



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## “Nasir Khusraw: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow - An Introduction”

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### Introduction

This paper provides an introductory perspective for the volume of articles devoted to Nasir Khusraw’s millennium commemoration, entitled *Nasir Khusraw: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (2005), held in Tajikistan in September 2003. The volume captures the intellectual quality and diversity reflected in the presentations and discussions held in the remote mountain city of Khorog and the capital Dushanbe.<sup>1</sup> The introduction commences with the background to the commemoration and its rationale, followed by a brief introduction to the conference and symposium, their aims and the participants. The following section is on the approaches, themes and various ideas about Nasir Khusraw in the conference papers and it is followed by procedural comments and an epilogue.

### Background and Rationale

Famous for the ethics exhibited in his poetry, the arguments represented in his philosophical and spiritual prose, his conversion and steadfast commitment to the Ismaili interpretation of Islam, his deliberate selection and elevation of Dari<sup>2</sup> as a language of literature, and the meticulously perceptive descriptions in his travelogue, Nasir Khusraw (1004 -1088 CE) lived in a time of dramatic political upheavals, economic, ethnic and religious conflicts, and sectarian and ideological polarisation and debate. His own personal, poetic and philosophical engagement with his circumstances and the moral issues of the day bear a universal significance that has outlasted Nasir’s life and times.

At the request of a number of Central Asian countries where Nasir Khusraw’s thoughts have been a formative influence on the people and societies, UNESCO declared 2003 the year of Nasir Khusraw. In September 2003, a number of intellectual, social, cultural and artistic events took place in Tajikistan. Tajikistan’s initiation of the commemorative year is important not only because Nasir Khusraw is believed to have been born in its southern town of Qubadiyan, but also because his legacy has had a great impact on its citizens, especially on the population of the Badakhshan province.

As a post Soviet country, Tajikistan struggles to establish its new and independent identity. In

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<sup>1</sup> The commemorations included a number of other academic/intellectual, cultural and artistic activities. The academic events, in addition to the conference in Khorog and the symposium in Dushanbe, also included a high school essay competition, library provisions for a local museum, and meetings with local scholars. The cultural and artistic activities included a play on Nasir Khusraw organised by Khorog State Theatre, ethnographic concerts, field trips to the related sites, the unveiling of statues of Nasir Khusraw, and an art competition and exhibition. In Dushanbe the commemoration guests were received by His Excellency Emomali Rahmonov, and in Tajikistan and in Khorog by Honourable Alimamad Niyozmamadov, the Governor of Badakhshan.

<sup>2</sup> To be true to Nasir Khusraw’s words, we have used Dari instead of Persian and Tajik in this paper. In essence there is an increasing agreement among the scholars that Dari, Farsi and Tajik are synonymous terms for the same language, employed in Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran.

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doing so, it largely reflects the fundamental challenges that confront Muslim societies passing through radical transition. The presumed triumphant march of Western modernity and neo-liberal ideology through globalisation and the free market have given a new boost to competition, individualism and technical rationality<sup>3</sup> across the vast terrain of a defeated communist ideology.

Tajikistan, like the other Central Asian states, has become a meeting point where the heterogeneous and diverse forces of the Muslim heritage, an incumbent socialism, Western democracy, and nationalism have converged. The enormous paradoxical challenge of building a nation and maintaining social cohesion at a time of penetrating globalisation has been further compounded by an increasingly intense encounter with the ongoing dramatic changes experienced in various parts of the Muslim world.

The commemoration took place within this interaction of local and global contexts. It was organised as a collaborative endeavour between The Institute of Ismaili Studies and Tajikistan's Organisation Commission, which included representatives of the President's office, relevant ministries, Tajikistan's Academy of Sciences<sup>4</sup> and Khorog State University.

The Institute of Ismaili Studies, as one of the organisers of the commemoration in Tajikistan, promotes scholarship and learning on Islam in a historical as well as contemporary context. In so doing, the Institute encourages a perspective that is not confined to theological and religious heritage, but which seeks to explore the relationship between religious ideas and the broader dimensions of society and culture. Within the Muslim tradition, the Institute promotes research in areas which have, to date, received little attention from scholars. These include the intellectual and literary expressions of Shi'ism in general and Ismailism in particular<sup>5</sup>. In sum, the Institute concentrated its focus on the intellectual aspects of the commemoration of the millennium birth anniversary of Nasir Khusraw.

### **The forum and its objectives**

More than 100 scholars from 13 countries, representing various approaches and perspectives to understanding and portraying Nasir Khusraw and his tradition, were present at the Khorog conference (2-4 September, 2003) and the Dushanbe symposium (6-8 September, 2003). These venues and the current ensuing volumes have had the following objectives:

- (a) To create a forum for intellectual exchange and discussion on the thought and writings of Nasir Khusraw;
- (b) To illustrate the broad spectrum of Nasir Khusraw's role and contribution to the larger world of Islam as well as to Ismailism;

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<sup>3</sup> F. Fukiyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992); J. R. Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (Toronto, 1992), part 2.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the IIS activities, because of The Institute's focus on the intellectual aspects of The commemoration, were done in collaboration with the Tajik Academy of Sciences (represented by the Institutes of Philosophy and Law, the Institute of Oriental Studies and Oriental Manuscripts, and the Institute of History), and Khorog State University.

