

*Man `arafa nafsahu faqad `arafa Rabbahu*

**Eternal Teachings in Changing Cultural Contexts:**

**An Analysis of Kesari Sinha by Pir Shams (*qaddas`ilāhu sirrahu*)**

At the very beginning of this paper it would be appropriate to set out the Qur'ānic vision of inviting people to the faith of Islam. In the Sūrah of Nahl, chapter 16, verse 125, Allāh says: "Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom (*hikmat*) and goodly exhortation (*maw`izati`l-hasanah*), and argue with them in a manner which is the best." And in another verse, Sūrah of Al-Kahf, verse 54, He says: "And indeed We have displayed for humankind in this Qur`ān every kind of similitude (or example)".

This paper will examine how the Ismaili Hujjats/Pirs and Dā`is put into action the directive of these two verses of the holy Qur'an in the process of converting people to the Ismaili Tariqah of Islam.

The very first verse of this short, five verses only Ginan, establishes that Pir Shams was working in the Indian sub-continent, because the phrase 'Kesari sinha' refers to the particular breed of the Asiatic lion only found in the forest of Gir in Junagadh, Gujarat and which is famous for its saffron-coloured mane. This unique breed of lion and other rare species make the Gir National Park a well-sought tourist hotspot in present times. However in the context of this paper, this lion has inspired an ancient tale in Indian folklore, the exact origin and date are not known. The research I did for this article shows that several important figures like Shri Vivekananda, Shri Ramkrishna and in contemporary times Yogiji Maharaj have used this story to instruct their followers about the hidden reality of the human soul and the need for a true guide to unveil it.

The story in telling and re-telling has a few slight variations. The common elements are that a lion cub finds itself amongst a herd of goats, and growing up with them behaves in exactly the same way as goats do, that is, it eats grass and bleats and jumps and runs around. One day a fully grown lion spots the cub and is perplexed by its behaviour and manages to separate it from the herd and taking it to a river or pond shows it its reflection. The lion cub recognises its real identity, that it is a lion and not a goat and immediately stops all its goat-like behaviour.

The purpose of this presentation is to demonstrate how Pir Shams uses a familiar indigenous story in the spirit of the Qur'ānic instruction quoted at the beginning, to convey the eternal

teachings of the Ismaili Tariqah. In the refrain he says: *Bharam sab chodi bhai Ali Ali karana, hai bhi Ali ne hoeshe bhi Ali, esa vachan tame dil manhe dharana = Forsaking all delusions, brother keep reciting the name of `Alī. `Alī is [present] now and will always be, keep such words in your heart.* In these sentences which recur at the end of each of the five verses are encapsulated two fundamental teachings of the holy Qur`ān:

- In *hai bhi Ali ne hoeshe bhi Ali = `Alī is [present] now and will always be* is reiterated the belief that the Light of `Alī which is always present in the Imam of the time continues in this world. It is very clearly stated in the Qur`ān that Allāh`'s light cannot be extinguished<sup>1</sup> and that the chain of the Prophets and Imams is a continuing chain as expressed in the concept underlying the phrase “*nūrun `ala nūr*” (or Light upon Light) in the famous Verse of Light in Sūrah of Nūr, which is the 24<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the holy Qur`ān, as well as in the Verses 33-34 of Sūrah of Āl-i `Imrān, which read: “Verily Allāh chose Ādam and Nūḥ and the descendants of Ibrāhīm and the descendants of `Imrān above all creatures. Off-spring one from the other; and Allāh is hearing, knowing.”
- Secondly in *Bharam sab chodi bhai Ali Ali karana= Forsaking all delusions, brother keep reciting the name of `Alī* is the guidance to do constant *zikr* or remembrance of the name of the Light of God. The holy Qur`ān states in Sūrah 3, āyat 191: “Those who remember Allāh standing, sitting and reclining and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth, say: ‘Our Lord! You have not created all this in vain! ...’”. Standing, sitting and reclining are the three different positions of a human being in the course of his or her daily activities and this verse advises the believers to do *zikr* in whatever situation they find themselves, that is, all the time.

