

The Vedas as Sources of Satpanthi Ismaili Ginan Literature

The Satpanthi Ismaili ginans call two authoritative scriptural sources as "sankhi" or witness in support of the truth contained therein-- the Vedas and the Qur'an. In the ginans we often come across lines such as "teni sankh che Veda Quran" which means the witness or proof of that (what I have said) is in the Vedas and the Qur'an. Some ginans even go further; for example, the ginan E Sabhaga ~~by Pir Shams~~ ^(Pir Shams) says:

"Ape Shah mullah,
Ape Shah kazi
Ape Shah Veda Quran"

Which means the Shah (or Imam) himself is the mullah, he is the kazi, and he is the Veda and the Quran!

~~This ginan is attributed to Pir Shams.~~

The Qur'an is the revelation of Allah communicated to the holy Prophet Muhammad, (sala Alllah wa salam) by the angel Gabriel in sixth century Arabia in the Arabic language. Most of us are familiar with that much.

The Vedas are the most sacred scripture of Hinduism. They are also the oldest religious literature extant in the world, going back more than 4000 years. They are in the Sanskrit language. They are "shruti" (meaning what has been heard by the sages, as against "smriti" or what is remembered); hence they have the authority of being revealed scriptures. There are four Vedas: the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda and the Atharva Veda. All four have been mentioned in the ginan literature. For example, in To Muniver Bhai of Pir Sadr Din (which is 552 verses long) it is said:

"Ashaji vedani vani te to swamiji pote mukha mahethi
boliya
Ane e bhai tena vedaja kidha char
Rug ved, jujar ved, sama ved, atharva ved karya
Ane e bhai tena kitabaja kidha char re (232)

Te to char kitab Vishnu pote karya
Ane temna namana te sambharo vicara
Aval kitab Toret and bija jambur kahiye
Ane trijo kitab injil sara (233)

Trijo kitab te injil karyo
Ane chotho kitab te furqan sara --- (234) (Here the Pir is equating the Atharva Veda to the Furqan or the Quran).

The Rig Veda, the oldest, is a collection of 1028 hymns. These hymns are dedicated to the gods and the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Vedic Hinduism which is supposed to have been brought to the Indus valley by the Aryans who came from Iran, is said to be polytheistic. In fact this is not quite so-- Professor Max Muller, a well-known German Sanskritist coined the word 'henotheism' for the religious attitude of the Aryans. When the Aryans

addressed one god or set of gods they used the same epithets and attributes as they did for another god or set of gods on another occasion. The lines of division were not clearly marked.

The mode of religious action that the Aryans proposed was ritual sacrifice called "yagna". These were big fire ceremonies where various articles were sacrificed into the fire to the accompaniment of mantras. Now fire ceremonies are not enjoined in the ginans, but one does come across lines such as "pagale pagale anant jagan nu pun", meaning at every step one accrues the merit of having performed countless ~~krone~~ yagnas. Yagna is thus supposed to incur great merit for the performer.

But the Rig Veda, especially the tenth book contains hymns which take a spiritual step higher, in speculating about creation, the creator etc. How did all this come about? One hymn suggests cosmic sacrifice and dismemberment of the Primal Purusha: the Brahmins came from his mouth, the arms became the kshatriyas, his thighs became the vaishyas and his feet became the sudras. The moon came from his thought organ, the sun was produced from his eye etc. The Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda, but especially the Atharva Veda contains much material for magical and ritual interaction. It seems that the hymns of the Atharva Veda are intended for use as magical spells to satisfy popular desires, such as protection from snakes, demons and witchcraft; good luck in childbirth; success against enemies and in gambling, recovery of virility etc. etc.

Perhaps the most sacred mantra of Hinduism is the Gayatri mantra, and it occurs in the Rig Veda. It goes:

"Om bhur bhuvah svah
Tatsavitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
Dhiyo yo nah prachodayat"

Which means, 'O God, thou art the giver of life, the remover of pains and sorrows, the bestower of happiness. O creator of the universe, may we receive thy sin-destroying light. May Thou guide our intellect in the right direction'.

Now in the Satpanthi ginan literature there are three texts called the Gayatri, or the Gavantri. One is jointly by Pir Sadr Din and guru Hasan kabir Din. Then there are two others: the Atharvedi Gavatri and the Mur Gavatri, both by Seyyed Imam Shah of Pirana. All three are entirely concerned with the theory of creation. They are rather involved, detailed pieces of work, and need not detain us here. We will just make a few basic observations:

Like the Qur'an, but unlike Hinduism, the Satpanthi Gayatris propose a single creator (not Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva). But creation is not out of the word 'Kun' (Be) as in the Qur'an or the Judeo-Christian traditions. Secondly, Time in the Qur'an and in Islam is a linear concept. Creation takes place at a certain point in time, then at the end there is Judgement. The Satpanthi Gayatris, and the other ginans too teach a cyclical theory of time as

in Hinduism. Time is divided into kalpas and yugas: Karta yuga, treta yuga, dvapara yuga and kali yuga (which we are supposed to be living in now). Kali yuga degenerates and will eventually give way to satya yuga, and the whole cycle will be repeated. The Satpanthi Gayatris also propose that Rig Veda is the scripture of satya yuga, Yajur Veda is the scripture of the Treta Yuga, Sama Veda is the scripture of the Dvapara Yuga, and Atharva Veda is the scripture of the Kali era. Since we are supposed to be living in the Kali Yuga, the Atharva Veda is more frequently mentioned in the Ginan literature; it is also equated with the Qur'an.*

I wondered why these works are called Gayatri at all, because they bear no resemblance to the Rig Vedic Gayatri mantra whatsoever. Pir Sadr Din's Gayatri is divided into sections. In the Karta Yuga section it says "aucharnta Rig Veda, audharanta Gavatri", in the Treta Yuga section "aucharnta Yajur Veda, audharanta Gavatri", in the Dvapara Yuga section "aucharnta Sama Veda, audharnta Gavatri", and in the Kali Yuga section it says "aucharnta Atharva Veda, audharnta Gavatri". This seems to me to be the only justification for calling these works Gayatri.

