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The Ismailis of the Badkashan region of Tajikistan and Afghanistan constitute an important part of the Shi‘a Ismaili Muslim community today, with a distinctive socio-cultural heritage of their own. This heritage, shaped by both history and geography, has preserved their faith for more than a thousand years. Nasir Khusraw, the famous Ismaili *da‘i*, theologian, philosopher and poet from the 5th century AH/11th century CE, was probably the most influential person in the formation of the Ismaili community in this region. This article attempts to give a general account of Nasir Khusraw’s life and teachings, using his writings as the principal sources of information. It highlights the profound and lasting impact he has had on the Ismaili communities of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran and the neighbouring northern areas of Pakistan. Emphasising the importance of knowledge and intellect in his writings, the article argues that Nasir Khusraw’s work is a product of the larger, multi-dimensional intellectual tradition of Fatimid Ismailism that developed over several centuries and made significant contributions to Islamic culture and civilisation. As such, the achievements of Nasir Khusraw constitute part of the common heritage of Ismailis all over the world, and indeed of the Muslim Ummah as a whole.

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Nasir Khusraw: a Living Tradition

By Kutub Kassam

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Abstract

The Ismailis of the Badkashan region of Tajikistan and Afghanistan constitute an important part of the Shi'a Ismaili Muslim community today, with a distinctive socio-cultural heritage of their own. This heritage, shaped by both history and geography, has preserved their faith for more than a thousand years. Nasir Khusraw, the famous Ismaili *da'i*, theologian, philosopher and poet from the 5th century AH/11th century CE, was probably the most influential person in the formation of the Ismaili community in this region. This article attempts to give a general account of Nasir Khusraw's life and teachings, using his writings as the principal sources of information. It highlights the profound and lasting impact he has had on the Ismaili communities of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran and the neighbouring northern areas of Pakistan. Emphasising the importance of knowledge and intellect in his writings, the article argues that Nasir Khusraw's work is a product of the larger, multi-dimensional intellectual tradition of Fatimid Ismailism that developed over several centuries and made significant contributions to Islamic culture and civilisation. As such, the achievements of Nasir Khusraw constitute part of the common heritage of Ismailis all over the world, and indeed of the Muslim Ummah as a whole.

Introduction

The Ismailis of the Badakhshan region of Tajikistan and Afghanistan constitute an important part of the global Shi'a Ismaili Muslim community today. Along with Ismailis in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America, they share a common set of beliefs and principles, centred upon spiritual allegiance to the Ismaili Imam. Like other Ismaili communities, those of Tajikistan have inherited a distinctive social and cultural heritage of their own, shaped to a large extent by the geographical conditions and historical circumstances of the region in which they have preserved their faith for more than a thousand years. This cultural legacy, which is at the same time religious and customary, intellectual and artistic, represents a rich and valuable component of the international, multifaceted cultural tapestry of the Ismaili community today.

The continuity of the Ismaili tradition in the Badakhshan regions of Tajikistan and Afghanistan is, in one respect, quite remarkable because through much of their history until recent times, the people have remained more or less isolated from their co-religionists in other part of the world. This was in part due to the remote and mountainous terrain of the Pamir Mountains, which hindered regular commerce with the rest of the Muslim world during medieval times, and more recently a result of Soviet policy which restricted access to the republic by people from outside. It was only with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in



1991 and the emergence of Tajikistan as an independent republic that the Ismailis of this region were able to restore direct links with their sister Ismaili communities and the institutions of the Imam. This historic reunification was symbolised by the visit of His Highness the Aga Khan to Tajikistan in 1995, the first time ever that the Ismailis of Badakhshan have had physical contact with their Imam of the time.

It is likely that the Ismaili form of Shi'a Islam was first introduced in the Pamirs by preachers from Khurasan in north-eastern Iran as early as the 4th century AH/10th century CE, possibly associated with the two leading Ismaili *da'is* and philosophers active in Tansoxania at this time, Muhammad al-Nasafi and Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani. Furthermore, it appears that conversion of local people to the Ismaili Muslim faith was a long and gradual process to which a succession of Ismaili *da'is*, some from Iran and probably the Indian subcontinent as well, contributed over the centuries. In local tradition, however, the foundation and expansion of the Ismaili community in Badakhshan is most emphatically and inextricably associated with a single person—the famous Ismaili theologian, philosopher and poet Nasir Khusraw, who flourished in the 5th century AH/11th century CE and lived the final 15 or more years of his life in the region. His teachings have had a profound and lasting impact among the Ismailis of Tajikistan and the neighbouring northern areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Indeed, so deep-rooted and pervasive has been his influence upon the lives of these people that one may justifiably refer to their collective religio-cultural heritage as the Nasir Khusraw tradition in Ismaili history.

