

THE
ISMAILI
IMAMAT
A BRIEF HISTORY

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THE ISMAILI IMAMAT

Introduction

The last in the line of the Abrahamic family of revealed traditions, Islam emerged in the early decades of the seventh century. Its message, addressed in perpetuity, calls upon a people that are wise, a people of reason, to seek in their daily life, in the rhythm of nature, in the ordering of the universe, in their own selves, in the very diversity of humankind, signs that point to the Creator and Sustainer of all creation, Who alone is worthy of their submission.

It was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (s.a.s.) in Arabia from where its influence spread rapidly and strongly, bringing within its fold, in just over a century after its birth, inhabitants of the lands stretching from the central regions of Asia to the Iberian peninsula in Europe. A major world religion, Islam today counts a quarter of the globe's population among its adherents, bound to their faith by the affirmation of the witness that there is no divinity except God, and Muhammad is His messenger.

Muslims are those who submit to God. They are a community of the middle path, of balance, which is taught to avoid extremes, to enjoin good and forbid evil, using the best of arguments. Such a community eschews compulsion, leaves each to their own

faith and encourages all to vie for goodness: it is the nobility of conduct which endears one in the sight of God. In its pristine sense, Islam refers to the inner struggle of the individual, waged singly and in consonance with fellow believers, to engage in earthly life, and yet, to rise above its trappings in search of the Divine. But that quest is only meaningful in tandem with the effort to do good for the kin, the orphan, the needy, the vulnerable; to be just, honest, humble, tolerant and forgiving.

The spiritual dimension of Islam varies from individual to individual according to their inner capacities as conditioned by the external environment. Equally, in the collective domain, a divergence of views has persisted since the demise of the Prophet among the pious and the learned, on what constitutes the best community. The very comprehensiveness of the vision of Islam, as it has unfolded over time and in a multiplicity of cultures, has rendered a monolithic conception of the ideal society difficult. Nevertheless, whatever the cultural milieu in which Islam takes root, its central impulse of submission to the Divine translates into patterns of lifeways and acts of devotion, which impart a palpable impress of an Islamic piety to whichever spheres Muslims occupy.

Shia Islam: Historical Origins

Within its fundamental unity, Islam has elicited, over the ages, varying responses to its primal message calling upon man to surrender himself to God. Historically, these responses have been expressed as two main perspectives within Islam: the Shia and the Sunni.

Each encompasses a rich diversity of spiritual temperaments, juridical preferences, social and psychological dispositions, political entities and cultures. Ismailism is one such response integral to the overall Shia perspective which seeks to comprehend the true meaning of the Islamic message, and trace a path to its fulfilment.

All Muslims affirm the unity of God (tawhid) as the first and foremost article of the faith, followed by that of Divine guidance through God's chosen messengers, of whom Prophet Muhammad was the last. The verbal attestation of the absolute unity and transcendence of God and of His choice of Muhammad as His Messenger constitutes the shahada, the profession of faith, and the basic creed of all Muslims.

During his lifetime, Prophet Muhammad was both the recipient of Divine revelation and its expounder. His death marked the conclusion of the line of prophecy, and the beginning of the critical debate on the question of the rightful leadership to continue his mission for the future generations. The debate ensued as a result of the absence of consensus, in the nascent Muslim community, on the succession to the Prophet.

A variety of viewpoints on the nature of the succession continued to be expressed before being consolidated into systematic doctrine, propounded by legal scholars and theologians, towards the end of the ninth century. From the beginning, however, there was a clear distinction of views on this matter between those, known as Shi'at Ali or the "party" of Ali, who believed that the Prophet had designated Ali, his cousin, as his successor, and those groups which followed the political leadership of the caliphs. These latter groups eventually coalesced into the majoritarian, Sunni branch, comprising several different juridical schools.

In essence, the Sunni position was that the Prophet had not nominated a successor, as the revelation, the Quran, was sufficient guidance for the community. Nevertheless, there developed a tacit recognition that the spiritual-moral authority was to be exercised by the ulama, a group of specialists in matters of religious law, the shariah. The task of the ulama came to be understood as that of merely deducing appropriate rules of conduct on the basis of the Quran, the Hadith or the Prophetic tradition and several other subordinate criteria. The role of the caliph, theoretically elected by the community, was to maintain a realm in which the principles and practices of Islam were safeguarded and propagated.

