intellectual. Davari, on the other hand, opposed the application of the scientific methodology to fiqh. The debate continues.

The major achievement of Boroujerdi’s book is that it provides understanding of the complex process through which intellectual viewpoints and discourses were articulated. Crucially significant is the argument that nativism rather than Islam was the major inspiration for most of the intellectuals but it came to be expressed in a religious idiom. This is worth critical attention, not only because this is a new insight into Iranian intellectual history but also because it helps us understand Islamic revivalist movements elsewhere in the world. In Maulānā Mawdūdi’s work, too, there is much that is inspired by his reaction to the West. Mawdūdi’s revivalist work also has the nativist element since it is not a continuation of the old medieval Islamic debates which preoccupied the traditional ‘ulamā’ of his time.

The epilogue tells us how nativism emerged as the sole ideological candidate which united most segments of the intellectual polity. However, now in the hands of the clergy, it has become a sacerdotal device to suppress other discourses. Moreover, nativism, like orientalism, is itself based on wrong theoretical premises. And yet it flourishes because of being a response to the West’s overwhelming power.

The book is very valuable for both theoretical insights as well as empirical information about Iranian intellectual and political life. I recommend it to scholars and informed non-specialist readers alike. It is a book which anyone interested in Islam and modernity should read and understand in the light of their own society. However, it is perhaps especially relevant for Pakistan, which has a highly developed intellectual discourse on Islam like Iran.

Tariq Rahman


Most research on Islam and Muslim communities has been distinctly ‘Sunnī-centric’, based on the assumption that Sunnī Islam presents the ‘authentic’ Islamic ‘orthodoxy’. Consequently, Shi‘ah Muslims and their history have
suffered from considerable neglect by historians and students of Islamic
history. Further, most of the limited corpus of writings on the Shi’ahs focuses
on the Ithnā ‘Ashārī or ‘Twelver’ Shi‘ahs, particularly on the radical religious
and political movements among them. Relatively little has been written on the
Ismā‘īlīs, who have been and continue to be important. This fascinating work
on the Satpanthī Ismā‘īlīs thus comes as a very welcome contribution to the
sorely neglected field of Ismā‘īlī studies.

Despite being the most numerous of contemporary Ismā‘īlī communities,
the South Asian Satpanthīs, also known as the Khōjahs, have been
marginalized in almost all studies of Ismā‘īlīsm. Kassam offers several
explanations for this. She argues that most scholars take Fātimid Ismā‘īlīsm as
representing authentic Ismā‘īlīsm, in contrast to which Satpanthī Ismā‘īlīsm is
regarded as a ‘corrupt’, ‘superstitious’ and ‘Hinduistic’ degeneration. Then, she
tells us, Ismā‘īlīsm is seen by most scholars on the subject as basically a
political and proto-revolutionary movement, because of which the Satpanthī,
with its apparent lack of concern for political power, is seen as an aberration,
and, therefore, not worthy of study. Furthermore, she suggests, many
contemporary Ismā‘īlīs, concerned to provide their community and history
with a more ‘orthodox’ Islamic lineage, see the Satpanthī as a deviation that
needs to be reformed or even denied. Kassam, on the other hand, pleads for
the need to recognize the Satpanthī on its own terms, as a unique Indic form of
Ismā‘īlīsm, rather than as a deviation from a presumed Ismā‘īlī orthodoxy.