<sup>5</sup> For more on The Institute of Ismaili Studies' mandate, programmes and activities visit the IIS website at <http://www.iis.ac.uk>



- (c) To address the relevance of Nasir Khusraw's thought to the present without adopting parochialising or dogmatic stances;
- (d) To contribute to a revival and revitalisation of Nasir Khusraw's heritage amongst the various segments of Central Asian societies; and
- (e) To facilitate collaborative projects on Nasir Khusraw and the tradition he represents.

A major challenge for the organisers was how to balance commemoration with reflection so that the participants and the presenters, in addition to celebrating Nasir Khusraw, would also ask questions and consider the legacy of someone who, in the words of Hunsberger, was “trying to live life as ethically and as purposefully as possible, one who has examined his past and then decided to make a fundamental change, one who has come to some sort of accommodation with the massive upheavals and disappointments of his life.”<sup>6</sup>

### **A Framework for Understanding Nasir Khusraw: Themes, Questions and Aspects**

In an attempt to realise the events' objectives, the Khorog conference was divided into morning plenary sessions followed in the afternoon by parallel sectional presentations. In both cases, the sections broke with the customary mode of studying a classical scholar's legacy, by dividing them into discipline-based sections such as philosophy, theology and literature. The break with traditional approaches was aimed at reflecting Nasir Khusraw's integration of philosophy, theology and literature, and highlighting the holistic nature of Nasir Khusraw's life and legacy. The richness of Nasir Khusraw's thought and life, like that of other outstanding medieval scholars, cannot be categorised in clear-cut disciplinary divisions. Hunsberger observes that in Nasir Khusraw “philosophy flows through his poetry, his travels were undertaken as a response to his conversion to Ismailism, and his keen poet's eye as well as his religious values are evident in his travelogue, the *Safarnama*, the places he visits, the sights he delights at, and his careful observations of people and cultures.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as with the other great Muslim luminaries, “medieval Ismaili thinkers, such as Nasir Khusraw and Nasir al-Din Tusi, perceived themselves not merely as theologians and spokespersons of their religious communities, but as global thinkers proffering philosophical wisdom and spiritual therapy for humanity.”<sup>8</sup>

In order to represent the aspects of Nasir Khusraw's contribution to Persian-speaking culture, the Muslim *Umma* and global intellectual history, we created sections that would address the following broad themes: (a) reasoning, thinking and intellect rather than simply philosophy; (b) plurality of interpretations of beliefs and practices in place of theology; (c) learning, morality and society; (d) the challenges of engaging with, understanding and representing Nasir Khusraw to reflect a wide range of research and methodology; (e) aesthetic, poetic, and linguistic dimensions of Nasir Khusraw's writings, to encompass his literary output and (f) the dialectic of tradition and modernity, to appropriate Nasir Khusraw as an agent and mediator of change.

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<sup>6</sup> A. Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan: A Portrait of Persian Poet, Traveller and Philosopher*, (London, 2000), p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. xiv.

<sup>8</sup> P. Morewedge, ‘Nasir-i Khusraw's Hermeneutic Philosophical theology’, in *Nasir Khusraw, Knowledge and Liberation. A Treatise on Philosophical Theology*, new ed. and English trans. by F. M. Hunzai (London, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion see Mehdi Mohabbati's paper in this volume.



We believe that this innovative approach to understanding Nasir Khusraw inspired the presenters and the readers to imagine new horizons, redefine concepts and terms such as “intellect”, “tradition” and “rationalism”, as understood in the eleventh century<sup>9</sup> and pose questions about “the future of the past”.<sup>10</sup>

The section on *Wisdom, Intellect and Reasoning* aims at understanding the core of Nasir Khusraw’s thought and the tradition of Islam that he represented. It is these qualities that define the essence of Nasir Khusraw’s thought and the Fatimid tradition of Islam.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the title of this section highlighted conceptual questions such as: what rationality and reasoning meant in the Muslim context of the eleventh century; what was regarded as intellect and how did it differ from the notion of intellect today<sup>12</sup>; what were the sources of Nasir Khusraw’s rationalist approach to the message of Islam and its various practices; and what stimulated him to reject both *taqlid* and a blind acceptance of not only the message of Islam and its various interpretations, including some of his own Ismaili predecessors, but also Greek philosophy:

I could never accept the blind following of the prescribed forms  
(*taqlid*), without any demand for explanations.  
The truth cannot be provided by blind acceptance.<sup>13</sup>

Another major issue was whether Nasir Khusraw could be called a philosopher as the Greeks defined the term and as contemporary scholars see it<sup>14</sup> or whether he transcends a narrow definition of a philosopher. In most of his works, Nasir clearly sympathised with philosophers, and unlike al-Ghazali, for instance, remained committed to using their tools. At the same time he criticised philosophers not for their use of intellect and reasoning, but for their separation of reasoning and spirituality, their disregard of other ways of knowing, and their lack of humility.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to examine the forms and methods that Nasir Khusraw’s

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion see Mehdi Mohabbati’s paper in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> A. Esmail, ‘Introduction’, in F. Daftary, ed., *Intellectual Traditions in Islam* (London, 2000), pp. 1-16.

