



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

My First Meeting with the Ismailis in Persia

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I came in touch with the Ismailis for the first time in Persia, in February 1912. The world was quite different then. No one imagined that the Great World War I, with all its misery and suffering, was just around the corner. Persia was still living in her ancestral mediaeval style, and her affairs were largely going on in their traditional ways, as they were going on for centuries.

I was riding from Mashhad to Birjand in Eastern Persia: travelling by day and taking shelter at night in the villages that were situated along the road. Icy winds blow in that part of the country in winter, raising clouds of dust and sand which make the journey a real torture. Tired and hungry, I arrived at the village of Sedeh, and was very glad to take shelter in the hut of a peasant. I sat warming myself by the side of a fire awaiting food which was being prepared for me. A man entered, conveying to me the invitation of the local landlord to shift to his house and accept his hospitality. It was, indeed, very kind of him, but unfortunately, his invitation came a bit too late. To think of packing everything, shifting and again unpacking in another house, and especially after being tied hand and foot by the observances of the old Persian etiquette; it was quite unbearable. I therefore declined the invitation with thanks, promising that after a rest I would personally go to see the landlord and convey my thanks to him. This I did later on, and enjoyed a very interesting and instructive talk.

Already in Mashhad I had often heard about these localities being populated by the followers of a 'strange sect'. My inquiries could not elicit any reliable information. Some people told me that the 'strange sect' were the Ismailis, but I disbelieved it, having been brought upon the idea, universally accepted by Oriental scholars in Europe, that all traces of the Ismailis in Persia were swept away by the brutal Mongols. And here, taking the opportunity of a conversation with the landlord on the spot, I tried to ascertain the truth. To my surprise, he confirmed what I had heard before stating that the people really were Ismailis, and that the locality was not the only seat of the followers of the community but there were other places too in Persia in which they were found.

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It was an interesting and surprising discovery. My young enthusiasm was so much aroused that I at once made determined attempts to ascertain the doctrine of the community, inquired about their religious books, etc. In all this I had to suffer a complete defeat as a result of the patriarchal and mediaeval conditions in the country. The Ismailis were extremely reticent in this respect. The only exceptions would be that they would admit their being Ismailis. By far the greatest majority would simply deny any connection with them, and only now and then would show some knowledge of the matter, explaining this by their former contact with the community.

My learned friends in Europe plainly disbelieved me when I wrote about the community to them. It appeared to them quite unbelievable that the most brutal persecution, wholesale slaughter, age-long hostility and suppression were unable to annihilate the community which even at its highest formed but a small minority in the country. Only later on, however, when my contact with them grew more intimate, I was able to see the reasons for such surprising vitality. It was their quite extraordinary devotion and faithfulness to the tradition of their ancestors, the ungrudging patience with which they suffered all the calamities and misfortunes, cherishing no illusions whatsoever as to what they could expect in life and in the contact with their majority fellow countrymen. They with amazing care and devotion kept through ages burning that Light, mentioned in the Qur'an, which God always protects against all attempts of His enemies to extinguish it. I rarely saw anything so extraordinary and impressive as this ancient tradition being devoutly preserved in the poor muddy huts of mountain hamlets or poor villages in the desert.

Of course, this tradition was not what it was at the time when it was in the forefront of the civilised world of its time, under the early Fatimid Caliphs of Egypt. Much has been forgotten and lost. But what is most valuable is that the spirit which animated those ancient philosophers and devotees has not become extinct. The illiterate peasant, often famishing and always suffering from privations and oppression of the changing regimes, in his inner consciousness, preserves the spark of the same light, which illuminated the path to the cultural progress of many people.