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NASIR KHUSRAW

A PORTRAIT OF THE PERSIAN POET, TRAVELLER AND PHILOSOPHER

One of the foremost poets of the Persian language and a major contributor to ismaili thought, Nasir Khusraw has attracted passionate attention, from admirers and critics alike, for nearly a thousand years. Celebrated for a poetry that combines art with philosophy, trusted for the details of his travels throughout the Middle East, revered and criticized for his theological texts, Nasir Khusraw remains one of the most fascinating figures in Islamic history and literature. This article provides an introduction to his life, travels and writing as well as his role as an Ismaili in Khurasan.

Introduction:

Delight in his mastery of poetical form and expression has led centuries of Persian speakers to rank him among the best of Persian poets. In addition, his personal record of the seven-year journey he took from Central Asia to the Mediterranean coast, Egypt, Arabia and back home again has been studied word by word for its detailed descriptions of cities, societies and customs. French and German scholars of the 19th century stood where he stood in Jerusalem and could count out the steps he had counted out centuries before. Appreciation for the serious intellectual

content found throughout his writings, both in poetry and prose, early on earned him the title of hakim that is someone revered for scientific knowledge and analytical ability. In some parts of Central Asia, people still claim descent from him. On the other hand, his success as a missionary for the Ismaili faith caused public and official opinion to turn viciously against him, forcing him to flee for his life. He spent the last fifteen years or so of his life in exile under the protection of a minor prince, in a remote place tucked away in the mountains of Badakhshan, slightly north of the Hindu Kush. He has been falsely credited with founding an eponymous religious community, the Nasiriyya. Legends about him flowered so extravagantly that by 1574 a scholar was warned not to believe anything said about him. Today, his verses are still taught in Persian literature classes and, perhaps more significantly, are recited from memory and sprinkled throughout Persian conversations when a moral illustration is called for;

Nasir Khusraw has written in three distinct genres – travelogue, poetry and philosophy – each of which provides a window into his character. In an age when the international language of political and intellectual discourse from Spain to India was Arabic, Nasir distinguished himself by writing predominantly in his native Persian language. Most of his fellow Iranians – including the brightest stars of Islamic intellectual history, such as the philosophers ibn Sina (A vicenna), and al-Farabi and some of his fellow Islamilis – made sure to write at least some works in Arabic and thereby secured a broader reputation. Nasir Khusraw himself was certainly well-schooled in Arabic and there are some suggestions that he also composed works in the language.

Nasir Khusraw's life can be divided into four periods:

01. His early years up until his religious conversion at about the age of forty, about which we know very little;
02. The seven-year journey, for which we have his (safarnama) Travelogue and some references in his poetry;

03. His return home to Khurasan as head missionary for the Ismailis in the region; and finally;
04. His exile in the Pamir mountains of Badakhshan in the district of Yumgan, for which we have his poetry and some of his philosophical works with their dedications to the prince who gave him refuge.

The Early Years:

Abu Mu'in Hamid al-Din Nasir b. Khusraw b. Harith al-Qubadiyani al-Marvazi, generally known as Nasir Khusraw, was born in 394 / 1004 into a family of government officials. In his prose philosophical works, he usually records his entire name when claiming authorship; in the *Safarnama* he often refers to himself as 'Nasir'; and in his poetry he primarily uses his pen-name 'Hujjat', which means 'Proof'.

Nasir's place of birth, Qubadiyan, was a small town in the outskirts of Marv, a major city in the Balkh district of the great province of Khurasan, which extended in eastern Iran roughly up to the Oxus River. The provincial capital, Nishapur, and the city of Marv were important stopping points along the Silk route and, in Nasir's time, cosmopolitan cities successfully mixing people from many ethnic groups and religions. Sizeable Jewish, Christian and Buddhist communities lived side by side with Muslims of both Sunni and Shi'i persuasions, producing a society rich not only in material wealth but also in intellectual, religious and artistic products. Which provides great influence on his all the writings.

Nasir followed family tradition and entered the government bureaucracy in some financial capacity, perhaps tax collection, for which he gained a measure of fame.

Nasir Khusraw relished the opportunity to see new places and to admire the Nasir's missionary successes put his life into danger. So when public pressure against Nasir escalated even in his hometown to Balkh, he realized he had to flee. He found refuge further east, in a place called Yumgan, in the court of Ali b. al-

Asad, an intellectual Ismaili prince in the mountainous region of Badakhshan.

