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ISLAM IN SOUTH ASIA

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A LIVING¹ BRANCH OF ISLAM: ISMAILIS
OF THE MOUNTAINS OF HUNZA

Islam is a major world religion. In the Qurʾān (30:30), the holy book of Islam, Religion is compared to nature (*fiṭrah*). A tree is one of the best examples in nature. It grows from a single seed that potentially contains the entire tree: its roots, trunk, branches, leaves, buds, flowers, raw fruit, ripe fruit and finally the new seed, which again contains an entire tree. However, in the process of growth all these features do not appear at once. Rather they manifest at various stages of the tree's development. The same is true of the evolution of religion. It starts with the teachings of a Divinely inspired messenger or teacher. In his lifetime, the followers remain united as a single community, but after his demise they become divided into different groups and branches. Islam is not an exception to this law of nature.

According to the Qurʾān (2:213; 3:19; 42:13), Islam is a continuation of God's message to humankind, whose revelation began with Adam and continued through Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and finally Muḥammad. The religion of God has been preached by these six *nāṭiqs* or law-giving Prophets, each of whom brought a new law (*ṣarīʿah*) and a Book. Thus, God's religion may also be compared to a week that consists of seven days – six of which are for humankind to work in and the seventh is the day of retribution and reward. In this sense, the six law-giving Prophets are the six days or cycles in which God created the world of religion. The seventh day or cycle represents the retributor or the *qāʾim* (Qurʾān: 7:54; 10:3; 22:47; 25:59). Thus, according to the Qurʾān, after the sixth day of the world of religion, namely the Prophet Muḥammad, the time of the Prophets draws to an end. After him starts the day or cycle of *qiyāmah* in the line of Imamate. This day or cycle continues until the advent of the *qāʾim*,² about whom the Prophet said: "Even if there remains of time but a single day, God will prolong it until there emerges a man from my descendants, who will fill the earth with equity and justice as it is filled with oppression and injustice".³

1 – By 'living branch' is meant a branch of Islam that continues with its principles from the very beginning when Islam divided into its branches or groups. In the course of history, many branches have appeared and disappeared.

2 – Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, *Waḡh-i Dīn*, ed. Ghulam Reza Aavani, Tehran, 1977, pp. 60-65.

3 – Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, *Šiṣ Faṣl or Six Chapters*, ed. & trans. W. Ivanow, Leiden, 1949, p. 39.

The followers of Islam were originally a single community during the lifetime of the Prophet under his absolute guidance. After his death, although ideologically there emerged a difference concerning the legitimacy of Imamate, that is, temporal and spiritual guidance, the community remained politically united. However, after the murder of Caliph ʿUtmān, the Muslim community split into two branches, or two *Šīʿahs*, one known as *Šīʿat ʿAlī*, the other as *Šīʿat Muʿāwiyah*. The latter, in the course of time assumed the appellation *ahl al-sunnah waʿl-ġamāʿah*, that is, people of the *sunnah* and community, or simply Sunnīs. The *Šīʿat ʿAlī*, however retained their name believing that the real means of keeping the community on the *sunnah* of the Prophet and in the form of a *ġamāʿah* was Imām ʿAlī, and after him the Imāms from his children by Fāṭimah, the daughter of Prophet Muḥammad. The Ismailis belong to this branch of Islam, known as *Šīʿat ʿAlī*.⁴

In the course of history, the Sunnīs sub-divided into many schools of jurisprudence. *Šīʿat ʿAlī* also gradually divided into a number of groups based on the legitimacy of the successor to the Imām. The appellation *Ismāʿīliyyah* came into existence after Imām Ġaʿfar al-Šādiq, when the Imāmi *Šīʿah* split into many groups named after his children. Among them the two most important ones are those who followed *Ismāʿīl al-Mubārak*, his older son and came to be known as Ismailis (anglicized form of *Ismāʿīliyyah*) and those who followed Mūsā al-Kāzim, another of his sons, who came to be known as *Mūsawīyyah*. Later on, when the twelfth Imām of this latter group went into occultation, they became known as the *Itnā ʿašariyyah* or Twelvers, meaning those who believe in twelve Imāms.⁵

After the demise of Imām al-Mustaṣir biʿllāh I (d. 487/1094), the Ismailis further divided into Nizari Ismailis, that is, those who followed the eldest son, Niẓār al-Muṣṭafā li-Dīniʿllāh (d. 488/1095) and Mustaʿlawī Ismailis, those who followed another son named Aḥmad al-Mustaʿlī biʿllāh (d. 495/1101). To continue the story of the Nizaris, after the demise of Imām Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad (d. 710/1310), they further divided into Qāsim Šāhī Nizaris and Muʿmin Šāhī Nizaris. In this article, by Ismailis are meant the Qāsim Šāhī Nizari Ismaili Imāmi Šīʿī Muslims.

