



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

'Ismaili Communities – South Asia'

Encyclopedia of Modern Asia

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An important Shi'i Muslim community, the Ismailis as an entity emerged in 765 from a disagreement over the successor to the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq. The Ismailis chose Isma'il and then traced the *imamat* through Isma'il's son Muhammad and the latter's progeny. The bulk of other Shi'i, however, eventually recognised 12 *imams*, descendants of Isma'il's brother Musa al-Kazim. The two main Ismaili branches in India are the Musta'lis (Bohras) and the Nizaris (Khojas). The Nizaris, led by the Aga Khan, also have populations in Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, East Africa, Europe, and North America.

Early History

By the middle of the ninth century the religiopolitical message of the Ismaili *da'wa* (mission) aiming to win recognition for the Ismaili *imam* as the rightful interpreter of the Islamic revelation was disseminated in many regions by a network of *da'is* (missionaries). The earliest Ismaili missionaries arrived in Sind (in today's Pakistan) in 883, initiating Ismaili activities in South Asia.

By 909, the Ismailis had succeeded in establishing the new Fatimid caliphate with their *imam* as head, in rivalry with the 'Abbasid caliphate (750-1258) established by Sunni Muslims. Around 958 an Ismaili principality was established in Sind, with its seat at Multan, where large numbers of Hindus converted to Ismailism. Ismaili rule ended in Sind in 1005, but Ismailism survived in Sind and received the protection of the ruling Sumra dynasty. The Sulayhids of Yemen, who acknowledged the suzerainty of the Ismaili Fatimid caliph-*imams*, played a crucial role in the renewed efforts of the Fatimids to spread the Ismaili cause in South Asia. In 1067 missionaries sent from Yemen founded a new Ismaili community in Gujarat in western India. The mission maintained close ties with Yemen, and this new Ismaili community evolved into the present Bohra community.

In 1094 the Ismaili community became divided over who would become the 19th *imam*; the two branches resulted from this division, each of which developed its own religious and literary traditions.

This article is an edited version of 'Ismaili Sects – South Asia' in the *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*, Vol. 3, pp. 185-187, ed. David Levinson and Karen Christensen, New York, 2002. An electronic version appears on the website of The Institute of Ismaili Studies at http://www.iiis.ac.uk/encyclopaedias/ismailis_southasia.htm.

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Musta'li Ismailis (Bohras)

The Musta'li Ismailis founded their stronghold in Yemen, where in the absence of the *imams* the *da'i* acted as executive heads of the *da'wa* organisation and as community spiritual leaders. They were designated as *da'i mutlaq* (*da'i* with absolute authority).

The Musta'li
da'wa

The Musta'li *da'wa* in South Asia remained under the strict supervision of the *da'i* and the *da'wa* headquarters in Yemen until the second half of the 16th century. In South Asia the Musta'li Ismaili *da'wa* originally spread among the urban artisans and traders of Gujarat; the Hindu converts became known as Bohras.

Many were converted in Cambay, Patan, Sidhpur, and later in Ahmadabad, where the Indian headquarters of the Musta'li *da'wa* were established. Early in the 16th century the headship of the Musta'li Ismailis passed to an Indian from Sidhpur, and later the headquarters of this Ismaili community were transferred permanently from Yemen to Ahmadabad, where the *da'i* could generally count on the religious tolerance of the Mughal emperors. By then the Ismaili Bohras of South Asia greatly outnumbered their co-religionists in Yemen.

Challenges for the
Bohras

In 1589 a succession dispute over the position of the *da'i mutlaq* split the Musta'li Ismailis into the rival Da'udi and Sulaymani branches, each of which followed a separate line of *da'i*. Subsequently the Da'udi Bohras were further subdivided in India as a result of periodic challenges to the authority of their *da'i mutlaq*. In 1624 a third Bohra splinter group appeared under the name of 'Aliyya, a small community of 8,000 still centred in Baroda. In 1785 the headquarters of the *da'wa* organization of the Da'udi Bohras were transferred to Surat, still a centre of traditional Islamic and Ismaili learning for the Da'udi Bohras.

The Bohras, like other Shi'i Muslims, were periodically persecuted in South Asia, and many converted to Sunni Islam, the religion of the Muslim rulers of Gujarat and elsewhere. However, with the consolidation of British rule in India in the early 19th century, South Asian Ismailis were no longer subjected to official persecution. The total Da'udi Bohra population of the world is currently estimated at around 700,000 persons, more than half of whom live in Gujarat. Since the 1920s Bombay has served as the permanent seat of the *da'i mutlaq* of the Da'udi Bohras and the central administration of his *da'wa* organisation.

The Sulaymani Ismailis, numbering around 60,000, are concentrated in northern Yemen, with only a few thousand Sulaymani Bohras living in South Asia, mainly in Mumbai (Bombay).

