Aga Khan Encyclopedia Article

Aga Khan

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AGA KHAN (Pers., Āghā Khān). First conferred in 1817 on the Ismāʿīlī imam (spiritual leader) Ḥasan ʿAlī Shāh (d. 1881) by the Qajar shah of Iran, this hereditary title is now applied to the imam of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī Muslims. As imams of a Shīʿī community, the Aga Khans have always based their claims to leadership on their descent from ʿAlī and Fāṭimah, the son-in-law and daughter of the prophet Muḥammad. Their followers, who reside mainly in various developing countries, have traditionally looked to them for guidance on religious as well as secular matters.

Intrigues at the Iranian court during the 1830s forced Aga Khan I to migrate to India, where, under British protection, he eventually established headquarters in Bombay in 1848. An important British ally during the conquest of Sind, Aga Khan I faced strong challenges to his leadership from within his community. Most of these challenges were resolved in 1866 when Sir Joseph Arnold of the Bombay High Court issued a judgment in favor of the Aga Khan. His son ʿAlī Shāh (d. 1885) became Aga Khan II; he was, after a short period, succeeded in turn by his son, Sir Sulṭān Muḥammad Shāh.

Aga Khan III (d. 1957) initiated a process of modernizing the community through the establishment of schools, dispensaries, hospitals, housing societies, welfare organizations; the creation of communal administrative structures; and the emancipation and education of Ismāʿīlī women. He also participated in a wide range of political, social, and philanthropic activities for the benefit of Muslims, particularly those of the Indian subcontinent. His important role in public life led to his election to the presidency of the League of Nations in 1937. Under his grandson, Shāh Karīm al-Ḥu-saynī, Aga Khan IV (b. 1936), an international university, the Aga Khan University, was established, with its first faculty in Karachi, Pakistan. The Aga Khan Foundation, and agency founded in 1967, is actively involved in diverse humanitarian and cultural activities.

See Also

Shiism, Article on Ismāʿīlīyah.

Bibliography

For further discussion see Willi Frischauer's *The Aga Khans* (London, 1970) and John Norman Hollister's *The Shiʿa of India* (London, 1953), p. 364ff. The memoirs of Aga Khan III are published under the title *The Memoirs of the Aga Khan: World Enough and Time* (New York, 1954.)