Years of Exile:

In exile, remote, far from the intellectual centres of Cairo and his beloved Khurasaan, Nasir Khusraw turned his energies inward, producing most of the written works we now have. Stylistically, his philosophical texts move methodically through the fundamentals of Ismaili faith, and his displays a straightforward, even spare, language with only a few moments of personal expression for the reader. So it is in his poetry where Nasir portrays the greatest range and depth of his feelings. His poetry is filled with the despair and bitterness of his exile, calmed only at times by his unflinching conviction of the rightness of his actions and the surely of his ultimate salvation before God on the Day of Judgement. He heaps his anger on his countrymen for throwing him out of his own land and for being so ignorant as not to see the truth of his message. He bewails his exile, his suffering in intellectual solitude. He pounds his fist at the world for promising pleasure and delivering destruction. But he cannot escape the safety of his refuge. His protection tightens destruction. But he cannot escape the safety of his refuge. His protection tightens round him. Yumgan becomes synonymous with prison.

One image in which our poet often found consolation was of a jewel in a mine. He sees himself as the one precious thing to be found in his entire surroundings. By extension, we are all jewels in the mine, buried beneath tons of muck and dirt, but surely there. No matter the external circumstances, no matter the physical conditions – and luxury and victory can be as deceptive as poverty and enslavement – each person is a work of God, a creation of intrinsic value. Each person contains a piece of eternity, a soul that is the true self. To find this essential self a person must work and dig. Without work, without sacrifice, without conscious effort, the jewel will not be found and will not shine. If the jewel does not

shine it does not fulfill the purpose for which it was made. Intrinsic value must be brought into view.

The soul's purpose is to move toward God. For Nasir Khusraw, the conscious accomplishments of the human hand and mind. In his travels, he turned his keen eye toward both the physical and administrative structures put in place by each society. But, for Nasir Khusraw a more urgent current ran under the delights of the world, namely his aching desire to have some purpose, some answer to the question of why all this exists. Why the world, why human happiness, why human sadness, why beautiful pearls within ugly, scabby oysters? He asked all the teachers and clergy he knew, inquired of all denominations and schools of thought, and read all the books he could, but no response was adequate enough for him. This restless searching and inner discontent lasted until it all came together in the conviction that the answers to these ultimate questions could be found in the doctrines of the Ismaili, Shi'I faith.

At some point in his 40th year (or 42nd. Depending on the source), Nasir experienced a spiritual upheaval. It culminated in the conviction that truth could be discovered in the Ismaili message. He also became convinced that he must change his life completely and use this truth to change the world. In his *Safarnama* he describes a powerful dream that shocked him out of his 'forty years' sleep, and transformed his life into one of religious conviction and preaching. For a dream or a quest need not be merely a literary convention or a topos of human mythology. People do have dreams and do have moments of exquisite clarity, which they interpret as having revealed a profound truth that thereafter guides their lives.

The Journey of a Life:

Following this conscious, vivid conversion, Nasir Khusraw quite his administrative post and set out from his home province of Khurasan, ostensibly to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. His route took him westward through northern Iran, across Armenia and

Azerbaijan, down through Syria to Jerusalem, Hebron and other cities of the region. He spent three of the seven years of his journey in Cairo, the capital of the Fatimids and the heart of Ismaili power and intellectual life. When Nasir left Cairo, he apparently left as the hujjat of Khurasan, the head of the Ismaili da'wa (missionary organization) in his home province.

As the head of Ismaili missionary activity in Khurasan for the Fatimid da'wa, effort to find and polish the jewel, that is, to purify the soul of its base bodily surroundings, can only take place when the intellect (Arabic, 'aql, or Persian, khirad) leads the way. Since it is the defining characteristic of human beings, not found in any other of God's creatures, the intellect is the tool for fulfillment in this world and salvation in the next. Through the intellect the human soul is able to learn the things it needs to learn in order to separate what is essential from what is not, the batin from the zahir, and thereby direct the person's actions to achieve the finest pleasures possible.

Nasir's flight and exile provide the overt content of much of his later poetry. In his verses he allows full rein to his sense of separation and homesickness.

The Content of his Writings:

As a writer who wrote extensively in the Persian language, nasir Khusraw is admired not only for his dedication to his mother tongue, but particularly for his imaginative rhetorical skill and his ability to create new words, in addition to new twists on old phrases. As a traveler who visited much of the Islamic world, his personal record of his seven – year journey continues to be scrutinized for all clues it might possibly offer to the history, politics, archaeology, administration, society, religion, customs and military defences of the region and time. As a preacher, he provides not only the tenets of faith in his works, but also the reasons for faith and prescriptions for living in faith. As a moralist warning of the dangers of troubling too much over the pains and pleasures of the world, his verses are recited to this day to illustrate the lessons of

life and, also, to provide solace by diminishing vanity which places excessive importance on this life. As a thinker living in exile, his prolific literary output from his 'prison' of Yumgan stands as testimony to his passion and drive for life which were not extinguished even by his own very palpable despair. From whichever angle one chooses to look, what appears is a man trying to live life as ethically and 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.

