices and memories of the Ismā'īlīs to date, is the need to adopt and abide by the teachings of the Prophet and the Imām. The Pīrs drew on a wide literary vocabulary and synthesised, especially, Shī'ī-Ṣūfī and Vaiṣṇava ideas, to discuss the central Islamic doctrines of *nubuwwah* and *imāmah*. Through the introduction of new concepts, like the need to adopt the *Gur*/*Pīr* and the *Nar*/*Shāh*, into the pre-existing Vaiṣṇava myth of divine descent, a continuity is drawn by them between the ancient past of the Indian religion to the message of Islam as embodied by the figures of Muḥammad and ʿAlī.

As this article has shown, the doctrines of *nubuwwah* and *imāmah* in the ginān literature are exemplified through these two religious figures. Muḥammad is cast as the ultimate *Gur*/*Pīr*, for it is through this divine teacher that the knowledge of God was revealed. ʿAlī in a complimentary way serves as the *Nar*/*Shāh*, the King who preserves the *dharma*, in whose guidance the knowledge of God's revelation is made understandable to humankind. These figures and the very concept of the Prophet and the Imām are, in the Pīr's teachings, not bound to time; both the *Pīr* and the *Shāh* have descended time and again over history to provide reminders, for the Truth-seeking, of the route to salvation.

The wider implications of the results of this article are multi-fold. One of the most important outcomes relates to realising the importance of engaging with oral literature, like the gināns, theologically. Through a close reading of vernacular and regional traditions of the "syncretic" popular genre, we find that complex religious ideas were in fact being delivered perceptively through literary expression. As exampled in this article, the Satpanth Pīrs accepted other religious frameworks and figures, like those of the Vaiṣṇava tradition, to discuss Islamic ideas. The references to Vaiṣṇava ideas are, then, not really about a distinct religion at all; rather, in the retellings of the Satpanth saints, the mytho-history of Hinduism speaks to the long history of revelation in Islam. In other words, that specific figures have come into the world time and again to deliver God's message was also true for India. In the storytelling of the Pīrs, figures central to Vaiṣṇavism, like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, were the respective Imāms of their own time but, that time having passed, a necessity is drawn in continuity to the eternal ʿAlī, the living Imām.

When this message of the Satpanth Pīrs is mirrored against wider articulations of Shī'ī theology, it carries logical continuity. For, in the rationalised Shī'ī theological paradigm, which was explained in the opening sections of this article, it is not possible for God in His divine grace to leave humankind without a living guide. Thus is the role of the Prophet and the Imām not only important to Shī'ī theology, but also necessary; without them, the path to salvation, for an unguided human, would be met with failure.

Engagement with the gināns theologically also allows us to see how certain doctrines play out in popular Islamic literature through religious encounter and translation. The Shī'ī- Ṣūfī and Ismā'īlī importance of the outer (*ẓāhir*) and the inward (*bāṭin*) duality is especially pertinent to the analysis of this article. We see through the lyrical teachings of the Satpanth Pīrs that, for them, the Truth is less concerned with the outer, external (*ẓāhir*) difference in the meaning of a word, religious idea, or story; what matters most is the universal ideas represented by these externalities. This is common to wider expressions of Ismā'īlī theology, where the external is described as concealing the inner, hidden (*bāṭin*) reality.[111] Thus, for example, is it possible for words like the Sanskrit *prabhu* and the Arabic word *mawlā* – both which mean "master" or "lord" – to be used interchangeably in the ginān literature. Expanding upon the translation theory by Tony Stewart that was earlier discussed, it is possible for such Indic concepts to be used interchangeably by the Pīrs because for them the inner meaning of these words is rendered equivalent.

Finally, the theological exploration of the Prophet and the Imām presented in this article also illustrates how the Satpanth Pīrs were in fact deliberate in their teaching of Islamic ideas. This is especially important for recognising the role that literary expressions of popular religion have played in introducing and reinforcing the ideas of Islam for laypersons in India, and for reconsidering the definition and scope of "Islamic literature." It is also helpful for reframing dominant narratives about the history of Islam's arrival to the subcontinent, which are often rooted in the language of "conquest" and "conversion," and which have, widely, excluded the crucial role of folk and poetic genres in the dissemination of the Islamic message.