<sup>11</sup> A number of scholars have noticed that the Fatimid state distinguished itself through a search for knowledge, and conditions of tolerance and inclusiveness in which lawyers, scholars and laymen of various religious and ethnic backgrounds not only lived side by side in peace and harmony, but actively participated in the running of the state. For more, see H. Halm, *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning* (London, 1997); F. Daftary, *The Isma‘ilis. Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990); W. Madelung, ‘The Fatimids and the Qarmatis of Bahrayn’, in F. Daftary, ed., *Medieval Ismaili History and Thought* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 21-73.

<sup>12</sup> Hunsberger is one of the few scholars who have raised this issue, in her work *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan* suggesting that the term intellect, as well as universal intellect, used by Nasir Khusraw is a quite different notion from that in which it is understood and used in the two periods of history, i.e., medieval Islam and the 20th century.

<sup>13</sup> From Nasir’s ode of confession in his *Divan*, ed. S. N. Taqawi (Tehran, 1304-1307/1925-1928). English trans. by A. Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan*, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> See N. Arabzoda, *Mir idey i razmishleniy Nosira Khusrava* (Dushanbe, 2003); Kh. Dodikhudoev, *Filosofiya Krestyariskogo Bunta (O roli srednevekovogo Ismailizma v razvitii svobodomisliya na musul’ manskom Vostoke)* (Dushanbe, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> In *Wajh-i din* (discourse 10, *On the Establishment of Zahir and Batin of the Book and Shari‘at*, Nasir referring to scripture says that ‘God the exalted may help us to act with knowledge and [yet] do not become arrogant because of what knowledge we possess. And remember that there is always one wiser above those who call themselves knowledgeable’. See also Nasir-i Khusraw, *Jami‘ al-hikmatayn*, ed. H. Corbin and M. Muin (Tehran/Paris, 1953), p. 16.



rationalist approach took and how they were different from those of other defenders of reason in Islam<sup>16</sup> such as the Peripatetic philosophers. Does his work entail a different approach within Islam to the perennial question of the relationships between reason and revelation, free will and predestination, happiness and suffering? Was Nasir Khusraw's engagement with these philosophical questions merely an intellectual exercise or do they sum up his approach to the ethical and moral issues of daily life?

The section on *Pluralism of Beliefs and Practices* tries to go beyond purely theological definitions of God, his qualities and the stages of creation/emanation and salvation. It examines the concepts of *ibda'*, *tanzil* and *ta'wil*, *zahir* and *batin*, and their role as intellectual tools in clarifying the inner meaning of the religious message, providing the hermeneutic behind beliefs, rituals and practices, while also anticipating possible contradictions and misunderstandings. Clearly Nasir Khusraw saw his life purpose as a quest:

...the Shafi'ites, Malikites, Hanafites I asked what they said.  
I began to search for the guidance of the Chosen One of God (i.e., the Prophet).  
But when I asked (my teachers) about the reasons for (various) injunctions  
Of the religion or the verses of the Qur'an on which they are based,  
None proved to be helpful, one resembling the blind, and the other the deaf.  
Then I rose from my place and started on a journey,  
Abandoning without regret my house, my garden, those whom I was accustomed to see.

From the Persian and Arab, Indian and Turk,  
From the inhabitants of Sind, Byzantium and Jew, from everyone,  
From the philosophers, Manichee, Sabeen, from an atheist  
Did I inquire as to what interested me with much persistence.<sup>17</sup>

Here was also an opportunity to examine how Nasir Khusraw's personal experience of mistreatment and misunderstanding, in turn, influenced his attitude towards diversity and the plurality of beliefs and practices in his own time. This volume touches upon these issues. Further consideration of these issues, however, requires a balanced and responsible approach which will necessitate positioning them in the proper context and historical perspective.

The third section, *Learning, Morality and Society*, is further testimony to Nasir Khusraw's engagement with and transformation of the world (*dunya*) around him and the vital importance of knowledge and intellectual pursuit:

If you turn your mind away from learning  
You will never become an exalted leader

But if your tree would grasp the fruit of knowledge  
You would grasp the azure Wheel of Heaven in your hand!<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> R. C. Martin and M. R. Woodward with D. S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam. Mu 'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 25-42.

<sup>17</sup> W. Ivanow, *Nasir-i Khusraw and Ismailism* (Bombay, 1948), pp. 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Nasir-i Khusraw, *Divan*, ed. S. N. Taqavi (Tehran, 1304-1307/1925-1928), English trans. by A. Hunsberger, *The Ruby*, pp. 40-41.



Here Nasir departs not only from the spiritual exclusionism of the Sufis, but also from the Neoplatonists' dichotomisation of soul and body, suggesting the fundamental significance of body to soul (*tan ba jon*), world to religion (*dunya ba din*)<sup>19</sup> and action to knowledge ('*amal ba 'ilm*).<sup>20</sup> The section also touches upon Arabic terms like '*ilm, ma'rifa, ta'lim* and their Persian equivalents such as *khirad, danish* and *parwarish* in terms of Nasir's pedagogical aspiration of reaching and enlightening more people.