The book begins with an overview of the Satpanthī, tracing its origins and
later development in its western Indian context. Kassam shows the historical
links between the Ismā‘īlī Imāms of Egypt and then Alamaut with their Indian
followers in Gujarat, Sind and southern Punjab, tracing the fascinating process
of the spread of the Ismā‘īlī faith in India. She shows how Ismā‘īlī missionaries
sought to inculcate the message of Ismā‘īlīsm in distinctly Indic categories,
because of which for its neophytes it appeared not as a completely different or
alien religion but, rather, as a fulfillment of their own traditions. Thus, for
instance, the Ismā‘īlī missionaries accepted the Hindu notion of divine
incarnations, accepting the legitimacy of the previous nine avatars of Vishnu,
but presenting Imām ‘Alī as the tenth avatar who would usher in the much-
awaited period of righteous rule. They also adopted several local customs and
practices, as well as the singing of mystical hymns (ginans, from the Sanskrit
word gnan or ‘wisdom’) through which they sought to propagate their views.
By thus rooting their faith firmly in local ‘Hindu’ thought-forms and customs,
they put forward the argument that the Satpanthī or ‘True Path’ that they
were preaching was a culmination of the faith of the Hindu communities
among whom they preached.
In contrast to others who have written on the subject, Kassam argues that it is wrong to see the Satpanth as simply a tool to facilitate the Ismā‘ili missionary project. While she does accept the fact that the syncretism actively promoted by the Ismā‘ili missionaries did play a central role in attracting large numbers of converts, she insists that the emergence of the Satpanth must be seen in broader terms. Questioning the argument that the Satpanth was simply a missionary device, she writes that in the period before the destruction of the Ismā‘ili state in Alamut by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, the Ismā‘ili Imāms seem to have strongly opposed any efforts at syncretism by their missionaries in Sind and Gujarat, fearing that this would inevitably result in the re-absorption of the local Ismā‘ilis into the broader Hindu fold. She writes that a deliberate policy of syncretism, leading to the crystallization of the Satpanth as we know it today, must be traced to the post-Alamut phase, when Ismā‘ili missionaries attempted to form a coalition of local Hindu and neo-Ismā‘ili rulers in Sind to counter the invading Turks, who saw the Ismā‘ilis as heretics and, along with the Hindu rajas, as their major political rivals. The Satpanth represented a major effort on the part of the Ismā‘ili missionaries to recover Ismā‘ili political power in Sind and Multan, for which Hindu support was seen as necessary. The unique syncretism that the Ismā‘ili missionaries presented in the form of the Satpanth also intended to provide religious legitimacy to this political project. This process of indigenization of Ismā‘ilism in India represented by the Satpanth was given further impetus with the fall of the Ismā‘ili state, which led to a weakening of the control exercised by the Ismā‘ili Imāms over scattered Ismā‘ili communities. Furthermore, it provided the remaining Ismā‘ilis in India a protective identity to escape Sunnī persecution, in line with the Shī‘ah acceptance of taqiyyah or concealment of religious beliefs.

The major focus of this book is life and works of the renowned Satpanth-i Ismā‘ili missionary, the twelfth century Pir Shams, who played a central role in the evolution and development of the Satpanth. Kassam provides a translation of 106 ginans attributed to Pir Shams, which are still recited and sung at South Asian Ismā‘ili ritual performances. These ginans cover a range of themes, providing an interesting glimpse of the missionary methods of the Satpanthi missionaries as well as of their political activities. They express the remarkable fusion of Indic, Šūfi and Nizārī Ismā‘ili concepts and motifs so characteristic of the Satpanth, reflecting on the unique missionary methods employed by the Ismā‘ilis in western India. They also show how the Satpanthi missionaries, including Pir Shams himself, sought, through the gīnānic tradition, to promote the political aims of the Ismā‘ili Imāms, presenting them
as divinely-appointed saviours who would arrive to establish a utopian society free of oppression.

As a general survey of the little-known Satpanth this book excels. It provides fascinating details about the Satpanth that are not generally known to people outside the community. The book could have been strengthened by examining the contested nature of the Satpanth identity, in particular the later split in the community led by Imām Shāh of Pirānā, in Gujarat, with his followers, the Imāmshāhīs, representing themselves as the true Satpanthīs, which, in turn, led to the declining use of the term Satpanthī among the followers of the Āgā Khāns. Further, while the book contains vital information on Pīr Shams and his followers, most of whom, as Khōjahs, are now are followers of the Āgā Khāns, it tells us little about the other followers of the Pīr who do not accept the Āgā Khan’s authority. These include many scattered groups in western India, particularly among ‘lower’ caste communities who are still formally ‘Hindu’. The image of Pīr Shams that Kassam provides us with is one that conforms to Khōjah understandings, and does not represent the remarkably diverse ways in which the Pīr is understood and revered by non-Khōjahs. Thus, for instance, Pīr Shams is the center of a flourishing cult among the Meghwals and other ‘lower’ castes of contemporary Rajasthan, who revere the Pīr as ‘Shamas Rishi’ while at the same time continue to be, at least formally, ‘Hindus’. Likewise, certain trading groups in Punjab, who call themselves as Shamsīs, regard Pīr Shams as their patron saint. Including these non-Khōjah perspectives on Pīr Shams would have provided an interesting contrast as well as clues to the continuing appeal of the Pīr to diverse communities. That said, this book cannot be ignored by anyone interested in Ismāʿīlism and in the history of Hindu-Muslim encounters.

Yoginder Sikand

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