Two other verses of the Qur`ān are very pertinent to the teachings of this Gīnan, particularly bearing in mind the warning Pīr Shams gives in the third verse where he says: *Eji avidiya man avi padiyo sab jive, apa-pana man khoyo hathe piv, ocinto avine kare re ghirabh = Every soul [born in this world] has fallen into ignorance. In their egoism they have lost the Beloved by their own doing. It is seized suddenly by arrogance.* Here three very great barriers to spiritual progress are highlighted, namely ignorance, egoism and arrogance. The remedy for all these spiritual diseases is the constant remembrance of Allāh and thus the holy Qur`ān says in Sūrah 29, āyat 45: “Recite (O Muḥammad) what has been revealed to you of the Book, and establish

prayer/*ṣalāt*. Verily prayer/*ṣalāt* keeps you away from the obscene and detestable and verily remembrance of Allāh is greater (*wa la zikru'llāhi Akbar*). ...” The second Qur'ānic reference is Sūrah 13, āyat 28: “Those who believe and whose hearts find satisfaction in the remembrance of Allāh. Truly in the remembrance of Allāh do hearts find satisfaction (*alā bi zikri'llāhi taṭma'innu'l-qulūb*)”. The phrase ‘*taṭma'innu'l-qulūb*’ in this verse resonates the Divine welcome that awaits the *nafsu'l-muṭma'innah*, the Satisfied Soul in Sūrah 89 verses 27 to 30, in which God says: “O you the Satisfied Soul, return to your Lord well-pleased (with him) and (He) well-pleased (with you): Enter among My servants, enter My Garden”.

The entire Ginan is obviously in the language of those who were being invited to the Ismaili Tariqah. Without having done a thorough philological analysis of it, it would be safe to say that Kesari sinha is a blending of Indic languages such as Gujarati and Hindi. However, we can with certainty say that the phrase in Verse 4 ‘*murshid kāmīl*’ is in Arabic, which means the ‘Perfect Guide’. In Ismaili literature through the ages we find the use of *Insān-i muṭlaq* (Absolute or Perfect Man), *Insān-i kāmīl*, *Shakhs-i waḥdat* (Single Man) and *murshid-i kāmīl* to refer to the “living, hereditary Imam in direct descent from the Prophet”, a phrase which has been used twice recently by Mawlana Shah Karim al-Husayni (s.a.) in his address to the Canadian Parliament last year 2014 and in his The Samuel L. and Elizabeth Jodidi Lecture at Harvard University in Massachusetts, U.S.A. on 12 November 2015. As pointed out earlier, the belief in a hereditary Imam or Divine Guide is central to the Ismaili Tariqah.

In Ismaili books the Imam of the time is described as “*Kāmīlun fī dhātihī wa mukammīlun li-ghayrihī*”, that is, “He is perfect in himself and he perfects others”. The 4<sup>th</sup> verse of the Ginan says: *Eji murshid kamil ko sang karie, ave avidya sab jae visarie, tab to suje dil ki gali* = Keep the company of the Perfect Guide to dispel ignorance and then you will realise or recognise the matters of the heart, that is, the realities free from delusion. The role of the Imam in the physical and spiritual lives of his *murids* is discussed in all authentic Ismaili literature, whether prose or poetry. It is best summarised in paragraph F of the Preamble of the Constitution of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims:

Historically and in accordance with Ismaili tradition, the Imam of the time is concerned with spiritual advancement as well as improvement of the quality of life of his *murids*. The Imam’s Ta`lim lights the *murids*’ path to spiritual

enlightenment and vision. In temporal matters, the Imam guides the murids, and motivates them to develop their potential.

At the beginning of this paper I said that in the Indian sub-continent context the story of the lion and the goat has been used to instruct followers about the reality of the human soul and the need for a true guide. In the Ismaili tradition the true guide can only be one and that is the Imam of the time, appointed by the previous Imam through *naṣṣ*, going back in history to the appointment and designation by the Prophet Muḥammad of Hazrat Mawlana `Alī. Further, the search for spiritual enlightenment is firmly tied to the institution of Imamāt as Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah (s.a.) says in his Platinum Jubilee Speech in Cairo in February 1955:

But, as I have explained in my Memoirs for the whole world to understand, there are two worlds – the world of material intelligence and the world of spiritual enlightenment. The world of spiritual enlightenment is fundamentally different from the world of material intellectualism and it is the pride of Ismailis that we firmly believe that the world of spiritual enlightenment has come as a truth from the inception of Islam to this day with the Imamāt ...<sup>ii</sup>