This section also deals with the illustration of the just, inclusive and ethical society, themes in Nasir Khusraw's writings that were previously addressed by al-Farabi and Ibn Sina.<sup>21</sup> Like Firdousi, he blames the Ghaznawids and like Sa'ad Salman he criticises the Saljuqs for de-intellectualising, de-culturising society, for militarising it and for destroying the moral values, ethical underpinning and intellectual openness, which for him constituted the essential fabric of a just and civilised society.<sup>22</sup>

Justice is at the heart of Nasir Khusraw's search and struggle. For him Islam, Prophethood, Imamate, Intellect and all other such concepts embody this fundamental concept. In constructing an image of the good and just society, Nasir Khusraw draws on the Qur'an and *hadith* as well as assessing the achievements of the ancient Greeks. He also reflects on his personal life and his work under the Ghaznawids and Saljuqs, as well as on his travels illustrated in the *Safarnama*, and his acknowledgement of the Fatimid state as an embodiment of these values. In addition, he also builds upon the *Ikwan al-safa'*, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina's concepts of the ideal city and enlightened king, linking them to the romanticised accounts of the ancient Persian *dehqans*, nobility, kings and *viziers* depicted in the *Shahnama*.<sup>23</sup>

Nasir Khusraw emphasised that seeking knowledge is a divine obligation and the major purpose of human life. We may legitimately need to ask still more about what kind of knowledge he had in mind, how that knowledge is obtained, whether there is a direct relation between knowledge and action, and why the possession of "excessive" knowledge has often produced intellectual arrogance and some of the worst forms of bigotry. Perhaps a powerful resolution to this last malaise is hidden in Nasir Khusraw's disdain for the '*ulama-laqaban* (i.e., pseudo-scholars), his constant desire for and championing of the pursuit of self-knowledge and inquiring into the self, and reflectively analysing the positive and negative potential hidden in human beings. This urge weaves itself through all his writings, including his famous lines *as ma-st ki bar ma-st* (i.e., what ever happens to us emerges from us) expressed by the arrogant eagle in Nasir Khusraw's *Divan*. And if the source of proper knowledge is divine and is obtained through submission to God and God's representative<sup>24</sup>, what is the fate of secularising, yet successful societies?

The section entitled *Issues of Methodology and their Perspectives*, in our view, initiates one of the most important aspects of understanding the sage. The Fatimid intellectual tradition which Nasir Khusraw built upon, as well as the tradition that evolved after him in Central

<sup>19</sup> A. Hunsberger, 'Nasir Khusraw, a Fatimid Intellectual', in F. Daftary, ed., *Intellectual Traditions in Islam* (London, 2000), pp. 112-129.

<sup>20</sup> A. Nanji, 'Nasir Khusraw', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 7, pp. 1006-1007.

<sup>21</sup> N. Arabzoda, *Mir Idei*, chapter 5, pp. 211-247; Kh. Dodikhudoev, *Filosofiya*, pp. 368-406.

<sup>22</sup> A. E. Bertels, *Nasir-i Khosrov i ismailizm* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 9-47.

<sup>23</sup> Kh. Dodikhudoev, *Filosofiya* pp. 276-406.

<sup>24</sup> *Zad al-musafirin*, p. 151.



Asia still await proper study<sup>25</sup>. Some of the issues addressed are: (a) how to study the original works of Nasir Khusraw? (b) how to engage with the studies on Nasir Khusraw? and (c) how, in doing both of these, can we engage with our own assumptions, values, beliefs and methods of inquiry? In sum, the diverse approaches taken by chroniclers, editors, translators, scholars and journalists on Nasir Khusraw often say as much about their own values, knowledge and dispositions as about Nasir Khusraw and his tradition.

In part because he was made into a controversial figure by his adversaries, as is reflected in the Persian chronicles, Nasir Khusraw became a focus of interest for many scholars around the world who were attracted to his life and work.<sup>26</sup> Morewedge suggests that historically there have been four types of popular misunderstandings of Nasir Khusraw and the Ismaili interpretation of Islam: (a) as they were presented by the Crusaders, (b) the views of the opponents of the Ismailis (e.g., that of al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya), (c) the reduction of the Ismailis by historians to mere copiers and translators of Neoplatonist ideas, and (d) the presentation of Ismaili doctrine as a sectarian deviation or variation.<sup>27</sup>

What could better serve as a response to the above than Nasir Khusraw's own reaction to the enforced exile that took him to Badakhshan. In a powerfully symbolic manner, Nasir Khusraw draws symbolic parallels between his condition and the *hijra* of the Prophet Muhammad:

Because of my faith, I was driven out from my home  
Till I became similar to the Prophet of truth in *hijra*  
Thanks be to God, that by his grace in Yumgan  
I have become sovereign over the souls and property of the Shi'a<sup>28</sup>

Ironically, as with many great thinkers of the past, Nasir Khusraw has also been interpreted and used by different constituencies for different purposes. During Soviet times, for example, Nasir Khusraw and other medieval luminaries were stripped of their religious content so masterfully that many pupils in the high schools of Soviet Badakhshan, only dimly aware of their religious identity, barely knew that Nasir Khusraw was someone who, like them, struggled to find a voice and yearned for understanding, and as a result was forced to live in a socio-political milieu that was not of his choice.