Early life, education and career

According to his own writings, Abu Mu'in Hamid al-Din Nasir ibn Khusraw was born in 394 AH/1004 CE at Qubadiyan, in the Balkh district of Khurasan (today located in northern Afghanistan). At the time of his birth, this province was part of the Samanid empire, based in Bukhara, under whose enlightened rule the cities of Nishapur, Merv and Balkh became major, cosmopolitan centres of culture and learning. When Nasir Khusraw was about five years old, Khurasan was conquered by the Ghaznavids who ruled over it until the province passed to the Saljuqs in the middle of the 5th century AH/11th century CE.

We know very little about Nasir's childhood and youth other than that he acquired a fairly advanced level of education, which enabled him to master a variety of subjects, from Qur'anic and religious studies to Arabic and Persian literature, philosophy, mathematics and astronomy. Such learning was possible because he came from a family of fairly well-to-do and ambitious government officials who appreciated the value of education; but it was equally a result of the precocious character of the young man and his life-long thirst for knowledge. After completing his studies and in conformity with family tradition, Nasir Khusraw entered government service in the administration of the Ghaznavid rulers. His work involved him in the supervision of revenue collection, an important position in which he seems to have excelled, with a reputation that promised him a bright future in the senior ranks of government. A measure of Nasir's success and personal ambition at the time is reflected in the allusions he makes in his travelogue, *Safarnama*, of having attended the courts of the



Persian sultans Mahmud of Ghazna and his son Mas'ud.¹

Nasir Khusraw's brilliant career and intellectual talents enabled him to lead, by his own confession, a life of considerable ease and luxury. He entertained a wide circle of friends and colleagues, together with much feasting and wine-drinking. But as the years passed and he reached his 40th year, he became increasingly disenchanted with the dissolute pattern of his life and the burdens of his work. For a person deeply versed in the literary and intellectual sciences of his day, the life of an administrator and courtier appeared more and more empty and depressing. He became preoccupied once again with the search for meaning and truth, which had inspired him so much during his youth. At the same time, Nasir's anxieties may have also been fuelled by the rapid decline of the Ghaznavid state, which was marked by widespread corruption in government and the loss of Khurasan to the invading Seljuq Turks in 435 AH/1043 CE.

It was shortly after the Saljuq occupation when he was 40 to 42 years old and travelling on official business away from his home in Merv, that Nasir had a fateful dream which was to change his life forever. In the dream he encountered a mysterious person who reproached him for his wine drinking and aimless way of life, exhorting him instead to seek out reason and wisdom. "Where can I find such a thing?" asked Nasir. "Seek and you shall find," the person replied, pointing westward in the direction of Mecca.² The vision had such a powerful effect on Nasir that, when he awoke, it seemed to him that he had awakened from 40 years of ignorance, and he resolved to change his life radically. Upon returning home, he resigned from his position, sold most of his property, settled the debts he owed and announced his intention to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

The journey to the west

In 437 AH/1045 CE Nasir Khusraw began his famous seven-year journey, during which he was accompanied by his younger brother Abu Sa'id and an Indian servant. The journey had two major destinations, Mecca the sacred city of Islam, and Cairo the capital of the Fatimid Ismaili state, but Nasir's itinerary was purposely designed to take him through several regions, cities and towns en route. The three men travelled westward through northern Iran, then across Armenia and Azerbaijan to Syria and Palestine. It is not clear whether Nasir took this route for security reasons, to satisfy his natural curiosity about these places, or to meet certain individuals whom he does not identify. Nasir then undertook his first pilgrimage to Mecca, before leaving for the Egyptian capital where he arrived in 439 AH/1047 CE and spent the next three years.

Nasir Khusraw's account of the journey in Persian, the *Safarnama* is a unique literary work in many respects. It is regarded as a classic of early Persian prose literature because, unlike the

¹ Nasir Khusraw, *Safarnama*, tr. Wheeler M Thackston Jr. as *Naser-e Khosrow's Book of Travels (Safarnama)* (Costa Mesa, CA, 2001), p. 72.