Regarding doctrines, first of all, Šīʿah Islam differs from Sunnī Islam on the basis of Imamate. The Šīʿah assert that the world cannot be devoid of a Divinely appointed guide, either in the person of a Prophet or of an Imām. Imām Sulṭān Muḥammad Šāh al-Ḥusaynī (1877-1957) says:

“The Shia school of thought maintains that while direct Divine

4 – Imām Sulṭān Muḥammad Šāh, known as Aga Khan III, Final Reconciliation between Sunni and Shiʿah Doctrines, Pan Islam series, No.5. n.p., d.d., p. 1-6. See also for the explanation of the terms Shiʿa and Ahl al-Sunna, Abū Ḥātim Rāzī, “Kitāb al-Zinah”, in *al-Ġuluww wa al-firaq al-ġāliyyah*, by A.S. Sāmarrāʿī, Baghdad, 1972, pp. 252-56, 261-62; al-Muʿayyad fi ʿl-Dīn Šīrāzī, *al-Maġālis al-Muʿayyadiyyah*, ed. Hatim Hamid al-Din, Bombay, 1975, I, pp. 112-113.

⁵ – S.v. «*Itnā ʿašariyya*» (S.H. Nasr), *EI*², IV, pp. 277-279.

inspiration ceased at the Prophet's death, the need of Divine guidance continued and this could not be left merely to millions of mortal men, subject to the whims and gusts of passion and material necessity, capable of being momentarily but tragically misled by greed, by oratory, or by the sudden desire for material advantage".⁶

Since the cycle of Prophethood has come to an end with the Prophet Muḥammad and there cannot be any other Prophet, Divine guidance now continues through the chain of Imāms, starting with Imām ʿAlī, who was first publicly appointed by the Prophet as his *waṣī* (legatee) and *walī* (plenipotentiary) on the occasion of "warning the nearest kinsmen" (*indāruʿl-ʿašīratiʿl-aqrābīn*, 26:214) to accept the message of God according to His command. Finally, prior to leaving this physical world, the Prophet again publicly declared Imām ʿAlī's succession at Ġādīr Ḥumm by saying: "O people! Know that ʿAlī is to me as Aaron was to Moses, except that there will be no Prophet after me. He is your *walī* after me, therefore he whose *Mawlā* (Master) I am, ʿAlī is his *Mawlā*".⁷ Thus, the Imamate continues through the chain of Imāms by Divine designation (*naṣṣ*), that is, every preceding (*sābiq*) Imām designates the following (*lāḥiq*) Imām. According to Šīʿī traditions, the Prophet said: "Had the world been devoid of an Imām for a moment, it would have shaken with its people".⁸ In Šīʿī interpretation, such traditions conform to numerous Qurʾanic verses, such as 13:7; 35:24; 5:15; 9:32; 24:35; 3:33-4 and 8:24. This is because of the fact that in Šīʿah Islam, the recognition of God depends on the recognition of the Prophet or the Imām in their respective times, as they are His Proof (*ḥuḡḡah*) and Veil (*ḥiḡāb*). It is because of this importance that the Prophet further said: "He who dies without the recognition of the Imām of his time, dies the death of ignorance, and the ignorant is in the fire".⁹ Ismailis uphold this fundamental principle of Šīʿah Islam. Further, they believe that this Imām has to be always "present and living" (*al-ḥādīr al-mawḡūd*).

Ismailis are sometimes called *Sabʿiyyah* or Seveners, that is, those who believe in seven Imāms, and are thereby juxtaposed to the *Itnā ʿašariyyah* or Twelvers, those who believe in twelve Imāms. This is a grave misunderstanding. Ismailis do give importance to a set of seven Imāms in the sense that they constitute a minor cycle (*dawr ṣaḡīr*). However, they do not believe that there are only seven Imāms. Their present Imām is the 49th in the line of Imām ʿAlī in the cycle of Prophet Muḥammad.

6 – Imām Sulṭān Muḥammad Shāh al-Ḥusayni, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, London, 1954, p. 178.

7 – al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Daʿāʾim al-Islām*, ed. A.A. Fyzee, Cairo, 1951, I, pp. 14-20; See also Buḡārī, *Ṣaḡīḥ*, Riyāḍ, 1999, p. 625, 749; Muslim, *Ṣaḡīḥ*, Riyāḍ, 1998, pp. 1059-1060.

8 – Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, *Rawḡatu ʿl-Tasīm*, ed. & trans. W. Ivanow, Bombay, 1950, p. 132.

9 – Waḡh-i Dīn, p. 280, al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Daʿāʾim al-Islām*, I, 25, 27; M.H. Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *al-Mizān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, Beirut, 1973, I, 7.