Such reductionist and politically motivated views miss the complexity and multidimensionality of Nasir Khusraw's personality and thought. His own view was that "no Muslim theologian can be sectarian, alienating his community with peculiar theology suited to a limited audience. Nasir's universalism follows not only from his religion of unity"<sup>29</sup>, but also from his committed defence of such fundamental human ideals and aspirations as justice,

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<sup>25</sup> See F. Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis* (Edinburgh, 1998) and F. Daftary, *The Assassin Legends. Myths of the Isma'ilis* (London, 1995); for a critique of studies on Ismailis; Kh. Dodikhudoev, *Filosofrya*, pp. 15-40; for a critique of the Russian, Soviet and Tajik studies on Ismailis, including studies of Nasir Khusraw, see Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan*, pp. 17-32, for misrepresentation of Nasir Khusraw in the medieval Muslim treatises, see Bertels, *Nasir-i Khosrov i ismailizm*, pp. 148-168 and 193-202.

<sup>26</sup> For two interesting accounts of portrayals of Nasir Khusraw by Muslim anthologists see A. E. Bertels, *Nasir-i Khosrov*, pp. 148-167 and Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan*, pp. 17-32.

<sup>27</sup> P. Morewedge, 'Nasir-i Khusraw's Hermeneutic Philosophical theology', pp. 9-10.

<sup>28</sup> Nasir Khusraw, *Divan*, ed. M. Minuvi and M. Mohaghegh (Tehran, 1974), p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> P. Morewedge, 'Nasir-i Khusraw's Hermeneutic Philosophical theology', p. 9.



good works, kind words, virtuous acts, dignity, truth, wisdom, intellect and morality. Regardless of the questioning of these and other ideas by the proponents of relativism and post-modernism, they remain just as important for hope and survival in societies today as they were in Nasir Khusraw's time.

At the same time, there have always been scholars both in the West and the East, who have tried to enter the world of Nasir Khusraw, to consider his perspective, endeavouring to locate him within the broader Ismaili movement and the intellectual traditions of Islam.<sup>30</sup> These researchers have tried to understand what Nasir Khusraw wrote, why he laid down those ideas, how he arrived at them, how he responded to the challenges and pressures of his era and what influences his writings have engendered from his time up to the present.

Among numerous examples of this approach is the work of the late Arabzoda, a well-known Tajik scholar and expert on Nasir Khusraw, who in his last work combined the methods of textual anthropology with a comparative analysis of Nasir Khusraw and the Greek sages, medieval Muslim 'ulama', philosophers, and western thinkers since the advent of modernity.<sup>31</sup>

Another major challenge in studying Nasir Khusraw is the availability, authenticity and quality of the original texts attributed to him, some of which have been lost and in some cases suppressed. It will be important for future scholarship to "sweep away the prejudicial misreading; these are projections of our fantasy of an Oriental, secretive, cult-like order of esoteric 'assassins' into the 'alienated other'."<sup>32</sup> This is a vital point, as we continue witnessing in the media as well as scholarly works, the continued recycling of old myths and misrepresentations of Ismaili history and traditions.<sup>33</sup> The removal of these misconceptions in the predominantly Muslim environment of Central Asia is an important task to be undertaken towards the achieving of a more comprehensive portrayal of the diversity and plurality of the intellectual and social history of Islam. It is time to place Nasir Khusraw and his tradition in their proper context and acknowledge that Nasir Khusraw's ideas were not a deviation, nor was he a sectarian but instead a figure of whom the Muslim *Umma* and humanity as a whole should be proud.

The size of the task of diminishing this misrepresentation rests on how genuine scholarship deals with Nasir Khusraw and his tradition. New scholarship will require a reflective

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<sup>30</sup> See for example A. Hunsberger, *The Ruby*, W. Ivanow, *Nasir-i Khusraw and Ismailism* (Bombay, 1948); H. Corbin, 'Nasir-i Khusraw and Iranian Ismailism', in ed., R. Frye, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 4, *From the Arab invasion to the Saljuks* (Cambridge, 1975); A. E. Bertels, *Nasir-i Khosrov i Ismailism* (Moscow, 1959); G. A. Hunzai, *The Concept of Pleasure in Nasir-i Khusraw's Thought* (Montreal, 1993); F. Sher Zaman, *Falsafa-i Akhlaq-i Nasir-i Khusraw* (Islamabad, 1992); A. Schimmel, *Make a Shield from Wisdom. Selected Verses from Nasir Khusraw* (London, 2001); Kh. Dodikhudoev, *Filosofiya Krest 'yanskogo Bunta* (Dushanbe, 1987) for a review of these approaches.