The Shia Position

The Shia or “party” of Ali, maintained that while the revelation ceased at the Prophet’s death, the need for spiritual and moral guidance of the community, through an ongoing interpretation of the Islamic message, continued. They firmly believed that the legacy of Prophet Muhammad could only be entrusted to a member of his own family, in whom the Prophet had invested his authority through designation. That person was Ali, Prophet Muhammad’s cousin, the husband of his daughter and only surviving child, Fatima, and his first supporter who had devoutly championed the cause of Islam and had earned the Prophet’s trust and admiration. Their espousal of the right of Ali and that of his descendants, through Fatima, to the leadership of the community was rooted, above all, in their understanding of the Quran and its concept of qualified and rightly guided leadership, as reinforced by Prophetic traditions. The most prominent among the latter were part of the Prophet’s sermon at a place called Ghadir Khumm, following his farewell pilgrimage, designating Ali as his successor, and his testament that he was leaving behind him “the two weighty things”, namely the Quran and his progeny, for the future guidance of his community.

Among the early Shia were the pious Quran readers, several close Companions of the Prophet, tribal chiefs of distinction and other pious Muslims who had rendered great services to Islam. Their foremost teacher and guide was Ali himself who, in his sermons and letters, and in his admonitions to the leaders of the tribe of Quraysh, reminded Muslims of his family’s right, in heredity, to the leadership for all time “as long as there is among us one who adheres to the religion of truth”.

The Shia, therefore, attest that after the Prophet, the authority for the guidance of the community was vested in Ali. The Sunni, on the other hand, revere Ali as the last of the four rightly-guided caliphs, the first three being Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman. Just as it was the prerogative of the Prophet to designate his successor, so it is the absolute prerogative of each Imam of the time to designate his successor from among his male progeny. Hence, according to Shia doctrine, the Imamatus continues by heredity in the Prophet’s progeny through Ali and Fatima.

Evolution of Communities of Interpretation

In time, the Shia were sub-divided. The Ismailis are the second largest Shia Muslim community. The Ismailis and what eventually came to be known as the Ithna ashari or Twelver Shia parted ways over the succession to the great, great grandson of Ali and Fatima, Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, who died in the year 765 CE. The Ithna asharis transferred their allegiance to as-Sadiq’s youngest son Musa al-Kazim and after him, in lineal descent, to Muhammad al-Mahdi, their twelfth Imam who, they believe, is in occultation and will reappear to dispense perfect order and justice. Led by mujtahids, the Ithna asharis are the largest Shia Muslim community, and the majority of the population in Iran.

The Ismailis gave their allegiance to Imam Jafar al-Sadiq’s eldest son Ismail, from whom they derive their name. Throughout their history, the Ismailis have been led by a living, hereditary Imam. They trace the line of Imamatus in hereditary succession from Ismail to His Highness the Aga Khan, who is their present, 49th Imam in direct lineal descent from Prophet Muhammad through Ali and Fatima. There was also divergent growth among the Sunnis.

From the early decades, various embryonic systems of law began to emerge in response to concrete situations of life, reflecting initially the influence of regional custom in the way the Quran was interpreted. Eventually, these were consolidated into four major schools, which came to command the allegiance of the majority of Sunni adherents. The history and evolution of Islam, thus, witnessed the growth of different communities of interpretation with their respective schools of jurisprudence. However, whatever the differences between the Shia and the Sunni or among their sub-divisions, they never amounted to such fundamental a divergence over theology or dogma as to result in separate religions. On the other hand, in the absence of an established church in Islam and an institutionalized method of pronouncing on dogma, a proper reading of history reveals the inappropriateness of referring to the Shia-Sunni divide, or to interpretational differences within each branch, in the frame of an orthodoxy-heterodoxy dichotomy, or of applying the term “sect” to any Shia or Sunni community.

Principles of Shi'ism

The essence of Shi'ism lies in the desire to search for the true meaning of the revelation in order to understand the purpose of human existence and its destiny. This true, spiritual meaning can never be fettered by the bounds of time, place or the letter of its form. It is to be comprehended through the guidance of the Imam of the time, who is the inheritor of the Prophet's authority, and the trustee of his legacy.