The final verse summarises the eternal teachings of the Ismaili Tariqah. It says: *Ejji bharam ne talo to sanhi ne pichano, apano ap moman pichano* = If you expel the delusion you will recognise the Beloved; O believer recognise yourself. Pir Shams in ending this Ginan is reminding the listeners of the famous *ḥadīth* or saying of Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.s.) and of Hazrat Mawlana `Alī: *Man `arafa nafsahu faqad `arafa Rabbahu*, which means “he or she who recognises their soul indeed recognises their Lord”. This teaching has existed from the very beginning of Prophet Muḥammad’s mission and Pir Shams using the story of the lion cub who in the midst of the goats had forgotten his identity or real self, reinforces the Ismaili teaching of self-recognition in the light of the Imam’s guidance, which leads to the recognition of the Lord, the ultimate purpose of human life.

This paper has attempted to show that the physical, social, linguistic and cultural context described in *Kesari sinha* is undoubtedly that of the Indian sub-continent. However, the teachings are those of the Shia Ismaili Tariqah as rooted in the holy Qur`ān and the teachings of the holy Prophet, Hazrat Mawlana `Alī and all Imams including Mawlana Sultan Muhammad Shah and the present Imam Shah Karim al-Husayni (*alayhimu`s-salām*). In the history of the Ismaili *da`wah* which has spanned some 1400 years, Ismaili Ḥujjats/Pīrs and Dā`īs have used the medium of local languages, ideas, music and folklore to convey the same message of the Tariqah. This

has resulted in a heritage of a wonderful pluralism in the global Ismaili Jamat, a pluralism at the heart of which is the unifying centrality of Imamate. This plurality and diversity, which the Imam of the time has publicly described as a strength and not a weakness, is beginning to be appreciated gradually within the scattered Ismaili community by the guidance of the Imam and under the influence of globalising forces, such as migration which results in different cultures and backgrounds rubbing shoulders together. It also equips Ismailis all over the world with the tremendous advantage of real empathy and respect for other cultures which is essential for true pluralism.

In the public domain many scholars have failed to understand this pluralism of the Ismaili community and taken a myopic approach of examining Ismaili history in a segmented fashion. Such scholars have therefore written much about the influence of neo-Platonism in Fatimid Ismaili literature, or the preponderance of Sufi terminology in the Persian Ismaili books or the abundance of references to Hindu mythology and philosophy in the Ginan literature. In the last case, the Ismailis of the Indian sub-continent have actually been described as Hindus by those who refuse to accept the unfolding story of the Ismaili *da`wah* history, where the Ḥujjats or Pīrs and Dā`īs were sent by the Imam of the time from a different part of the world to invite the inhabitants of a new geographical area to the Dīn-i Ḥaqq (True Religion) which is the original name of the Ismaili Tariqah.

In the case of the Ginan just analysed, the composer Pīr Shams was of Iranian origin. He hailed from Sabzwar in Iran. In coming to India he would have had to learn the languages and the culture and traditions of the people he had to convert. In this endeavour he would have been inspired by the special luminous help of the Imam, which is technically known as *tā`yid*. Thus he, as other Pīrs, was able to convey the eternal teachings of the Ismaili Tariqah through the medium of Ginans. In other parts of the world, in other cultural and linguistic contexts the Ḥujjats and Dā`īs used the local medium but retained the same message, namely that the Divine Light is always present in the world to guide human beings to recognise themselves and thus recognise God.

Finally, I wish to thank the Association for the Study of Ginans for giving me the opportunity to participate in this annual event. I had access to four English translations, all of which were done by learned individuals who have published books about Ginans. However, I was humbled to see that their translations of Kesari Sinha

differed substantially, proving to me that Ginans are spiritual knowledge composed by enlightened beings and they must be studied deeply and very carefully. I am very conscious that my effort has only scratched the surface!

Rashida Hunzai,

Markaz-I Ilm-u Hikmat, London

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<sup>i</sup> See Surah 9:32 and 61:8

<sup>ii</sup> "Aga Khan III – Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah", ed. K.K. Aziz (Kegan Paul International, London, 1997), Vol. II, pp. 1408-09.