<sup>31</sup> N. Arabzoda, *Mir Idei Nasir-i Khusrava* (Dushanbe, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> P. Morewedge, *Ibid*, p. 4;

<sup>33</sup> See for example N. Shastic, 'Nad Tsentral'noy Aziei navisla novaya urgoza', *Evrzrya Segodnya*, April 28, 2002; R. Karaev, 'ugotovili nam khalifat?', *Argumenty I Fakty*, 20 (November 2002); A. Orlov, 'Aga Khan IV, Ismaility, Nato, i mezhdunarodnyy terrorizm', *Journal of the Theory and Practice of Eurasianism*, 18 (2001); Y. Kagramanov, 'Prizrak Alamuta', *Intellektualnyy Forum*, 18 (July, 2003), available at <http://if.russ.ru/issue/9/prizrak.html>; Yuriy Razgulyaev, 'Islamskoe obrazovanie v Kirgizii stanovitsya istochnikom ekstrimisma yi napryazhennosti', *Pravda*, 20 (March 2002), available at <http://pravda.ru/cis/2002/03/20/38526.html>





immersion in and recovery of Nasir Khusraw's own legacy, his context and the movement he represented.<sup>34</sup> Such scholarship will have to engage with Nasir Khusraw, his legacy, his time and his tradition through critical reconstruction, because without this the fundamental question of the relevance of Nasir and his legacy for contemporary realities will remain unanswered.<sup>35</sup> We may ask what aspects of Nasir Khusraw's teachings have been outlined by the commemorations as most critical for meeting contemporary challenges. If the situation in the twenty-first century further highlights the questions of human rights, gender equality, civil society, diversity and pluralism, and civilisational encounters, what insights into them can we glean from Nasir Khusraw and the intellectual traditions of Islam to which he belonged?

The fifth section is *Aesthetic Expressions in Nasir Khusraw's Poetry*. There are those who have belittled the aesthetic quality of his poetry<sup>36</sup>, who have accused Nasir Khusraw of contradicting himself by condemning other poets for composing panegyrics,<sup>37</sup> for condemning others as culturally arrogant and self-serving poets and being a blind panegyrist himself<sup>38</sup> There are, however, those who, despite Nasir's own suggestion that he be judged according to the path of the prophet rather than as a poet, considered him one of a handful of the greatest poets of classical Persian literature<sup>39</sup> or perhaps a philosophical poet, the equivalent of Abu'l-'Ala al-Ma'ari amongst the Persian literati. It is clear also that in addition to his contribution to philosophy and Ismaili theology, Nasir Khusraw played a pioneering role in the development of Persian prose, reviving and inventing new concepts, terms, words and expressions.<sup>40</sup> In any case, the cornerstone of Nasir Khusraw's approach to poetry and prose, to build further on Schimmel's observation, lies in the high value that he attributed to speech, and the word speech occurs in the *Divan* almost as frequently as do the expressions "reason" and "intellect":<sup>41</sup>

By words, the Prophet's religion spread throughout the earth  
And by words, he reached to heaven's highest dome<sup>42</sup>

Nasir Khusraw's mother tongue, Dari, was his preferred language. He had faith in its efficacy and potential as a literary language, preserved it and enriched it as a medium of expression on a par with Arabic in fields such as theology, philosophy and science. This choice, as we shall see, played an important role in making Nasir Khusraw a champion of the vernacular and so making his work accessible to a greater number of readers.

One of the fundamental elements of Nasir Khusraw's poetry is the position and status of

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<sup>34</sup> Such an approach was suggested by Professors Dinorshoev Muso and the late Arabzoda Nozir during a number of our discussions and Arabzoda included a whole section on the Ismaili movement in his work *Jahan-i Andesha-i Nasir-i Khusraw* (Dushanbe, 2003)

<sup>35</sup> H. Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. P. Sherrard (London, 1986), pp. 134-147.

<sup>36</sup> W. Ivanow, *Nasir-i Khusraw and Ismailism*, pp. 62-66.

<sup>37</sup> M. A. Nadusan, 'Paiwand-i fikr-u shi'r dar nazd-i Nasir-i Khusraw', in *Yadnama-i Nasir-i Khusraw* (Mashad, 1976), pp. 38-40.

<sup>38</sup> See a number of articles in *Yadnama-i Nasir-i Khusraw* (Mashad, 1976).

<sup>39</sup> E. G. Browne, 'Nasir-i Khusraw. Poet Traveller and Propagandist', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1905), pp. 313-352.

<sup>40</sup> See for example S. Sulaimonov's paper in this volume.