A principal function of the Imam is to enable the believers to go beyond the apparent or outward form of the revelation in search of its spirituality and intellect. A believer who sincerely submits to the Imam's guidance may potentially attain the knowledge of self. The tradition attributed to both the Prophet and Imam Ali: "He who knows himself, knows his Lord", conveys the essence of this relationship between the Imam and his follower. The Shia thus place obedience to the Imams after that to God and the Prophet by virtue of the command in the Quran for Muslims to obey those vested with authority.

The succession of the line of prophecy by that of Imamatus ensures the balance between the shariah or the exoteric aspect of the faith, and its esoteric, spiritual essence. Neither the exoteric nor the esoteric obliterates the other. While the Imam is the path to a believer's inward, spiritual elevation, he is also the authority who makes the shariah relevant according to the needs of time and universe. The inner, spiritual life in harmony with the exoteric, is a dimension of the faith that finds acceptance among many communities in both branches of Islam.

Intellect and Faith

The intellect plays a central role in Shia tradition. Indeed, the principle of submission to the Imam's guidance, explicitly derived from the revelation, is considered essential for nurturing and developing the gift of intellect whose role in Shi'ism is elevated as an important facet of the faith. Consonant with the role of the intellect is the responsibility of individual conscience, both of which inform the Ismaili tradition of tolerance embedded in the injunction of the Quran: There is no compulsion in religion.

In Shia Islam, the role of the intellect has never been perceived within a confrontational mode of revelation versus reason, the context which enlivened the debate, during the classical age of Islam, between the rationalists who gave primacy to reason, and the traditionalists who opposed such primacy without, however, denying a subordinate role for reason in matters of faith.

The Shia tradition, rooted in the teachings of Imam Ali and Jafar as-Sadiq, emphasizes the complementarity between revelation and intellectual reflection, each substantiating the other. This is the message that the Prophet conveys in a reported tradition: "We (the Prophets) speak to people in the measure of their intelligences". The Imams Ali and Jafar al-Sadiq expounded the doctrine that the Quran addresses different levels of meaning: the literal, the alluded esoteric purport, the limit as to what is permitted and what is forbidden, and the ethical vision which God intends to realise through man, with Divine support, for an integral

moral society. The Quran thus offers the believers the possibility, in accordance with their own inner capacities, to derive newer insights to address the needs of time.

An unwavering belief in God combined with trust in the liberty of human will finds a recurring echo in the sermons and sayings of the Imams. Believers are asked to weigh their actions with their own conscience. None other can direct a person who fails to guide and warn himself, while there is Divine help for those who exert themselves on the right path. In the modern period, this Alid view of Islam as a thinking, spiritual faith continues to find resonance in the guidance of the present Imam and his immediate predecessor. Aga Khan III describes Islam as a natural religion, which values intellect, logic and empirical experience.

Religion and science are both endeavours to understand, in their own ways, the mystery of God's creation. A man of faith who strives after truth, without forsaking his worldly obligations, is potentially capable of rising to the level of the company of the Prophet's family.

The Aga Khan's Words about the Role of the Intellect in the Realm of the Faith

The present Imam has often spoken about the role of the intellect in the realm of the faith. Appropriately, he made the theme a centrepiece of his two inaugural addresses at the Aga Khan University:

“In Islamic belief, knowledge is two-fold. There is that revealed through the Holy Prophet and that which man discovers by virtue of his own intellect. Nor do these two involve any contradiction, provided man remembers that his own mind is itself the creation of God. Without this humility, no balance is possible. With it, there are no barriers. Indeed, one strength of Islam has always lain in its belief that creation is not static but continuous, that through scientific and other endeavours, God has opened, and continues to open, new windows for us to see the marvels of His creation”.

Muslims need not be apprehensive, he said, of these continuing journeys of the mind to comprehend the universe of God’s creation, including one’s own self. The tendency to restrict academic inquiry to the study of past accomplishments was at variance with the belief in the timeless relevance of the Islamic message.

“Our faith has never been restricted to one place or one time. Ever since its revelation, the fundamental concept of Islam has been its universality and the fact that this is the last revelation, constantly valid, and not petrified into one period of man’s history or confined to one area of the world.”

Crossing the frontiers of knowledge through scientific and other endeavours, and facing up to the challenges of ethics posed by an evolving world is, thus, seen as a requirement of the faith. The Imam’s authoritative guidance provides a liberating, enabling framework for an individual’s quest for meaning and for solutions to the problems of life. An honest believer accepts the norms and ethics of the faith which guide his quest, recognises his own inner capacities and knows that when in doubt he should seek the guidance of the one vested with authority who, in Shia tradition, is the Alid Imam of the time from the Prophet’s progeny.