² *Ibid.*, p.2.



highly ornate and embellished style of the time, it is a model of simplicity, lucidity and brevity of expression. Further, in contrast to the accounts of most other travellers of the time in this part of the world, he recorded his impressions and experiences in an objective, realistic and almost documentary manner, with meticulous attention to the physical, economic and cultural features of each place he visited. As such, his account is valuable to the historian for the detailed information it provides about important areas of the Muslim world in the middle of the 5th century AH/11th century CE. At the same time, the narrative is not without interesting anecdotes, unusual episodes and occasional touches of humour, which impart to it a sense of personal adventure and investigative enterprise.

There is another, more confessional and intimate account of Nasir Khusraw's journey which he gives in one of his most celebrated poems, the long autobiographical *qasida* that appears in his *Diwan*, where he depicts his journey not in terms of the physical topography or cultural traditions of the places and people he visited, but exclusively as a quest for true knowledge. Here he subjects his life and achievements, beliefs and opinions, to a rigorous self-examination and critical scrutiny. Unable to obtain satisfactory answers to his intellectual inquiries from various religious scholars and philosophers he consulted, he was plunged into a state of deep despair, as a result of which he says "my face became yellow as a flower" and "my back bent prematurely." Nasir goes on to declare:

Then I rose from my place and started on a journey,
Abandoning without regret my house, my garden and those whom
I was accustomed to see.
From the Persian and the Arab, the Indian and the Turk,
From the inhabitants of Sind and Byzantine, a Jew, from everyone,
From the philosopher, the Manichee, from the Sabaeen and from the atheist,
Did I inquire with much persistence about what interested me.
Very often I had to spend nights sleeping on hard stones, with no roof or cover
over my head except clouds.
Now roaming low, swimming as a fish in the sea,
Now high in the mountains loftier than the Two Statues.
Now I passed through countries where frozen water was as hard as marble,
Now through countries in which the earth was as hot as embers.
By sea and land, sometimes even if there were no roads,
By hills and sandy desert, across streams and precipices,
Now like a true cameleer with the camel's halter rope over my shoulder;
Now carrying my belongings on my shoulders like a beast of burden.
In this way did I wander from town to town, asking questions,
And wandered in search of the truth over this sea to that land.³

It was only when Nasir Khusraw reached Fatimid Egypt that the prospect of finding the true path to wisdom, promised to him in his dream, appeared to bear fruit. In the *Safanama*, he

³ Vladimir Ivanow, *Problems in Nasir-i Khusraw's Biography* (Bombay, 1956), which gives a complete translation of the poem, pp. 21-40.



expresses his astonishment at the prosperity and splendours of Cairo, the likes of which he had not witnessed anywhere else throughout his journey. But true to his intentions, nowhere in the travelogue does he give any intimations of his association with the Ismaili faith. This has led some scholars to maintain that Nasir had already embraced Ismailism before leaving Persia. It is clear from the confessional poem, however, that his conversion took place in Cairo at the hand of the chief Ismaili *da'i* of the time, al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi (d. 470 AH/1078 CE), a fellow-Pesian who became his friend, colleague and mentor. It was this distinguished theologian, poet and statesman who was finally able to resolve Nasir's intellectual doubts, initiate him into the Fatimid *da'wa*, and personally supervise his education and training as a *da'i* (lit. 'summoner' or missionary). This is how Nasir records the moment of conversion when he took the oath of allegiance:

When I mentioned all these questions, the wise one lifted his hand,
touching (with it) his breast.
May a hundred blessings be now on that hand and breast!
He said: 'I shall give thee that medicine, tried and tested,
But I have to affix a strong seal on thy mouth.
He, that wise guide, summoned as two legal witnesses,
the world and man (macrocosm and microcosm),
And also all that can be eaten and used as a drink.
I expressed acceptance and he then sealed the medicine,
Giving me a dose of it to take as a nourishing extract.
My suffering disappeared, my speech became free,
My yellowed face became scarlet through joy.
He raised me from dust to the sky, as a ruby;
I was like dust and became like precious amber.
He it was who laid my hand into the Prophet's hand for the oath,
Under the same exalted tree, full of shadow and fruit.⁴

Although we have no further information about Nasir Khusraw's activities during his three-year sojourn in Egypt, it is clear that his exceptional intelligence, capabilities and devotion were recognised by the Fatimid authorities. Before returning to his native land, it seems that he had already attained a high position in the *da'wa* and also met the Fatimid Imam-caliph of the time, Mustansir Bi'illah. In fact, Nasir often refers to himself in his poetic writings as the *hujja* (lit. 'proof') of Khurasan, that is to say, the senior-most representative of the Imam, responsible for administering the religious affairs of Ismailis in north-eastern Iran and the Transoxania region of Central Asia.