Another characteristic that distinguishes Šī‘ah Islam, particularly Ismaili Šī‘ism, from Sunnī Islam is the concept of *tanzīl* and *ta’wīl*. *Tanzīl*, which literally means ‘sending down’ or ‘bringing down’ implies explaining intelligible spiritual realities in the form of perceptible material parables and allegories. *Ta’wīl*, which literally means to take something back to its origin, implies to gradually remove the veils of parables and allegories from those realities and to explain them in their pure, original, spiritual state. This dual process is also called transformation of subtle (*latīf*) into dense (*katīf*) and vice versa, that is, to give a physical form to spiritual realities and to give spiritual meaning to physical parables and allegories.¹⁰ Thus, the purpose of one cannot be fulfilled without the other. *Tanzīl* is called the miracle of the Prophet and *ta’wīl* is the miracle of the Imāms in their respective times.¹¹ The Prophet therefore said: “I am the custodian of *tanzīl* (*Šāhib al-tanzīl*) and ‘Alī is the custodian of *ta’wīl* (*Šāhib al-ta’wīl*)”. He further said in numerous traditions, unanimously accepted by Muslims, that ‘Alī would fight for the sake of *ta’wīl* as he, the Prophet had fought for the sake of *tanzīl*.¹²

According to Šī‘ah Islam, the Prophet had two *da‘wahs* (missions): the *da‘wah* of *tanzīl*, which he completed in his own time, and the *da‘wah* of *ta’wīl*, which he entrusted to Imām ‘Alī and the Imāms from his descendants. The *ta’wīl* according to the Qur’ān continues to manifest through the Imāms who are the *rāsīhūn fi’l-‘ilm* (well grounded in knowledge) until the resurrection (Qur’ān: 3:7; 7:52-53; 39:10; 41:53), when the veils of knowledge will be completely removed. The Qur’ān, through the *ta’wīl* of the Imāms, becomes the fountainhead of perennial guidance to cope with the exigencies of time and space. That is, the words of the Qur’ān remain the same, but every generation, every century and every period has a new and different interpretation to that of the past. Referring to this important aspect of *ta’wīl*, Imām Sulṭān Muḥammad Šāh al-Ḥusaynī says: “By the institution of the *ulu’l-amr* – who can be interpreted as Imām and Caliph – and by placing obedience to *ulu’l-amr* immediately after that to God and Prophet, he ensured that the faith would ever remain living, extending, developing with science, knowledge, art and industry”.¹³

Dissemination of the Ismaili Da‘wah

From the preceding description of Ismaili Šī‘ism, it is obvious that the Prophet accomplished the *tanzīlī* or exoteric *da‘wah* in his own lifetime, whereas the *ta’wīlī* or esoteric had to be continued till the day of resurrection. This was to be the responsibility of the Imāms. Accordingly, the Ismaili

10 – Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, *Gušāyīš wa rahāyīš*, ed. & trans. F.M. Hunzai, London, 1998, p. 65.

11 – al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *Asās al-Ta’wīl*, ed. ‘Ārif Tāmīr, Beirut, 1960, p. 31.

12 – Ḥamīd al-Dīn Kirmānī, *Maḡmū‘at rasā’il*, ed. M. Ġālib, Beirut, 1998, p. 65; F.M. Hunzai, *The Holy Ahl al-Bayt in the Prophetic Traditions*, Karachi, 1999, p. 13.

13 – Imām Sulṭān Muḥammad Šāh al-Ḥusaynī, *Preface to Muhammad: A Mercy to All Nations*, Q.A. Jairazbhoy, London, 1937, p. 14; *Asās al-Ta’wīl*, p. 27.

Imāms continued it wherever it was possible to do so in the world, irrespective of whether they had worldly power, as in the time of the Fatimid Caliphate or in the Alamut period, or they had to go into concealment due to the persecution of their adversaries. It is due to the tireless efforts of the Imāms and their *ḥudūd* or religious hierarchy, that the Ismaili *daʿwah* reached the far-flung areas of the inhabited world, such as Central Asia and China. Since geographically Hunza is a part of Central Asia, it would not be out of place to briefly mention the dissemination of the Ismaili *ṭarīqah* in that area prior to its dissemination in the mountainous region of Hunza. The Ismaili *daʿwah* was introduced into Central Asia at the end of the third/ ninth and the beginning of the fourth/tenth century by eminent *dāʿīs*, such as Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī Marwazī and Abuʿl-Ḥasan Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Nasafī (d. 332/ 943), who were actively engaged in the work of disseminating it. *Dāʿī* Nasafī converted the Samanid king Naṣr b. Aḥmad (d. 331/943), and many dignitaries of his court and army to the Ismaili *ṭarīqah*. However, due to the intrigues of adversaries, there was a setback to the Ismaili *daʿwah* in the reign of his successor and son Nūh b. Naṣr (d. 343/955) and many Ismailis, including Nasafī, were massacred. However, the *daʿwah* continued secretly. It was as a result of this that there was an Ismaili ruler known as Abuʿl-Maʿālī ʿAlī b. Asad when Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw took refuge in Yumgan in the year 452/1060, more than a century after the martyrdom of Nasafī.¹⁴