THE HISTORY OF THE ISMAILI IMAMAT

History

The foundation of the Ismaili Fatimid caliphate in Ifriqiya (Tunisia) in the year 909 was the culmination of a long development, directed by the descendants of Imam Ismail and sustained by a commitment to promote the Islamic ideal of social justice and equity. Much has been written about the Fatimid caliphate, one of the most successful in overcoming the endemic threat of despotism and anarchy, and much noted for its religious tolerance.

The geographer al-Muqaddasi has written of the harmony among different religious groups in the Fatimid domains, which, at the peak of the caliphate, centred in Egypt, extended westward to North Africa, Sicily and other Mediterranean islands, and eastward to the Red Sea coast of Africa, Palestine, Syria, the Yemen and the Hijaz. The Ismaili view of history, which accorded due respect to the great monotheistic religions of the Abrahamic tradition, provided the intellectual framework for the participation of the followers of different faiths in the affairs of the Fatimid state. Within the Fatimid judiciary, as in other branches of government, appointments were based on merit.

In elevating a Sunni jurist to the post of chief qadi, Imam-caliph al-Hakim praised the appointee’s sense of justice and calibre as the determining factors. The Fatimid tolerance towards non-Muslims has also been well attested. Christians and Jews, as much as Muslims of either branch, were able to rise to the highest echelons of state office on grounds of competence.

Foundation of Fatimid Caliphate

The foundation of the Fatimid caliphate as the first major Shia state, provided the first opportunity for the promulgation of an Ismaili school of jurisprudence.

Based on Shia principles, it was formulated and implemented with due deference to the Fatimids' universalist philosophy of religious tolerance. In the same spirit, the Fatimids pioneered the practice of encouraging private patronage of mosques and other pious buildings by Muslims of different persuasions. Their policy reflected the historical fact of a plurality of pious ways rather than a monolithic interpretation of the faith.

The Fatimids generously encouraged intellectual pursuits. Natural and philosophical inquiry enjoyed a free rein and thrived. The culture of unhindered scientific thought attracted the finest minds of the age to the Fatimid court, whatever their religious persuasions: mathematicians and engineers like Ibn Haytham, astronomers like Ali b. Yunus; physicians like al-Tamimi, al-Israili and Ibn Ridwan.

Nor was the scientific culture the preserve exclusively of men of letters and science, as efforts were made to popularise their learning. Al-Azhar, the chief Cairo mosque built by Imam/caliph al-Muizz in 972, was also a great centre of learning, generously endowed by the Fatimid Imam/caliphs.

Dar al-'Ilm, the House of Knowledge, established in Cairo in 1005 by Imam/caliph al-Hakim, was the first mediaeval institution of learning, a precursor of the modern university, which combined in its programme of studies a full range of the major academic disciplines, from the study of the Quran and Prophetic traditions through jurisprudence, philology and grammar, to medicine, logic, mathematics and astronomy. The institution was open to followers of different religions.

Period of Schism over Imam Succession Line

In the last decade of the eleventh century, the Ismaili community suffered a schism over the succession to Imam/caliph Mustansir billah (d.1094).

One section of the community followed his youngest son al-Mustali. The other gave its allegiance to his eldest son Imam Nizar from whom the Aga Khan, the present Imam of the Ismailis, traces his descent. The seat of the Nizari Imamate then moved to Iran where the Ismailis had succeeded in establishing a state comprising a defensive network of fortified settlements.

With its headquarters at Alamut, in Northern Iran, the Ismaili state later extended to parts of Syria. Though there were continual wars among Muslims over issues of power and territory, this period of Muslim history does not paint a simple canvas of one camp of enemies facing another. The military equation was further complicated by the presence of the Crusaders.

Shifting alliances among all these different groups was the normal order of the times. In spite of their continual struggle to keep powerful enemies at bay, the Ismailis of the Alamut state did not forsake their intellectual and literary traditions. Their fortresses housed impressive libraries whose collections ranged from books on various religious traditions and philosophical and scientific tracts to scientific equipment. Nor did the hostile environment force them to abandon their liberal policy of patronage to men of learning which benefited Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars and scientists.