The final years in Badakhshan

In 444 AH/1052 CE Nasir Khusraw returned to Persia and settled in his home town of Balkh, from where he began to teach the Ismaili Muslim faith in the surrounding areas. His activities seem to have been so vigorous and effective as to alarm the Sunni religious scholars in the

⁴ Ibid.



area who mounted a campaign of vilification against him. The Seljuq regime, which by now dominated Iran and was ideologically hostile to all the Shi'a including the Ismailis, may also have encouraged his persecution. As a result, Nasir's house was destroyed by a fanatical mob and he barely managed to escape with his life. Eventually he found refuge in the remote mountainous village of Yumgan in the upper reaches of the Oxus river, under the protection of the Ismaili ruler of Badakhshan, 'Ali b. al-Asad.

Nasir Khusraw spent the remaining years of his life in Yumgan until his death around 470 AH/1077 CE. In many of his poems, Nasir Khusraw complains bitterly against the ignorance and fanaticism of his opponents who had driven him from his homeland. His love for Khurasan and its landscape is often contrasted against the harsh and inhospitable conditions of the high mountain valley where he now found himself. He also expresses regret for his isolation from the world of learning and scholarship in which he once flourished and had become renowned. But it was the realisation of his permanent physical separation from the Ismaili Imam and his headquarters in Cairo that grieved him the most.

In spite of these setbacks, Nasir Khusraw soon settled down with renewed determination to serve the Fatimid cause. Although there is no record of him converting local people, there is considerable internal evidence in his writings of his personal engagement in teachings and discussions. There are also indications of the existence under his supervision of a local network of *da'is* and preachers with whom he communicated by letter and word of mouth. In addition to his preaching and administrative duties, Nasir devoted a great deal of his time to writing. If Nasir Khusraw sometimes regretted the fact that he was unable to engage in learned discourse with his colleagues, he was yet able to produce some of the most erudite treatises and passionate poetry in Ismaili literature that have come down to us. These works demonstrate Nasir Khusraw at the peak of his intellectual and creative powers, with the ability to synthesise knowledge from a variety of disciplines which is truly impressive. To this day, the contents of these works continue to inspire Ismaili communities not only in Tajikistan, Iran and Central Asia but in other parts of the world as well.

The works and teachings of Nasir Khusraw

Nasir Khusraw is the only prominent Fatimid *da'i* to have composed all his works in the Persian language, and by so doing he gave a major impetus to the growth and resurgence of Persian language and literature as a whole, supplementing the role of Arabic as the main language of learning and scholarship in the Iranian world. Nasir has a high reputation in Persian literary history as one of its leading poets and among the earliest composers of religious verse in Persian. In spite of such renown and the indisputable quality of his writings, it is regrettable that only a small portion of his prose works and poetry has been translated into English and other European languages.

In addition to the *Safarnama*, which is his best known work in the West, the prose writings of Nasir Khusraw that are extant include a number of theological and philosophical treatises, including *Wajh-i Din* (The Countenance of Religion), *Jami' al-Hikmatayn* (The Harmony of the Two Wisdoms), *Khwan al-Ikhwān* (The Feast of the Brethren), *Zad al-Musafirin* (The Travellers' Provisions), *Gushayish wa Rahayish* (Knowledge and Liberation) and *Shish Fasl*



(Six Chapters). Nasir's poetic writings are collected in his *Diwan*, which consists of about 20,000 verses on a variety of personal, ethical and religious themes.

It is impossible to convey in summary form the scope and depth of Nasir Khusraw's teachings. His theological and philosophical thought is highly complex which, while grounded in the doctrines of Shi'a Ismaili faith of Islam, draws extensively upon a variety of other Islamic, Greek and Neoplatonic sources. In common with Ismaili thinkers who preceded him, Nasir sought to articulate his system of thought using the most advanced conceptual vocabulary of his time. This is demonstrated, for example, in his *Jami' al-Hikmatayn*, which seeks to demonstrate the compatibility of reason and faith, and is among the finest philosophical texts in Islamic literature. Contemporary readers will probably respond more readily to Nasir Khusraw's poetry because of the authenticity and intensity of its devotional spirit, as well as for the insights it gives into the poet's personality and the age in which he flourished.