The extensive spread of the Ismaili *ṭarīqah* in Central Asia was intensified due to the concerted efforts of Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw and the *dāʿīs* under him. Ismaili *daʿwah* in this region henceforth became known as *daʿwat-i Nāṣirī*. Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw was appointed by Imām al-Mustanṣir (d. 487/1094), the eighth Fatimid Caliph, as the *Ṣāhib* of the Eastern island (*ḡazīrah*) or the *ḥuḡḡah* of Khurasan.¹⁵ When his life was threatened in Khurasan, he took refuge in Yumgan and from there he actively spread the *daʿwah* in many parts of Central Asia, such as Afghanistan, Badakhshan, Khoqand, Yarqand, Sarikul, Pamir, Wakhan, Chitral, Yasin, etc. Referring to his active *daʿwah*, Nāṣir writes in his *Dīwān*:

Har sāl yakī kitāb-i daʿwat; Ba-aṭrāf-i jahān hamī firistam
Tā ān ki ḥaṣm-i man bi-dānad; Dar dīn na ḍaʿf-u sust-u
zāram

Every year a book on *daʿwat* I send to the corners of the world;
 That my adversary may know that in religion I am neither feeble
 nor weak nor idle.¹⁶

14 – Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Riza Tajaddud, Tehran, 1971, pp. 239-240; Niẓām al-Mulk Tūsī, *Siyāsat-nāma*, ed. Ġaʿfar Ṣiʿār, Tehran, 1377 h. š., pp. 257-264; *EL*², s.v. «al-Nasafī», (I.K. Poonawala), VII, p. 968.

15 – Rašīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh, *Ġāmiʿ al-tawārīḥ*, ed. M.T. Dāniš-Pazhūh and M. Modarresy, Tehran, 1960, p. 97; Abuʿl-Qāsim ʿAbd Allāh Kaṣānī, *Zubdat al-tawārīḥ*, ed. M.T. Dāniš-Pazhūh, Tehran, 1366, h. š., p. 23, 113.

16 – Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw, *Dīwān*, ed. N. Taqawī, Tehran, 1367 h. š., p. 312.

Nāṣir-i Ḥusraw's relentless efforts ensured that the Ismaili *da'wah* continued openly and successfully and there have since been many Ismaili rulers in Badakhshan and surrounding areas.

The advent and spread of the Ismaili da'wah in the mountains of Hunza

According to local traditions, the Ismaili *da'wah* was introduced in Hunza and surrounding areas in two phases. In the first phase, it was introduced by an Ismaili king or chief from Badakhshan known as Tāğ Moğul around the eighth/fourteenth century in the time of Imām Qāsim Šāh al-Ḥusaynī (d. 771/1370). After conquering these areas and spreading the Ismaili *da'wah* there he returned to Badakhshan. There are conflicting reports about what happened to Ismailism after his return. Unfortunately no written traces are left of this phase.¹⁷ It appears that Tāğ Moğul did not leave behind a proper organisation of *dā'īs* and teachers to sustain and continue the *da'wah*, therefore it gradually disappeared from these areas, and the Itnā 'aṣarī faith was introduced prior to the re-introduction of the Ismaili faith in the second phase.

The second phase is not very old. It is as late as the thirteenth/nineteenth century in the reign of Mīr Silum Khan II. It is said that the Mīr was brought up by an Ismaili family, which had migrated from Badakhshan to Gulmit, a town in upper Hunza. Thus, he had an inclination towards the Ismaili faith from a very young age. Eventually, he openly accepted the Ismaili faith from an Ismaili *dā'ī* or *pīr* known as Sayyid Šāh Ardabīl of Badakhshan and gave *bay'ah* through him to the Imām of the time, the 46th Imām Ḥasan 'Alī Šāh al-Ḥusaynī (d. 1298/1881) known as the Aga Khan I. Thus, the Ismaili *da'wah* was re-introduced to Hunza (mainly central and lower) after almost six hundred years. At this time it was confined to Mīr Silum Khan II, who promised that as soon as conditions were suitable, he would summon the *dā'ī* from Badakhshan to invite the masses to accept Ismailism. Mīr Silum Khan died in 1239/1823. Sayyid Šāh Ardabīl's son, Sayyid Ḥusayn Šāh arrived on the occasion of his death to perform his funeral rites according to the Ismaili tradition of Badakhshan and established the ceremony of the *Ārāğ-i Rawšan*, which represents the supreme similitude of the Divine Light mentioned in a Qur'ānic verse (24:35), which continues in the perennial line of Imamate as "light upon light". He was succeeded by his son Ġazanfar 'Alī Khan. Fifteen years after his father's demise, he remembered the latter's promise to Sayyid Šāh Ardabīl. He sent a messenger named Aḥund Turāb to Badakhshan. Sayyid Ardabīl had in the meantime passed away and his son Sayyid Ḥusayn Šāh set out for Hunza in his stead. When the news reached the Mīr that he had en-