<sup>41</sup> A. Schimmel, *Make a Shield*, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Divan*, ed. M. Minuvi and M. Mohaghegh (Tehran, 1974), p. 180, English trans. by A. Hunsberger, *The Ruby*, p. 1.



human beings in the universe. Reinforcing his theological and philosophical views, Nasir Khusraw's poetry is full of admiration for the nature of humanity and its creative potential. Like Sijistani,<sup>43</sup> Nasir Khusraw considers a human being to be not simply the culmination of creation and a threshold to the other world, but also as microcosm, a nexus of the animal and angelic worlds and indeed the lord of the planets and stars.<sup>44</sup> Even the highest entities, such as the intellect and soul, are there to enable human beings to reach their highest potential. With all these privileges comes the moral purpose of their existence and the responsibility for their actions not just before God, but also the rest of creation. As a note of caution, it must be pointed out that such an elevation of the human being should not be interpreted in modern western humanistic terms, but instead defined within the religious context of medieval Islam. Nasir Khusraw puts it as follows:

But note that virtue and intellect which makes us lords of donkeys  
Are the very same trait which binds us as slaves of the Lord.<sup>45</sup>

The final section of papers in this volume is *Dialectics of Tradition and Modernity*. Nasir Khusraw is one of those great thinkers in Islam who have established a tradition and solid following able to survive long after the founder has died. In greater Badakhshan<sup>46</sup> Nasir Khusraw is revered as *hazrat, hakim, shah, sayyid, pir* and *hujjat*. He is seen as one of the *ahl al-bayt*.<sup>47</sup> His name remembered recited on a daily basis during local spiritual ceremonies such as *maddoh* (devotional poetry)<sup>48</sup>, *charaghrawshan, da'wat-i fana* and *baqa*<sup>49</sup> as well as during visitations to the sacred natural sites that remind the visitors of their spiritual connection with God.<sup>50</sup> For many Nasir Khusraw remains a source of inspiration and an example of the wonder of the unyielding soul, which in its search overcomes physical, psychological and social hardships and creates new ideas as he did in Yumgan.

Listen to these wise thoughts of the Hujjat  
Who resides in Yumgan like a king...  
Each year a book of *da'wat*  
I send to the various parts of the world<sup>51</sup>

Regardless of the increase in scholarship on Nasir Khusraw and his tradition in the last

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<sup>43</sup> P. E. Walker, *Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani: Intellectual Missionary* (London, 1996), pp. 59-63.

<sup>44</sup> See the paper by J. Nazriev in this volume.

<sup>45</sup> *Divan*, ed. S. N. Taqavi (Tehran, 1304-1307/1925-1928), p. 33, English trans. A. Hunsberger, *The Ruby*, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> Greater Badakhshan often implies the vast area where the Pamir and Hindukush mountains face each other and where the Nasir Khusraw traditions as well as Tajik-Persian culture has a strong presence. This includes Tajik and Afghan Badakhshan as well as Chitral, Northern Pakistan, and the westernmost regions of Chinese Xingjian.

<sup>47</sup> *Ahl al-Bayt* refers to the family of the Prophet. Mohaghegh (1969) on the basis of an extensive study of his spiritual *nisba* suggested that Nasir was not a *sayyid*, nor a member of the Prophet's family. He suggested that Nasir's reference to and connection with the *Ahl al-Bayt* should be understood symbolically, as was the case with Salman al-Farsi; On the subject see also W. Ivanow, *Nasir-i Khusraw and Ismailism*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>48</sup> On Ismaili devotional poetry see G. Van Den Berg, *Minstrel Poetry from the Pamir Mountains: A Study of the Songs and Poems of the Ismailis of Tajik Badakhshan*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, (Leiden, 1997).

<sup>49</sup> See S. Niyozov, 'Shi'a Ismaili Tradition in Central Asia: Evolution, Continuities and Changes', *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 6, 24 (2003), pp. 45-46; also Z. Yusufbekova, *Sem 'ya i semeinty byt shugnantsev* (Dushanbe, 1995), pp. 140-145.

<sup>50</sup> One such site is Nasir Khusraw's spring, which is believed to have gushed past him as a response to the villagers' complaint about the lack of drinking and irrigation water. For more on shrines in Badakhshan see Shakarmamadov's paper in this volume.

<sup>51</sup> *Divan*, ed. M. Minuvi and M. Mohaghegh (Tehran, 1974), p. 221.



century, in particular by Russian, Soviet and Tajik scholars, almost every aspect of Nasir Khusraw's tradition in Central Asia remains largely uncharted. This is due to the following: (a) a dearth of information on Badakhshan and the geographical isolation of its Ismaili community, (b) oppression by certain non-Ismaili rulers and *fuqaha*, as well as the Soviets, which altogether led to the destruction of some Ismaili sources, (c) deliberate distortion of the image of the Ismailis in extant sources by their ideological opponents, and (d) lack of suitable conditions for critical scholarship, which has often led to ideological and parochial appropriation of data and research processes and their products.<sup>52</sup>

The major question to address here is what shape Nasir Khusraw's ideas took after his life as the adherents of his community strove to establish and preserve their identity despite attempts at conversion, oppression and marginalisation, and changes wrought by time over the centuries.<sup>53</sup> In other words, questions such as what does Nasir Khusraw's tradition mean<sup>54</sup>, how did it evolve after his death, how similar or different is it to Nasir Khusraw's textual legacy<sup>55</sup> how has it survived in the face of constant attack during Afghan rule of Badakhshan in the nineteenth century and Soviet militant atheist domination in the twentieth, all require renewed scholarly engagement. More importantly, what is the future of this tradition in a time dominated by the rapid and inevitable intrusion of globalisation and the free-market economy?