Nizari Ismailis (Khojas)

Nizari Ismaili *da'wa*

In the late 11th century, the Nizari Ismailis founded and organised a state with a network of mountain strongholds in Iran and Syria, which the Mongols destroyed in 1256. Around the 13th century, the Nizari Ismaili *da'wa* was introduced into the Indian subcontinent. The earliest Nizari *da'i* operating in South Asia apparently concentrated their efforts in Sind (modern-day Punjab in Pakistan), where Ismailism had persisted clandestinely since Fatimid times. Nizari *da'is* were referred to as *pirs* in South Asia. Pir Shams al-Din is the earliest figure associated with the commencement of Nizari Ismaili activities in Sind. The Nizari *da'wa* continued to be preached secretly in Sind by descendants of Shams. By the time of Pir Sadr al-Din, a great-grandson of Pir Shams, Nizari missionaries had established their own hereditary



dynasty of *pirs* in South Asia with sporadic contacts with the Nizari *imams* who continued to reside in Iran.

Pir Sadr al-Din consolidated and organised Nizari activities in South Asia and strengthened the Nizari Ismaili, or Khoja, community in the Indian subcontinent. His shrine is located near Ucch, south of Multan. Sadr al-Din converted many Hindus from the Lohana trading caste and gave them the title of Khoja. The specific Nizari Ismaili tradition that developed in India is sometimes referred to by the vernacular translation of the Qur'anic term *sirat al-mustaqim*, rendered as Satpanth (*sat panth*) or the 'true way'.

Pir Sadr al-Din was succeeded by his son Hasan Kabir al-Din, who eventually settled in Ucch, which served as the seat of Nizari Ismailism in South Asia. Pir Hasan was reportedly affiliated with the Suhrawardi Sufi order, at the time prevalent in western and northern India. Multan and Ucch in Sind, where Ismailism had become established, were also the headquarters of the Suhrawardi and Qadiri Sufi orders. In the next two or three centuries Ismailism, in its Nizari form, re-emerged in the subcontinent, in forms and ideas having much in common with Sufism. The nature of this relationship is not clear, but recent research suggests that the Ismailis along with the Sufis spearheaded the spread of Islam in rural areas of India. The Ismaili heritage and contribution to Islam in South Asia are best reflected in their literary traditions, preserved and developed over centuries and aptly called *ginans*, from the Sanskrit *jnana*, meaning reflective or contemplative knowledge.

After the death of Pir Hasan Kabir al-Din a section of the community seceded and established itself in Gujarat, becoming known as Imam Shahis. The majority continued to adhere to the authority of the Nizari *imams*.

Ginans and Their Historical Context

With scholars' growing realisation that oral and so-called popular expressions of Muslim devotion and spirituality constitute a vital component of Islamic life and practice, there is increasing interest in the texts that preserve, in local languages, the devotional spirit of Muslim mysticism in the Indian subcontinent. In the South Asian context such texts represent part of the processes of conversion, negotiation, and transmission of established traditions of Muslim spirituality and ideas. The *ginans* emerged in a milieu where both oral and written traditions were well established. Because of their primary role in ritual and religious life, the performative and recitative elements of such devotional expressions were much more pronounced than was the case, for instance, for Sufi poetry.

Among the Nizari Ismailis, *ginan* has come to refer to that part of their tradition whose authorship is attributed to the *pirs* who undertook conversion and preaching. It is important to distinguish the various strands making up the hagiography of the *pirs* and to isolate the elements that reflect traces of ancient tradition and form the nucleus of later narratives. These are rarely concerned with imparting objective records of the past; the true value of the *ginan* narratives lies in their dual perspective on the tradition: one level mirroring the impact and continuing influence of the earlier *pirs* on the community's collective memory, and the other revealing the community's beliefs and understanding at various stages in its history.

Expressions of
devotion and
spirituality



Modern Period

The 46th Nizari Ismaili Imam Hasan Ali Shah (1817-1881), who received the honorific title of Aga Khan ('lord') from the monarch of Iran, Fath Ali Shah Qajar, emigrated from Iran to India in the 1840s and eventually settled in Bombay; he was the first Nizari Ismaili *imam* to live in India. Aga Khan I established elaborate headquarters and residences in Bombay, Poona, and Bangalore. As the spiritual head of a Muslim community, like other communities in British India, Aga Khan I was accorded recognition of his role in the legal framework of the empire. Aga Khan I tried to strengthen the religious identity of his followers. His successors to the Nizari Ismaili *imamat* adopted modernisation policies and introduced new administrative and institutional frameworks for guiding the affairs of their Khoja and other Nizari followers. Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, the 48th *imam*, led the Nizari Ismailis for 72 years (1885-1957), longer than any of his predecessors. He became well known as a Muslim reformer and statesman owing to his prominent role in Indo-Muslim and international affairs, as well as a wealthy sportsman and breeder of racehorses.

The Nizari Khojas, along with Bohras, were among the earliest Asian communities to settle in East Africa. Many from the Nizari Khoja communities of East Africa, India, and Pakistan have emigrated to Europe and North America since the 1970s. The Khojas today represent an integral part of the Nizari communities scattered in more than twenty-five countries.

They currently recognize Prince Karim Aga Khan IV as their 49th *imam*. The present Nizari *imam* continued and substantially expanded the modernisation policies of his grandfather and predecessor and developed new programmes and institutions, including the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Under the leadership of their recent *imams*, the South Asian and other Nizari Ismailis, numbering several millions, have entered the twenty-first century as a prosperous and progressive community with a distinct identity and a variety of regional traditions.

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