17 – 'Allāmah Nāṣir al-Dīn Nāṣir Hunzai, *Ārāğ-i Rawshan*, Karachi, 1993, p. 18; Quadrat Allāh Beg, *Ta'riḥ-i 'ahd-i 'atīq-i riyāsat-i Hunza*, Baltit, 1980, pp. 177-178; A.H. Dani, *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan*, Islamabad, 1991, pp. 62-63, 170-171; Hašmat Allāh, *Ta'riḥ-i Jammu*, Lahore, 1991, pp. 682-685. Šāh Ra'īs Khan, *Ta'riḥ-i Gilgit*, ed. A.H. Dani (Islamabad, 1987), pp. 52-65.

tered the territory of Hunza, he sent a deputation of dignitaries under the leadership of *wazīr-zāda* Zīnat Šāh to welcome him to the town of Nāšīrābād, then known as Hinī. Sayyid Ḥusayn Šāh was accorded great honour and welcome and Zīnat Šāh and some others immediately accepted the Ismaili faith. When they reached the capital, Baltit and were being received by the Mīr himself, Aḥund Turāb complained about the impropriety of Zīnat Šāh accepting the Ismaili faith prior to the Mīr. This angered the Mīr who therefore refused to accept the faith from Sayyid Ḥusayn Šāh. Further, the Sayyid was prevented from preaching to others and he therefore returned to Badakhshan having failed in his mission.¹⁸

Mīr Ġazanfar ʿAlī Khan was however, very keen to accept the Ismaili faith from any other *dāʿī*. He received news that another *dāʿī* known as Sayyid Yāqūt Šāh had reached Misgar, a town on the border between Hunza and China, on his return from receiving the *dīdār* (vision) of the Imām of the time, Ḥasan ʿAlī Šāh al-Ḥusayni in Maḥallāt, Iran. The Mīr sent a deputation of dignitaries to receive him warmly. They brought him to the capital, where the Mīr welcomed him with great honour. He accepted the Ismaili faith and gave *bayʿah* (oath of allegiance) to the Imām of the time. He was followed by his *wazīr*, Puno, other dignitaries and the subjects of central Hunza, with the exception of the village of Ganish, which remained Itnā ʿašārī. After accepting the Ismaili faith, they became known as *Mawlāʾīs*, namely, those who follow the *Mawlā*, the Imām of the time. Pīr Yāqūt Šāh emphasized the esoteric aspects of the pillars of Islam in his teachings. He also continued the ceremony of the *Čiraġ-i Rawšan*, which, as mentioned earlier, is the supreme similitude of the Divine Light and the continuity of that Light in the physical attires or persons (*jāmahs*) of the Imāms as His loci of manifestation (*maẓāhir*).¹⁹ He also introduced the *maġālis* (sing. *maġlis*, assembly) of *dīkr* (divine remembrance) and *samāʿ* (audition), which are performed with the musical instruments known as *daf* and *rubāb*.

During his stay in Hunza, Sayyid Yāqūt Šāh appointed deputies to continue the *daʿwah*, perform rites of passage and *Čiraġ-i Rawšan* and other pastoral and religious duties. These deputies are called *ḥalīfahs*. They in turn have assistants called *qāḍīs*, who help them in performing their various duties. Some writings of Pīr Sayyid Yāqūt Šāh show that the great historic event of the conversion of the majority of Hunzakuts, which changed their attitude and mentality, took place in the month of Ġumādā II, 1254/August 1838.²⁰

During this period of twenty-five days of Sayyid Yāqūt Šāh's short sojourn, some villages of Hunza were not converted to the Ismaili *ṭarīqah*. Besides Ganish, people in lower Hunza, in Nāšīrābād and Mayun, continued to follow the Itnā ʿašārī faith. Ganish and lower Hunza were converted to the Ismaili faith by Sayyid Šāh ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, a grandson of Sayyid Yāqūt Šāh, in

18 – *Taʾrīḥ ʿahd-i ʿatīq*, pp. 130, 140-141.

19 – *Ibid.*, pp. 174-177.

