

Agha Khan

He was born in Karachi (then under British colonial rule), to Aga Khan II and his third wife,^[1] Nawab A'lia Shamsul-Muluk, who was a granddaughter of Fath Ali Shah of Persia (Qajar dynasty).

Under the care of his mother, he was given not only that religious and Oriental education which his position as the religious leader of the Ismailis made indispensable, but a sound European training, a boon denied to his father and paternal grandfather. He also attended Eton and Cambridge University.^[2]

In 1885, at the age of seven, he succeeded his father as Imam of the Shi'a Isma'ili Muslims.

The Aga Khan traveled in distant parts of the world to receive the homage of his followers, and with the object either of settling differences or of advancing their welfare by pecuniary help and personal advice and guidance. The distinction of a Knight Commander of the Indian Empire was conferred upon him by Queen Victoria in 1897 (and later Knight Grand Commander in 1902 by Edward VII) and he received like recognition for his public services from the German emperor, the sultan of Turkey, the shah of Persia and other potentates.

In 1906, the Aga Khan was a founding member and first president of the All India Muslim League, a political party which pushed for the creation of an independent Muslim nation in the north west regions of South Asia, then under British colonial rule, and later established the country of Pakistan in 1947.

In 1934, he was made a member of the Privy Council and served as a member of the League of Nations (1934–37), becoming the President of the League of Nations in 1937.

He was made a "Knight of the Indian Empire" by Queen Victoria, a Knight Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire by Edward VII (1902), and a Knight Grand Commander of the Order of the Star of India by George V (1912). He was appointed a GCMG in 1923.

Under the leadership of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, the first half of the twentieth century was a period of significant development for the Ismā'īlī community. Numerous institutions for social and economic development were established in South Asia and in East Africa.^[3] Ismailis have marked the Jubilees of their Imāms with public celebrations, which are symbolic affirmations of the ties that link the Ismā'īlī Imām and his followers. Although the Jubilees have no religious significance, they serve to reaffirm the Imam's worldwide commitment to the improvement of the quality of human life, especially in the developing countries.^[3]

The Jubilees of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, are well remembered. During his 72 years of Imam (1885–1957), the community celebrated his Golden (1937), Diamond (1946) and Platinum (1954) Jubilees. To show their appreciation and affection, the Ismā'īliyya weighed their Imam in gold, diamonds and, symbolically, in platinum, respectively, the proceeds of which were used to further develop major social welfare and development institutions in Asia and Africa.

In India and later Pakistan, social development institutions were established, in the words of Aga Khan, "for the relief of humanity". They included institutions such as the Diamond Jubilee Trust and the Platinum Jubilee Investments Limited which in turn assisted the growth of various types of cooperative societies. Diamond Jubilee Schools for girls were established throughout the remote Northern Areas of what is now Pakistan. In addition, scholarship programs, established at the time of the Golden Jubilee to give assistance to needy students, were progressively expanded. In East Africa, major social welfare and economic development institutions were established. Those involved in social welfare included the accelerated development of schools and community centers, and a modern, fully-equipped hospital in Nairobi. Among the economic development institutions established in East Africa were companies such as the Diamond Jubilee Investment Trust (now Diamond Trust of Kenya) and the Jubilee Insurance Company, which are quoted on the Nairobi Stock Exchange and have become major players in national development.

Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah also introduced organizational forms that gave Ismā'īlī communities the means to structure and regulate their own affairs.^[3] These were built on the Muslim tradition of a communitarian ethic on the one hand, and responsible individual conscience with freedom to negotiate one's own moral commitment and destiny on the other. In 1905 he ordained the first Ismā'īlī Constitution for the social governance of the community in East Africa. The new administration for the Community's affairs was organized into a hierarchy of councils at the local, national, and regional levels. The constitution also set out rules in such matters as marriage, divorce and inheritance, guidelines for mutual cooperation and support among Ismā'īlīs, and their interface with other communities. Similar constitutions were promulgated in the South Asia, and all were periodically revised to address emerging needs and circumstances in diverse settings.^[3]

Following the Second World War, far-reaching social, economic and political changes profoundly affected a number of areas where Ismā'īlīs resided. In 1947, British rule in the South Asia was replaced by the sovereign, independent nations of India, Pakistan and later Bangladesh, resulting in the migration of millions of people and significant loss of life and property. In the Middle East, the Suez crisis of 1956 as well as the preceding crisis in Iran, demonstrated the sharp upsurge of nationalism, which was as assertive of the region's social and economic aspirations as of its political independence. Africa was also set on its course to decolonization, swept by what Harold Macmillan, the then British Prime Minister, aptly termed the "wind of change". By the early 1960s, most of East and Central Africa, where the majority of the Ismā'īlī population on the continent resided including Tanganyika, Kenya, Uganda, Malagasy, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire, had attained their political independence.