Their settlements were a generous sanctuary for waves of refugees, irrespective of their creed, fleeing

the Mongol invasions. It was these invasions by the Mongol hordes which, in 1256, brought about the destruction of the Ismaili state. Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, fell a much easier prey to the Mongols, whose advances further west were checked by the Mamluk rulers of Syria and Egypt.

The Syrian Ismailis were thus spared the Mongol atrocities. Many of the Ismailis of the Iranian lands found refuge in Afghanistan, the Oxus basin in Central Asia, China and the Indian subcontinent, where large Ismaili settlements had existed since the ninth century.

The Ismailis who remained in the Iranian lands had to protect themselves from hostile dynasties. Given the esoteric nature of their own tradition, aspects of which they shared with communities among both Sunni and Shia Muslims, Sufi tariqas provided welcome hospitality to the Ismailis. Though the Sufi orders then prevalent in the Iranian lands were predominantly Sunni, virtually all of them held the Prophet's family in high esteem. During this difficult phase, the Ismaili mission retained its resilience. Under the direction of each succeeding Imam, new centres of activity were established in the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan, the mountainous regions of the Hindukush, Central Asia and parts of China.

The advent of Shia rule in sixteenth century Iran led to a number of opportunities for the Ismailis and other Shias. In time, the Shia Safawid rulers cultivated friendly relations with the Ismaili Imams, one of whom had married a Safawid princess. Later, under the Zands, the Ismaili Imams played an important role in governing the province of Kirman.

Modern Period

As a result of migratory movements and mission activities in its history, the Ismaili community has come to settle in a wide spread of countries across the globe. Like the Muslim ummah as a whole, it represents today a rich diversity of cultures, languages and nationalities. Its traditions fall within four broad geographic and ethnographic groups: Central Asian, Persian, Arab and South Asian, all of them united by their allegiance to their present, 49th hereditary Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan. Settlements in Africa primarily comprise Ismailis of Indian sub continental origins, while recent settlements in the West comprise Ismailis from all the above traditions.

The modern phase of Ismaili history began when the forty-sixth Imam, Aga Hasan Ali Shah, emigrated to India in the early 1840's. He was the first Imam to bear the title of Aga Khan, bestowed by the Persian emperor, Fath Ali Shah. He settled in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1848, where he established his headquarters. The event had an uplifting effect on the community in India and on the religious and communal life of the whole Ismaili world. It helped the community in India to gain a greater sense of confidence and identity as a Shia Muslim community, and to lay the foundations for its social progress. It also marked the beginning of an era of more regular contacts between the Imam and his widely dispersed followers. Their deputations came

to Mumbai to receive the Imam's guidance from as far afield as Kashgar in China, Bokhara in Central Asia, all parts of Iran, the Middle East, the African coast and its then narrowly settled hinterland. Aga Khan I died in 1881. He was succeeded to the Imamate by his eldest son Aga Ali Shah. Imam Aga Ali Shah assumed the title of Aga Khan II, and was honoured with the courtesy of His Highness, first granted to his father, by the British government. Building on the initiatives of his father, Aga Khan II set about the long-term task of social development of the community, with emphasis on education. He established a number of schools in Mumbai and other Ismaili centres. On the broader front, he served on the Bombay Legislative Council and was elected President of the Muslim National Association in recognition of his educational and other philanthropic efforts for the benefit of Indian Muslims generally, Shia and Sunni alike.

Aga Khan II passed away in 1885 after being the Imam for only four years. The institution of the Imamate then devolved upon his son Sultan Mahomed Shah by Shams al-Mulk, a granddaughter of the Persian monarch, Fath Ali Shah. At the time of his accession, Imam Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III, was under eight years old. At the age of nine he received the honorific title of His Highness from Queen Victoria.

THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD OF THE ISMAILI IMAMAT

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III's life of seventy-two years as Imam, the longest in history, spans a remarkably crowded era of momentous significance. It was an era that saw a far-reaching transformation in the human condition that affected all areas of human endeavour: social, political, cultural, intellectual and scientific.

It was an era that witnessed both the peak and the dismantling of the European imperial adventure. His pre-occupation throughout was the welfare of his diverse, far flung community, but his compass also extended to Muslim progress in India and elsewhere, as well as to the plight of the ordinary person everywhere, summed up in his all-pervading concern for respect for human dignity.