Apart from Nasir Khusraw's expressions of steadfast loyalty to the Prophet's family and the descendants, the Fatimids, one of the central themes of his writings is that which preoccupied him all through his life, namely, the search for knowledge and the indispensable role of the intellect in this endeavour. For Nasir, the intellect is a precious, divine gift bestowed upon mankind for the purpose of acquiring knowledge in all its intellectual, spiritual and metaphysical dimensions. It is only by way of the ladder of intellect and the light of knowledge that one is led to attain happiness in this life and salvation in the next. Nasir Khusraw's works epitomise the harmony between matter and spirit, intellect and soul, reason and revelation, which has always been one of the most characteristic features of Ismaili thought, and summed up admirably by Nasir in the following lines from his *Diwan*:

Kindle the candle of intellect in your heart
and hasten with it to the world of brightness.
If you want to light a candle in your heart,
make knowledge and goodness its oil and wick.

In the path of the hereafter, one should not walk
on foot but with the soul and the intellect,
and for provisions you must fill the tablecloth
of your heart with obedience and knowledge.⁵

For Nasir Khusraw, however, there can be no synthesis of reason and faith without deep reflection upon the inner meaning of the scriptures. The language of divine revelation is, to a large extent, symbolical and allegorical in nature, and therefore richly textured with multiple levels of significance. It is the task of every believer to meditate on the revealed text and, through the application of *ta'wil* (hermeneutic interpretation), extract the esoteric meaning (*batin*) concealed in the exoteric form (*zahir*) of its words and letters. It is by means of

⁵ From Faquir M. Hunzai and Kutub Kassam, *Shimmering Light: An Anthology of Ismaili Poetry* (London, 1996), pp. 63.



continuous engagement with the *ta'wil* of the Qur'an that true balance between reason and revelation can be established, and thereby perfect understanding of faith attained. As Nasir puts it in one of his poems:

The exoteric of revelation
is like brackish water,
but the esoteric is like pearls
for people who are wise.

Since pearls and jewels are
to be found on the sea-bed,
look for the pearl-diver
instead of running on the shore

Why does the Maintainer
of the world keep so many
precious pearls concealed upon
the bottom of the sea?

He kept them for the Prophet
with the instruction:;
“The esoteric is for the wise,
the exoteric for the ignorant.”⁶

Another essential component of Nasir Khusraw's thought is the imperative of harnessing knowledge to righteous action. Since human beings are endowed with intellect, they possess a measure of free will which makes them responsible and accountable for their actions. All human pursuits, including the acquisition of knowledge, can be rendered meaningless and even harmful for the self if not accompanied by ethical conscience and moral conduct. The relationship between knowledge and action is like that of body and soul, without which human life cannot exist. In the *Wajh-i Din*, Nasir argues that this is a uniquely human quality that distinguishes man from animals and angels:

Action is the lot of animals without knowledge. Knowledge is the lot of angels without action. Knowledge and action are the lot of humans, for they correspond to animals by virtue of their bodies, but by virtue of their knowledge they do not correspond to animals; they are equivalent to angels. They are midway between beasts and angels so that, with knowledge and action, they can move from the rank of animals to that of angels.⁷

⁶ Ibid., pp. 7-71.

⁷ Cited in Alice C. Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan: A Portrait of the Persian Poet, Traveller and Philosopher* (London, new ed., 2003), pp. 84-85.



It is primarily through writings such as these, which are preserved, memorised and recited by the Ismailis of Tajikistan, Iran, Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, that the teachings of Nasir Khusraw continue as a living tradition today. But it is a tradition not unique or confined to the Persian-speaking Ismailis: it is a product essentially of the larger, multi-dimensional intellectual tradition of the Fatimid Ismailism which developed over several centuries and made significant contributions to the culture and civilisation of medieval Islam. As such, the life, thought and example of Nasir Khusraw constitute the common heritage not only of the Ismaili community but the Muslim Ummah as a whole.⁸

Suggestions for further reading

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⁸ An earlier version of this article appeared in *Expressions of the Pamir: Culture and Heritage of the Ismailis of Tajikistan* (London, 2000).