His answer was not, however, to fatalistically take refuge in the world's pleasures, or to retire from the world and ignore its social and physical attractions, as many ascetics and some Sufis did, but rather to reject the primacy given to these pleasures by many people and warn all who would be seduced by them. Nasir Khusraw is no ascetic. He chooses as his place of exile a prince's court, not a dervish's hut. Nor does he remove himself from an active life in the world. From his exile in Yumgan, he pours out his writings, 'a book a year',⁶ continuing to see the education of others as his personal responsibility.

The Travelogue:

In his *Safarnama*, Nasir Khusraw leaves a record of the seven-year journey from his 'home in Khurasan to Egypt and back'⁷. He adopts a personal style, often referring to himself as I, Nasir, to explain something he did or saw in certain place. From internal evidence, we can deduce that he wrote *Safarnama* in a later period from notes that he had taken along the way. Writing in a comparatively simple Persian prose, Nasir Khusraw gains the reader's trust with his straightforward descriptions of cities and towns. He is not trying to impress anyone with his language skills but rather with the strange and wonderful things he saw during his travels.

Poetry:

Nasir Khusraw's poetry is located in several works, the main corpus having been collected into his Diwan,⁸ which now totals more than 15,000 lines. The poems in the Diwan are primarily odes composed in qasida form, portraying lofty sentiments and thoughts in a formal and stately style. Besides the odes, the Diwan also contains shorter poems and quatrains. Nasir Khusraw also has two long free – standing poems.

The first, Rawshana-i-nama (The Book of Enlightenment) must be distinguished from his prose work of the same name – which surely marks Nasir Khusraw as the sole example of a Persian writer to have two different works, one in prose, the other in verse, bearing the same name. Fortunately, the prose work carries another name, Shish fasl (Six Chapters), and for the sake of clarity will be referred to here as such. The second long poem, Sa'adat-nama (The book of Happiness), has caused considerable debate for over a century. As it had been traditionally attributed to Nasir Khusraw.

Philosophy:

As the leader of the Ismaili in Khurasan, Nasir Khusraw produced a number of prose works on Ismaili doctrine, all of them in the Persian language as far as we know. To date, six of these works have been edited from manuscripts and several have been translated, at least partially, into Western languages.

The six edited works are:

01. Gushayish wa rahayish (unfettering and setting free);
02. Jami'al-Hikmatayn (Uniting the Two Wisdoms);
03. Khwan al-ikhwan (The Feast of the Brethren);
04. Shish fasl (Six Chapters, i.e., the prose Rawshana'I – nama);
05. Wajh-i-Din (The Face of Religion) and
06. Zad al-musafirin (The Pilgrims' Provisions).

1. The *Gushayish wa rahayish* is arranged as a series of 30 questions and answers dealing with theological issues which range from the metaphysical ('How can a non-body [such as God] create a body?') to the soteriological ('On the injustice of compelled acts and eternal punishment'). Most of the questions are concerned with the human soul, its relations to the world of nature, and its quest for salvation in the next world. They discuss whether the soul is a substance and whether it has been created, and how a person can know about God and His work. However interesting the questions, Nasir Khusraw's answers always remain general and synoptic, presenting succinct versions of his understanding of Fatimid doctrine on each of the topics.
2. In *Jami'al hikmatayn* Nasir Khusraw contributes to the larger medieval goal of combining the two 'wisdoms' of philosophy and religion, specifically Greek philosophy and Islam.
3. *Khwan al-ikhwan* – is divided into 100 chapters. These chapters cover such topics as resurrection; how an incorporeal soul will be punished or rewarded; the necessity for carrying out the requirements of the religious law *shari'a*; the meaning of the world Allah; the different ranks of Intellect and Soul; the difference between soul and spirit; how the 'many' of the world come from 'one' command of creation; the superiority of spiritual power over physical power; that the declaration of faith (*shahadat*) is the key to heaven etc.
4. *Shish fasl* (the prose *Rawshana'I – nama*) – presents a succinct version of the Fatimid Ismaili doctrine of creation, beginning with the concept of unity (*tawhid*), continuing through the succeeding Neoplatonic hypostases of Intellect, Soul and Nature and ending with a discussion of human salvation and how it relates to the hypostases.

5. *Wajh-i-din* – Nasir Khusraw provides his most straightforward exoteric interpretation (ta'wil) of a variety of religious regulations and rituals, giving the inner (batin) meaning of certain externals (zahir) of religion.

6. *Zad-al-Musafirin* – Nasir Khusraw covers a wide variety of physical and metaphysical topics such as simple matter, bodies, motion, time, place, creation, cause and effect and reward the punishment. But in keeping with the title of the book, he devotes most of his discussion to the human soul, that is, the pilgrim soul traveling through this physical world to salvation in the spiritual world. He discusses the fundamental substance of soul and its essential activities. Throughout the text Nasir asserts that the most important provisions which the pilgrime needs for this journey are knowledge and wisdom.