20 – *Ibid.*, p. 175.

the reign of Mīr Ġazan Khan I (d. 1303/1886). Sayyid Šāh ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd was very learned and many eminent people, such as Muḥammad Riẓā Beg, acquired religious knowledge from him.²¹ In the reign of Mīr Muḥammad Naẓīm Khan (d. 1357/ 1938), his son, Pīr Sayyid Šāh Nawāz Šāh, known as Bulbul Šāh or Bulbul Pīr also came to Hunza to escape from the persecution of the Mehtar of Chitral. He too, rendered great services to the Ismaili faith in Hunza, other areas of Badakhshan and Sariqul in China.

In upper Hunza or Gojal the Ismaili faith already existed amongst the Wakhīs who had migrated there from Badakhshan. The exact timing of this migration requires further research. This *ġamāʿah* has been guided by *dāʿīs*, such as Ḥwāġa Šāh Ṭālib, Ḥwāja Šāhdād, Mīrzā Ismāʿīl, and others from Sariqul, known as the Ḥwāġagān-i Sariqul.

Intellectual Activities

Subsequent to the catastrophic Mongol invasion, although the Ismailis continued to secretly and successfully propagate their faith in different areas and regions, it was very difficult for them to establish prominent educational and intellectual institutions of the calibre of *Ġāmiʿ Azhar*, *Dār al-ḥikmah* or *Dār al-ʿilm* and other outstanding libraries of the Fatimid and Alamut eras of Ismaili history. Ismaili Imāms lived in different parts of Iran for around seven hundred years, often keeping a low profile in *taqiyyah* (precautionary secrecy). This status continued until the 46th Imām Ḥasan ʿAlī Šāh al-Ḥusaynī migrated to the Indian sub-continent in 1840 and permanently settled in Bombay in 1848, where he established his *Darḥānah* or headquarters. Imām Sulṭān Muḥammad Šāh al-Ḥusaynī, known as Aga Khan III, describes the importance and consequences of this decision in his *Memoirs*:

“Not only was this a wise and happy personal decision, but it had an admirable effect on the religious and communal life of the whole Ismaili world. It was as if the heavy load of persecution and fanatical hostility, which they had had to bear for so long, was lifted. Deputations came to Bombay from places as remote as Kashgar, Bokhara, all parts of Iran, Syria, the Yemen, the African coast and the then narrowly settled hinterland behind it. Since then there has been no fundamental or violent change in the Ismaili way of life or in the conditions in which my followers can pursue their own religion.”²²

The effect of this decision of the Imām has been the main cause for the progress and prosperity of the Ismaili *ġamāʿah* or community in Hunza as well, which started particularly from the time of Imām Sulṭān Muḥammad Šāh. Hunza had politically been an independent state and therefore there was no political persecution. However, the state was extremely backward in educa-

21 – *Ibid.*, pp. 304-305.

22 – *The Memoirs of Aga Khan III*, pp. 182-183.

tion. There was no trace of a *madrasah* or school in the whole region. What education there was, was transmitted with the Mīr's permission within some families who had a tradition of reading and writing. Otherwise, without his permission, nobody dared to touch a pen.²³

Even in 1891, when the British conquered Hunza, only one primary school was established in the capital, Baltit. This single institution only benefited a small elite. However, during the Imamate of Imām Sulṭān Muḥammad Ṣāh al-Ḥusaynī, there was a great change and emphasis on education, both secular and religious. The Imām sent his *dā'īs* such as Āqā Abd al-Samad Ṣāh and Pīr Sabzali in the early twenties and schools were established for both boys and girls.

The Imām placed great emphasis on female education. He directed that if any family amongst his followers had two children, one boy and one girl, and they had means to only educate one of them, they should educate the girl because she would be responsible for the upbringing of her own children in the future. Initially, because of a lack of means, these efforts were not very successful. However, in 1946 when the Ismaili *ḡamā'ah* celebrated the Diamond Jubilee of their forty-eighth Imām, he dedicated all the funds raised to the education and social welfare of his scattered community. His *farāmīn* and the accompanying resources meant that even an isolated mountainous area such as Hunza felt the benefit in the form of schools being built in almost every village and the provision of free text books to the children. In the beginning, the schools catered for primary education only, but gradually they developed into middle and high schools and colleges. At present, 98% of the community is educated. Talented students are given scholarships to study in European and American universities.

Religious Practices

In the matter of religious practices, whether in the first phase or in the second phase, the Ismaili *da'wah* reached Hunza in its esoteric or *ta'wīlī* form, i.e. after the declaration of the *qiyāmatī* teachings by the Imām Ḥasan *'alā dikrihi al-salām* (d. 561/1166).

Comparing the difference between the two periods of *tanzīl* or *ṣarī'ah* and *ta'wīl* or *qiyāmah*, Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) says that in the former period, obedience is performed within the confines of set timings (*tā'at ba-ṣarṭ-i ta'yīn-i awqāt*) and worship is immersed in fixed timings (*istiḡrāq-i ṭā'at bāṣad dar awqāt*), whereas in the latter time, obedience is performed with the removal of the fixed timings (*tā'at ba-raf' -i ta'yīn-i awqāt*) and the entire time is immersed in [a state of] obedience (*istiḡrāq-i awqāt bāṣad dar ṭā'at*).²⁴

This difference in the nature of worship and obedience is clearly ex-

23 – *Ta'riḥ 'ahd-i 'atīq*, p. 129.