Let us go back to the Vedas now. The tendency to go beyond external ritual sacrifice and beyond the pantheon of gods is already apparent in the Rig Veda. In India ritual sacrifice gradually becomes internalized, and after quite some time full fledged mysticism appears in the Upanishads. The Upanishads are part of 'aranyaka' or forest treatises. These form part of Vedanta or the 'end of the Vedas'. They are secret, not to be imparted to the uninitiated. They are meant to be learnt 'sitting by' a Master who 'knows'. There are 108 Upanishads in all in the Sanskrit language. The Upanishads are the purest, most succinct statement of monistic mysticism to be found in any religious literature of the world. In a series of brilliant (and some not so brilliant) dialogues and stories this theme of monism is worked out.

For example, the story of the sage Yajnavalakya and his wife Maitreyi. Yajnavalkya having attained a certain age wished to renounce the world and retire into the forest to meditate. So he called both his wives and told them that he was going to divide his wealth between them. The older Katyayani was very pleased at that, but the younger Maitreyi queried whether wealth would bring her immortality. Yajnavalakya said no, wealth would bring her passing comforts, but no immortality. So she said what good was wealth to her in that case?

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She was insistent, so Yajnavalakya then went on to teach her that the only Reality that there was was the inner Self, the Atman, which was the same as Braman or the universal

Self. It was only by knowing the Atman that one could become immortal. For if there was only the One, how would one see another, or hear another, or smell another, or speak to another? The source of all 'being' was just one, and one had to know that One!

The Upanishads, as we see, are mystical treatises. One would think that the Ismaili tariqa being a 'batini' tariqa would find common ground in the Upanishads. Sufism did after all find this common ground. The Upanishads were translated from Sanskrit to Persian at the behest of Prince Dara Shikoh, the elder brother of the Mogul Emperor Aurangzeb. Dara Shikoh was a Sufi of the Chishti and later on the Qadiri order. But we find no reference to the Upanishadic material in the ginan literature- neither in content nor in spirit.

The Upanishads do teach the theory of karma and reincarnation in a rather crude form, which the ginan literature espouses too. But then the theory of karma and reincarnation are so prevalent at all levels of Indian religious life and thought that it is no surprise that they are to be found in the Satpanthi form of Ismailism. Their being present in the ginan literature does not necessarily suggest any connection to the Upanishadic or Vedantic literature of Hinduism. The Upanishads were 'secret', and probably only known to the Brahmins and the pandits. The Ismaili Pirs worked in a different strata of society-- mostly business classes, hence the lack of reference may be explainable.

Now if the Vedas and Vedant were not the sources for the ginans, we still have the problem of finding out what sources within Hinduism does the Satpanthi ginan literature draw upon. That brings me to one central theme in the ginan literature-- the theme of the Dasa Avatara and its close connection to the conversion process. The Dasa Avatara theory is the central doctrine of Satpanthi Ismailism, and the main testimony used for conversion of Vaishnavite Hindus to Satpanthi Ismailism.

The Dasa Avatara teaches that the god Vishnu takes ten incarnations. Of these the first nine have already come (four in the Karta Yuga: machh, kurma, varah, narsimha; three in the Treta Yuga: Vayman, Parshuram, Ram; two in the Dvapara Yuga: Krishna, Buddha) and the last avatara Kalki is supposed to come in the Kali era. The Ismaili Dasa Avatara which forms part of the ginan literature teaches that this Kalki avatara is in fact the Nakalamki avatara -- and this is Ali. It is by this theory and method that Ismaili Shiite Islam is superimposed on a Vaishnavite Hindu substructure. This in effect sets up the conversion process. Ali is Vishnu (and after Ali, the Imams), he is the tenth avatara.

In Hinduism the stories of the various avataras are to be found in the Purana literature. There are 18 Puranas in all (e.g. Shiva Purana, Vishnu Purana, Skanda Purana etc.) The stories of the avataras of Vishnu occur in the Bhagavat Purana, which forms a very popular reading over a 7 day period.

Hence one can conclude that it is the Purana literature, and especially the Bhagavat Purana which is more important as a source for the ginan literature, rather than the Vedas proper. The ginan literature also draws vastly from Vaishnavite as well as the popular bhakti literature, especially for its devotional elements, (but this is a whole separate field).

e.g. in the Arati Moti it is said:

Atharva veda paramane tame chalo mora bhai
Ajampiya jap vina mukti na hoye (17)

or in the ginan "Avichal Allah or Pir Sadr Din, it is said
Bhane Pir Sadr Din Satgura Bhirama (brahma!)
Atharva veda bhane so mera.