The latter half of the nineteenth century was a period of great anxiety and fear for Indian Muslims. They were ill-prepared to face the new challenges or to take advantage of the new opportunities of social uplift and political representation that were beginning to emerge. A recent government report had described Muslims as educationally backward. To safeguard their interests, the Aga Khan led a long and successful campaign for the principle of separate Muslim representation in the Indian legislature. However, as with other Muslims of forethought, it was the fight against ignorance that became his passionate priority.

From Primary to University: Aga Khan's Educational Vision

From every platform, he advocated free, universal, practically oriented primary education; improved secondary schools for Muslims, and a generous provision of government and private scholarships to enable talented Muslim students to study in Britain, Europe, America and Japan so that "they may learn the various processes in the lives of the great industrial commonwealth".

He strove hard to ensure that the benefits of education were equally enjoyed by Muslim men and women. When a family's economic resources were constrained, he placed greater emphasis on the education of the daughter. An educated mother would educate the family. He likened men and women to the two lungs in a body. To weaken one lung was to weaken the entire body.

It was in pursuit of his educational vision that the Aga Khan successfully dedicated himself to the project of transforming the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh into a leading Asian University. He envisaged Aligarh University as "an intellectual and moral capital" for Muslims, a university which would "preach the gospel of free inquiry, of large-hearted toleration and of pure morality".

The Aga Khan's crusade for education was never

parochial. He warmly welcomed the proposal for the establishment of the Hindu University of Benares, declaring his belief in the good that would result from "every movement that gave greater intellectual variety to the country. Such intellectual endeavours would in time turn out more tolerant Indians". Nor was his interest in education confined to India. He supported, for instance, the creation of the Gordon Memorial College in Sudan, which later evolved into the University of Khartoum.

The plight of the indigenous Muslims in Africa worried the Aga Khan a great deal. Their educational backwardness ill prepared them for economic, social, cultural or political progress. In an evocative address to the East African Muslim Conference at Mombasa, Kenya in 1945, he threw down an earnest challenge to the well-to-do non-indigenous Muslims. Outlining a plan of action to avert tragedy, he pledged to contribute a pound for every pound that non-Isma'ili Muslims donated. By the time of his death in July 1957, the East African Muslim Welfare Society had built many scores of schools, mosques, health clinics and a higher education polytechnic in East Africa largely as a result of his generosity and continuing advice.

The Isma'ili Imam is completely above, and independent of, all politics and political allegiances. Yet, it was his profound commitment to the Islamic ideals of brotherhood of man, peace among nations and respect for human dignity which impelled Aga Khan III's role as a statesman on the world scene. He sought amity among different communities in India, Africa and elsewhere.

His vigorous defence of Turkey against European encroachment after the First World War was motivated by a desire for a just and equitable peace, and out of a genuine concern that a truncated Turkey would provoke outrage against the West in the entire Muslim world. He played an important role in the political evolution of the Indian subcontinent, and was a delegate to the Round Table Conference in London in the 1930's. As the President of the League of Nations from 1937 to 1939, and through other fora, he called for peaceful solutions to problems, for the emancipation of Muslim and other nations from the colonial yoke, and for mutual understanding among nations of one another's cultures as the basis of lasting peace.

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III's involvement in world affairs began a family tradition of international service. His elder son, Prince Aly Khan, served as Pakistan's Ambassador to the United Nations. His younger son, the present Aga Khan's uncle, Prince Sadruddin, was UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Coordinator for assistance to Afghanistan and Executive Delegate of the Secretary-General for a UN humanitarian programme for Iraq-Kuwait, Iraq-Iran, and Iraq-Turkey border areas. The present Aga Khan's brother, Prince Ayn, entered the United Nations Secretariat following his graduation from Harvard in 1965, before joining the Aga Khan's Secretariat in 1968 and becoming significantly involved in the Imam's development activities.

Aga Khan III's abiding concern, throughout his career, was the welfare of his own Isma'ili community. It was his inspiring leadership as much as their enthusiastic response to his guidance that enabled the community to enter a period of remarkable progress in the areas of health, education, housing, commerce and industry. To meet the needs of the community in South Asia and East Africa, networks of health clinics, hospitals, schools, hostels, cooperative societies, investment trusts, savings and building societies and insurance companies were established. The period of his Imamate was a critical one in the modern history of the Isma'ili community.