24 – *Rawḏat al-Taslīm*, p. 102.

plained by Imām al-Mustaṣṣir bi’līlāh al-Ḥusaynī II (d. 885/1480) in his *farāmīn*. He says:

“The whole year you must fast, just as the *zāhirīs* (the literalists) fast one month. The meaning of this fast is *riyāzaḍ* (spiritual exercise). Watch yourselves, keep yourselves away from bad qualities, evil and indecent actions and devilish acts, so that the mirror of your hearts may be gradually polished.

Also know that in those thirty days during which the *zāhirīs* fast, the *‘īd* is only for one day. They fast thirty days in order to attain that one day and that again is a symbol. Just as they fast thirty days in order to attain one day, so you must undergo the entire life of difficulties, pain, have patience, do *riyāzaḍ* and keep fasting internally in order to attain the beatific vision (*liqā’/ḍīdār*) of your Lord”.²⁵

The Imām then explains the *ta’wīlī* or esoteric fasting. He says:

“The fast of the head means to treat one’s own head as the feet of the people, casting out from one’s head the desire for superiority, greatness and pride, because these attributes befit only God, Who is everlasting and the Master of the kingdom. The fasting of the eye is that he must not cast covetous looks at women who are not lawful to him. The fasting of the ear is that he should abstain from listening to slander. The fasting of the tongue is to avoid uttering abuse or slander. The fasting of the heart is to keep it free from doubt. The fasting of [his] foot is to hold it back from wrong steps. Fasting of [his] hand is to keep it away from treachery. Thus, a *mu’min* (believer) should keep all his body parts in a state of fasting, so that he may not be a wrong-doer (*zālim*)”.²⁶

Further explaining the esoteric meaning of the faith, the Imām says:

“Just as for exoteric worship the *zāhirīs* make the physical ablution, the people of *ḥaqīqah* must know the real (i.e. spiritual) ablution and accomplish it. The ablution of the head is to accept the Imām’s *farmān*; that of the hand is to give *bay‘ah* (oath of allegiance) to the Imām of the time. Ablution of the foot is to walk on the path of the Imām and according to his *farmān*. Ablution of the heart is to keep it steady in the Imām’s love. Ablution of the tongue is to keep it always in the remembrance of the Imām. Ablution of the ear is to hear the words of the Imām. Ablution of the eye is to see the *ḍīdār* of the

25 – Imām Mustaṣṣir bi’līlāh al-Ḥusaynī II, *Pandiyāt-i Jawānmardī*, ed. & trans. W. Ivanow, Bombay, 1950, p. 96.

26 – *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

Based on such teachings, the *dāʿīs* or *pīrs* who came from Badakhshan, taught and emphasised the esoteric or *taʿwīlī* aspects of the seven pillars of Islam. Šīʿah Islam, in contrast to Sunnī Islam (which has five pillars), has seven pillars, as Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir says: “Islam is based on seven pillars: *walāyah* (authority of and devotion to the Imām), *ṭahārah* (ritual purity), *ṣalāt* (prayer), *zakāt* (religious tax) *ṣawm* (fasting), *ḥaġġ* (pilgrimage), and *ġihād* (struggling according to the command of the Prophet or the Imām)”. Among these pillars, the most fundamental and important is *walāyah*, because it is through it and the *walī* (i.e. the Imām) that the other pillars can be understood and practised. *Walāyah* plays the pivotal role among these pillars, because in *taʿwīl*, they all revolve around the Imām and they all allude to his central position.²⁸

In *taʿwīlī* teachings, the devotion to and obedience of the Imām of the time is based on many Qurʾānic verses, one of which is: “O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Prophet and the *uluʿl-amr* (the possessors of Divine command) from among you”. (4:59). The Imāms or the *uluʿl-amr* guide their followers according to the changing conditions and the *taʿwīl* of the Qurʾān, which they transmit constantly. Such a process can be likened to a fruit tree, where the fruit passes through several phases, such as a bud, which changes into a flower, which develops into raw fruit, which eventually ripens. In the Ismailī *ṭarīqah*, religious teachings in the light of the guidance of the Imām are evolving from the *šarīʿah* into *ṭarīqah*, *ṭarīqah* into *ḥaqīqah* and finally *ḥaqīqah* into *maʿrifah*, which is the recognition of God through the Imām’s recognition.²⁹ These four stages in the spiritual journey are compared to a lamp, to the path, to the intended abode and to the recognition of the owner of the house respectively.