Through this tradition, we deal with yet another, that is to say the legendary and mythical portrayals of Nasir Khusraw construed through the popular forms of consciousness. It is important to acknowledge that this legendary dimension played an equally important role in providing meaning and hope to his Badakhshani adherents throughout the centuries.<sup>56</sup> The tribulations that befell the indigenous scholars who continued his tradition emulating his classical style and vocabulary were a part of this.<sup>57</sup> The relationship between Nasir Khusraw and his tradition provides an opportunity for identifying elements of continuity and change in Badakhshani society which have powerful implications for the future, in particular for those who have been and are still trying to bring change to Central Asian communities.<sup>58</sup> More concrete projects might seek to explore the roles of the religious, official and popular leadership in the process of negotiating identity<sup>59</sup>, what happened to the intellectual aspect of

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<sup>52</sup> See A. E. Bertels, *Nasir Khosrov i Ismailizm*, pp. 1-9; S. Akiner, 'Prospects for Civil Society in Tajikistan', in A. Sajoo, ed., *Civil Society in the Muslim World* (London, 2002), pp. 182-195.

<sup>53</sup> S. Niyozov, 'Shi'a Ismaili Tradition in Central Asia', pp. 39-46; also H. Emadi, 'The End of *Taqiyya*: Reaffirming the Religious Identity of Ismailis in Shughnan, Badakhshan and Political Implications for Afghanistan', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34, (1998), pp. 103-120.

<sup>54</sup> See an attempt at redefinition A. Iloliev's article in this volume.

<sup>55</sup> A. Semyonov for example, illustrated that there were substantial differences between the concept of *tanasukh* in Nasir Khusraw's writings and in the beliefs of the Ismailis of the Shughnan region of Badakhshan, see 'Protivorechie vo vzglyadakh na pereselenie dush u pamirskikh ismailitov i u Nasir-i Khosrova', *Byulleten' Sredniaziatskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* (Tashkent, 1925), pp. 103-117.

<sup>56</sup> Cf., N. Shakarmamadov's and S. Salim-Hunzai's papers in the volume. For more on the popular images of Nasir Khusraw in Badakhshan see N. Shakarmamadov and N. Jonboboev, *La'l-i Kuhsar* (Khorog, 2003).

<sup>57</sup> See papers written by S. Salim-Hunzai and A. Iloliev on some of the important figures of the late 19th/early 20th centuries in the Nasir Khusraw tradition.

<sup>58</sup> See S. Keshavjee, *Medicines in Transition An Analysis of Social and Health Change in GornoBadalchshan Tajikistan.*, Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1998; S. Niyozov, 'The Effects of the Collapse of the USSR on Teachers' Life and Work in Tajikistan', in S. Heyneman and A. J. De Young, eds., *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia* (Connecticut, 2004), pp. 37-64.

<sup>59</sup> For an attempt see E. Hojibekov's and U. Shozoda Muhammadov's papers in this volume. Also H. Emadi,



the Nasir Khusraw tradition, what was the effect of the imperial power-brokers' game at the end of the nineteenth century, and what were the effects of socialist, nationalist and other modern western ideologies on the community's traditional structure and culture.

### **Final notes on the volume's structure**

Apart from brief references to a few of the eighty authors, this introduction was not aimed at synthesising the papers. This task is fulfilled by the annotations provided at the beginning of each of the sections, as mentioned above. The annotations, provided in the major mediums used at the conference, i.e., Tajik, Dari/Persian and English, will also help the readers to gather the gist of the papers, which are all published in their original languages. These papers reflect a broad diversity. The authors of the papers represent a wide spectrum of scholarship: at one end of this continuum there are passionate beginners to writing and scholarship, while at the other, there are established scholars who have worked on Nasir Khusraw for decades. Further, the diversity of scholars also represents the sheer variety of scholarly traditions in contemporary scholarship. Lastly, the broad geographical range of the authorship presented in the volume is another indication of Nasir Khusraw's continuing relevance and attraction for the wider readership across the globe, including the wider scholarship. The challenge to research mentioned above could indeed be conceived of positively: Nasir Khusraw's tradition remains uncharted territory, offering new venues and opportunities for future research and scholarship.

### **An epilogue to begin with**

The publication of a volume in four languages as this is indeed a rare case and complex task, which required relentless effort from the writers, academic and technical editors, reviewers and publishers. In fulfilling such a complex job, one can never avoid all technical, grammatical and stylistic mistakes, for which the editorial committee, organisers and publishers of the volume extend their apologies.

Finally, heeding Nasir's advice to cultivate humility, it is safe to say that the volume presented for your attention constitutes a humble endeavour. It may not respond to all the questions and challenges highlighted in this introduction, but, if the articles motivate readers and specialists into realising that the next century inevitably calls for engaging with thinkers like Nasir, who can help all of us to negotiate our identity against the known challenges and yet unthought of upheavals of the twenty-first century, we can proudly say that we have achieved the objectives we highlighted for both the celebration and the current volume.

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'The End of *Taqiyya*'.