His leadership enabled it to adapt to historical change. He built on the Muslim tradition of a communitarian ethic on one hand, and responsible individual conscience, with freedom to negotiate one's own moral commitment and destiny, on the other, to create new organizational structures as a way forward into the twentieth century. In 1905, he ordained the first Isma'ili Constitution for the social governance of the community in East Africa. It gave the community a form of administration comprising a hierarchy of councils at local, national and regional levels. It also set out rules of personal law in such matters as marriage, divorce and inheritance; as well as guidelines for mutual cooperation and support among the Isma'ilis and their interface with other communities. Similar constitutions were promulgated in the Indian subcontinent. All of them were periodically revised to address emerging needs and circumstances.

This tradition has continued under the leadership of his successor, Aga Khan IV, the present Imam, has extended the practice to other regions, from the United States, Canada and several European countries, to East and South Asia, the Gulf, Syria and Iran, following a process of consultations within each respective constituency.

The Contemporary period of the Ismaili Imamate

Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III passed away on 11th July, 1957, having designated his grandson, Prince Karim, to succeed him as the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Ismaili Muslim community settled in over twenty-five countries, mostly in the developing world, but now also with a substantial presence in the industrialised world. Prince Karim Aga Khan IV was twenty years old at the time of his accession.

In recognition of his position as the leader of an important Muslim community spread widely within the Commonwealth and beyond, Queen Elizabeth extended to him the dignity of His Highness. He graduated from Harvard University with an honours degree in Islamic history two years later in 1959.

Within less than a decade and a half of his succeeding to the Imamate, almost the whole of Africa achieved independence. Significant political changes also occurred in Asia. The process of change was punctuated by serious crises: the expulsion from Burma of its non-indigenous residents; the civil war in Pakistan which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh; the expulsion of the entire Asian population from Uganda under the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin; and the exodus from Mozambique of its non-indigenous populations due to the almost complete breakdown of law and order in the period leading to the country's independence.

In 1986, he promulgated a Constitution that, for the first time, brought under one aegis, the social governance of the worldwide Ismaili community, with built-in flexibility to account for diverse circumstances of different regions.

Served by volunteers appointed by, and accountable to, the Imam, the Constitution functions as an enabler to harness the best in individual creativity, within an ethos of group responsibility, to promote the common weal. Like its predecessors, the Constitution is founded on each Ismaili's spiritual allegiance to the Imam of the time, which is separate from the secular allegiance, which they owe as individual citizens to their respective national entity. While the Constitution serves primarily the social governance needs of the Ismaili community, its provisions for encouraging amicable resolution of conflicts, through impartial conciliation and arbitration, are being increasingly used, in some countries, by non-Ismailis also.

Aga Khan IV's Leadership

More so than his grandfather, therefore, Aga Khan IV has had to deal with multiple governments, each with its own aspirations. Adaptation to change, at an acceleratingly faster pace, has been a consistent feature of the period since 1957.

Newer crises have arisen: the eruption of violent ethnic animosities, as in Tajikistan, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the continuing brutalization of Afghanistan. As with the earlier crises, urgent humanitarian measures have had to be taken including, when necessary, resettlement of dislocated populations either within the regions concerned or in Europe and North America. It is because of these rapid changes in the local and national circumstances in which the Ismaili community has lived worldwide since 1957, that Aga Khan IV has avoided his direct personal involvement with international agencies such as the United Nations, and has replaced the direct personal roles that were held in the past by his grandfather and other members of his family by new relationships between these agencies and the apex entities of the Ismaili Imamate.

Under the leadership of Aga Khan IV, the institutions of the Imamate have, thus, expanded far beyond their original geographical core and scope of activities.

The impulse that underpins them, and shapes the social conscience of his community, the Aga Khan has explained in his many pronouncements, remains the unchanging Muslim ethic of compassion for the vulnerable in society. Many new institutions have been founded reflecting the present complexity of the development process.

The Aga Khan Foundation, including the Aga Khan Rural Support Programmes, and the Mountain Societies Development Support Programme, the Aga Khan University, Aga Khan Health Services, Aga Khan Education Services and the Aga Khan Planning and Building Services operate in social development. Economic activities are the province of the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development with its affiliates in tourism and industrial promotion and financial services.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture co-ordinates the Imamate's cultural activities. Under its aegis are the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Historic Cities Support Program and the Aga Khan Museum. Problems related to building in the developing world are the Trust's special focus of concern, particularly in societies in which Muslims are present.



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