In Hunza, the main emphasis is thus on the recognition of the Imām of the time and obeying his *farāmīn*. Additionally there are *ġamāʿat ḥānahs* where congregational prayers are offered daily according to the guidance of the Imām. *ġamāʿat ḥānah* buildings are the most outstanding structures in the villages and towns of Hunza and are visible from the Karakorum highway as it winds along the Hunza valley. They are also used for social, educational and other communal activities.³⁰

Progress of the Ismailis in Hunza in the contemporary period

In 1940, on 10th March, Imām Sulṭān Muḥammad Šāh al-Ḥusaynī sent a *far-mān* in Persian through Delhi radio, at a time when there were merely two ra-

27 – *Ibid.*, p. 99.

28 – *Daʿāʾim*, I, 2

29 – *Pandiyāt*, pp. 2-3.

30 – Namus, *Gilgit and Shinā Zabān*, Bahawalpur, 1961, p. 58.

dios in the whole of Hunza, one belonging to Mīr Ġazan Khan II (d. 1364/1945) and the second to an English doctor serving at the Aliabad Civil Hospital. The translation of the *farman* runs as follows:

“I remember all *ġamā^cats* of the Northern Frontiers of India, such as Chitral, Hunza, Gilgit and Badakhshan and all friends and devotees with benediction. Be certain that the light of my love and kindness will reach the whole *ġamā^cat* of Hunza just like the rays of the sun. Men and women, small and big, young and old, all of you are my spiritual children. I never forget you and will never forget you both in this world and in the next. Try to educate your children and strive to learn European languages and the English language”.³¹

This promise of the Imām materialized practically when in 1960, the present Imām Šāh Karīm al-Ĥusaynī visited Hunza and the surrounding areas. This was perhaps the first time in Ismaili history that an Imām had personally visited the area. The communications, prior to the building of the Karakorum highway were extremely poor, and the Imām sometimes visited his scattered and isolated community on foot. Since that time the Imām has visited Hunza on a number of occasions, often to inaugurate the many economic, educational and cultural projects sponsored by the Aga Khan Development Network. The activities of the AKDN over the last two decades of the twentieth century have revolutionised the life of not only the Ismailis, but other sister Muslim communities in Hunza. The Aga Khan Development Network, an integrated family of social welfare, educational, economic and cultural institutions set up by the 49th Imām, has completely transformed society in Hunza. This unprecedented progress in the material lives of the Ismailis has been paralleled by their progress in the fields of religious literature and education.

An unprecedented emergence of spiritual and intellectual literature:

Since 1940, there has been rapid progress in the development of religious and spiritual literature, first as poetry and later as prose. Many writers and poets have flourished in Hunza. It is not possible to write about all of them in a short article such as this, but here an extraordinary personality is singled out for his pioneering contribution to spiritual and intellectual literature and for raising the Burušaski language from the level of a dialect to the level of a literary language. He is ‘Allāmah Nāšir al-Dīn Nāšir Hunzai, also known as *Bābā-yi Burušaskī* (Father of Burušaskī) and *Lisān al-Qawm* (Spokesperson of the nation) due to his meritorious and lasting services to the language and the spiritual and intellectual upliftment of the community. He has written over a hundred books in Urdu on the esoteric, spiritual and intellectual teachings of Islam. Many of his books have been translated into English, Gujarati,

31 – A copy of the *farmān* is in my private collection.

Farsi and French. His writings, such as “Book of Healing”, “Practical Sufism and Spiritual Science”, “A Thousand Wisdoms” and “Balance of Realities” elucidate the esoteric meanings of the Qurʾān. He has received the *Sitārah-yi Imtiyāz* (Star of Excellence) from the Government of Pakistan in recognition of his contribution to literature. His mastery over the poetic genre in several languages – Burušaski, Urdu, Farsi and Chinese Turkish – is legendary. His poetry is popular with all communities and groups in Pakistan, particularly in the Northern Areas.

He has established several organizations to promote esoteric Qurʾānic teachings as well as the Burušaski language. Recently, he also established an ‘Institute for Spiritual Wisdom’ to promote spiritual science. He teaches that a spiritual cycle has dawned, due to whose influence human beings will come closer to each other and differences based on race, gender and creed will gradually disappear. He also emphasises that according to a Qurʾānic prophecy (41:53) in which God had promised to show His signs (*āyāt*) in the physical world (*āfāq*) and in human beings themselves (*anfūs*), the physical signs have appeared in the form of prolific scientific discoveries and inventions. Now human beings will progress in spiritual science, as a result of which they will be able to use their inner senses to such an extent that many physical inventions will become redundant. Humankind will progress towards real peace through greater fraternity and understanding, thus actualizing the universal teaching of the Prophet of Islam, fourteen centuries ago, that “People are the household of God”.³²

(17-7-2002)

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