



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Reflections on Preserving Ismaili Heritage

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The efforts of the IIS Library in the context of recent and mediaeval history

The past two decades have brought about the looting and destruction of libraries, extending from Baghdad to Mazhar-e Sharif and Kabul to Sarajevo. But such events are not limited to the modern period. History is replete with them, and one can cite numerous examples from the past, such as the burning of the famous library at Alexandria and the destruction in Florence of the Medici collections with the conquest of the city by the French king Charles VIII. The destruction of the libraries in Fatimid Egypt during the 11th century and the burning of the Alamut library by the Mongols in 1256 CE are two examples within the specific context of Ismaili history. It takes only a few seconds to undo years of collecting, collating, classification, cataloguing and conservation. One has to engage with these moments of sadness and loss, without becoming despondent. One must derive inspiration from those who continue to struggle against the odds, spending endless hours salvaging materials that have been damaged by water or fire, scouring the world for microfilms and copies that may have been made years before, cataloguing and classifying material all over again, with a new vigour.

The destruction of libraries is a crime against human memory

The destruction of libraries and collections not only destroys the intellectual heritage of a community, but there is something greater, something much more profound and critical involved here. When, in the 13th century, the Persian historian Juwayni obtained permission from the Mongol ruler to consign the library at Alamut to flames, this was more than just a wanton act of destroying Ismaili texts and manuscripts; indeed, this was part of a broader strategy, for Juwayni writes that none of the Ismailis should be spared, not even the youngest child. R. Stephen Humphreys, a scholar of Islamic history, calls this destruction of objects and manuscripts no less than an attempt to eliminate historical memory; it is a process which is, in his words, “the destruction of cultural memory” and a “crime against human memory and personal identity”. Thus, those who destroy works of art or poetry or music are seeking to destroy the very soul of a community. The Mongols did not succeed in destroying the Ismaili community; neither did they succeed in destroying its intellectual heritage. For, nearly seven centuries later, scholars began locating original Ismaili texts. It was perhaps as a result of these ‘new finds’ and their potential for research that the Islamic Research Association (in 1933) and the Ismaili Society (in 1946) were established in Bombay by the 48th Ismaili Imam, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, with the objective of promoting independent and critical study of Ismailism. In one way, therefore, these modern institutions should be viewed as a continuum to the centres of learning of the Fatimid and Alamut periods, and one has to place the Institute of Ismaili Studies and its Library within this broader historical context.

The history of the Institute’s Library

The IIS Library was established in 1979, about two years after the creation of the Institute. Initially, the collection comprised approximately 300 volumes, mainly reference books on Islamic and Ismaili studies that were considered essential for the academic staff. In due course, with the onset of teaching and research programmes, this collection had to be expanded to include important editions and translations of primary sources, as well as studies and monographs on a broad array of subjects; further, subscriptions to periodicals and journals on Islamic studies were also initiated. Right from its inception, the Library did not seek to build a comprehensive collection on Islamic studies (the British Library and the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies already fulfill this role in London), but it did aim to develop a central resource for all materials on Ismaili studies. The most

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significant result was that Ismaili manuscripts (in Arabic, Persian, Gujarati and the Khojki script) in the collections of The Ismaili Society, Bombay, and the Ismailia Association, Karachi, were transferred to London. In this respect, while the contribution of Vladimir Ivanow in collecting these manuscripts has been documented, the work of Chotu Lakhani of Mumbai, India, has gone largely unrecognized; his efforts have been truly outstanding. In addition, a project to identify and acquire articles on Ismaili-related topics which had appeared in western journals and periodicals was begun, theses from various universities were acquired, a modified and expanded classification scheme was developed, and two catalogues of the Arabic manuscripts in the Institute's collection were published.

More recent landmarks in the Library's continued development

Besides the continuing work on identification, acquisition and cataloguing of printed materials, a majority of the Ismaili texts have been transferred onto microfiche, so as to preserve the original manuscripts. Two further catalogues of the Arabic manuscripts have been published, one of which is devoted to the outstanding private collection of the late Bohra Ismaili scholar, Dr Zahid Ali, which was gifted by his family to the Institute in 1997. At around this same time, the Library also began identifying and acquiring audiovisual materials as part of its mandate, and this is now an important aspect of collection development. Over the past few years, a number of collections relating to the modern history of the Ismaili community have been gifted to the Library. In 1998, an outstanding corpus of materials, both textual and visual, was donated by Dr Sherali Alidina of Karachi, while in 2000, Mr Amirali Mamdani of Atlanta gifted his unique collection of original films, slides and photographs. In 2002, the Library received the collection of Mr Sultanali Nazerali comprising both textual and visual materials. And, last year, a collection of books belonging to the late Professor Annemarie Schimmel, dealing with aspects of Indo-Muslim culture, were donated to the Library by Professor Ali Asani in her memory.

The future of the IIS Library in light of new technologies

The Library's card catalogue was automated a few years ago. Undoubtedly, the Internet has revolutionized our access to information, and there are significant benefits that can be derived from new technologies. A number of projects, including online databases and digitization, are being considered. However, there has to be some caution as to how we use these new technologies. Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold* and Alexander Stille's *The Future of the Past* deal with the 'darker side' to technological change, and the IIS Library is cognizant of this.

Much work remains to be done

A substantial amount of material has yet to be located and acquired. For example, some of the earliest 18th and 19th century printed books relevant to the Ismailis are quite rare to find, and there are many gaps in the magazines published by Ismaili institutions in the first half of the 20th century. Besides seeking to engage with the past, in terms of acquiring and cataloguing textual and non-textual material relating to Ismaili history, one of the most important challenges faced by the Institute is archiving the present. We are living in one of the most exciting periods in Ismaili history and, unfortunately, we view what is happening today, with every passing moment, as too recent to be preserved. For the Library's collection development, the present is as important as the past. If it had not been for the documents preserved by the Jewish community of the 10th and 11th centuries and relating to their daily lives in Egypt, information about societies and how people lived during Fatimid times would have been lost; these documents served as the basis for Goitein's majestic multi-volume study entitled *A Mediterranean Society*. Similarly, if we do not archive what is taking place in the global Ismaili community, whether it is in Ishkashim, Lisbon, Seattle, Chitral, Nottingham, Mwanza, Sydney, Sidhpur, Red Deer, Salamiya, Mashhad, Kisumu, Essen, Kabul or Maputo, then future generations will have no idea about Ismaili history in the 20th and 21st centuries; fragmented pieces of information derived from unreliable sources will provide the basis for Ismaili history.



What individual Ismailis can do to help

Individuals in the Ismaili community can play an important role, through personal initiatives and small projects. Collecting weekly information leaflets, maintaining records of local events, interviewing parents and grandparents, preserving family documents and papers, all these will serve as archives of the future. The Institute's Library is the custodian of the historical memory of the global Ismaili community, past and present, and every individual in the community is a custodian of this historical memory. In this context, the words inscribed on the National Archives building in Washington are inspirational: "The ties that bind the lives of our people in one indissoluble union are perpetuated in the archives of our government and to their custody this building is dedicated. This building holds in trust the records of our national life and symbolizes our faith in the permanency of our national institutions."