111 Poonawala, "Isma'ili *ta'wil* of the Qur'an"; Hodgson, *Encyclopaedia of Islam 2*, s.v., "Bāṭiniyya."

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Gināns

Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn. *allāh ek khasam sabukā*, vv. 1–17.
Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn. *āshāji jug patī jug nāth srī īslām shāh (anaṅt akhāḍo)*, vv. 1–500.
Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn. *āsh punī ham shāh*, vv. 1–7.
Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn. *ek jire sāmi āsh tamārī tribhovaranā sāmī* vv. 1–9.
Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn. *is duniyā meṅ tuṅ bhulī kem jāve*, vv. 1–12.
Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn. *sarve jivuṅnā jyāre*, vv. 1–182.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *ānaṅd ānaṅd karīyo*, vv. 1–7.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *āsamānī taṁbal vajīyā*, vv. 1–15.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *atī acharat kahuṅ (buj niranjan; re tuṅhī)*, Part 32.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *āvā gurnar sāmīne sirevīye*, vv. 1–5.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *bhāī tīnī vireṅ jīuṅ umeduṅ āsuṅ*, vv. 1–13.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *kahore paṅḍaito jīv kīs ghar*, vv. 1–10.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *kartā juge dwār utar dīse huaḍā*, vv. 1–5.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *lāvo lāvo ghāṅs*, vv. 1–5.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *pahelāj-nī mātā-e kuṅvar*, vv. 1–15.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *pīr puchhī tame paṅth kamāvo*, vv. 1–16.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *sāheb baḍā jeṇe sab jug sarjīyā*, v.1–8.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *sāmī rājā jampudīpe umāyo*, vv. 1–8.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *sāmi teje sirjaṇhār (khat darshan)*, vv. 1–235.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *sāmīne sāchu karīne srevīye*, v. 1–33.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *sāt sarag nā kāṅy khuliyā chhe*, vv. 1–21.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *satanā sarovar sarāsar bhariyā*, vv. 1–7.
Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn. *tārīye tuṅ tāraṇhār khudāvaṅd*, vv. 1–6.
Pir Satgur Nūr. *kalmā kahore momano*, vv. 1–29.
Pīr Shams. *e sabhāgā har puj nit niravāṇ* vv. 1–11.
Pīr Shams. *kāyam dāyam tuṅ moro sāmī*, vv. 1–6.
Pīr Shams. *kesarī siṅh svaroop bhulāyo*, vv. 1–5.
Pīr Shams. *nar kāsam shāh nā farmān-thī* (garbī 17), vv. 1–18.
Pīr Shams. *sāchā merā khālak*, vv. 1–6.
Pīr Shams. *sāmī tamārī vāḍī māṅhe*, vv. 1–7.
Pīr Shams. *shāh-nī srevāye tame*, vv. 1–8.
Pīr Shams. *suno suno bhāīve momano*, vv. 1–16.
Pīr Shams. *suno suno momano*, vv. 1–12.
Pīr Shams. *uṅchathī āyo baṅde*, vv. 1–4.
Sayyid Fāzal Shāh. *kāchi kāyā mīṭakī*, vv. 1–4.
Sayyid Imām Shāh. *ād nirīnjan avatāreā (muman chetāmṇī; cheto rikhīsaro)*, vv. 1–630.
Sayyid Imām Shāh. *āpaṇuṅ āp pichhāṇore*, vv. 1–14.
Sayyid Muḥammad Shāh. *chīlā chhoḍī dīnkā ghāṅchā mat*, vv. 1–4.
Sayyid Sāleh. *mīṭhā nām mahamad kā*, vv. 1–10.
Sayyidā Imām Begum. *satgur milīyā mune āj*, vv. 1–6.