CHAPTER 3

The Aga Khan: A Visionary Leader

Introduction

Aga Khan III, the forty-eighth Ismaili Imam, who had played a critical role in the modernization of the Ismaili Community and starting the engine of institutional proliferation, died in 1957. His grandson Karim succeeded to the office of the imamate on July 11, 1957. This appointment was the beginning of a new phase in the history of the Ismaili Community. Looking at the achievements of Aga Khan IV in 2011, Steinberg says,

He has intensified and expanded, moreover, the institutional scope of the imamate, to the degree that it reaches into the lives (in different ways in different places) of most every Isma’ili subject. But it was his predecessor that set, in an earlier moment, the tone and timbre for contemporary Isma’ili institutional globality. (Steinberg, 2011: 55)

In a paragraph in his published memoirs when he speaks about his son Aly, Aga Khan III mentions his two grandsons:

These boys are now at school, and in due course they will go to universities in America—the elder, Karim, who shows promise in mathematics, to M.I.T., we hope, and the other Amyn, probably to the Harvard Law School. (Aga Khan, 1954: 312)

Karim, who later became Aga Khan IV, eventually went to Harvard and studied Islamic History. A few years later, we read in the Aga Khan’s will the following pronouncement regarding the issue of succession, in which he designates his grandson Karim as the forty-ninth Imam of the Ismaili Community:

Ever since the time of my ancestor Ali, the first Imam, that is to say over a period of thirteen hundred years, it has always been the tradition of our
family that each Imam chooses his successor at his absolute and unfettered discretion from amongst any of his descendants, whether they be sons or remote male issue.

The above section is an articulation of the general Shi’i doctrine on the imamate and succession. The Aga Khan continues to give an explanation and justification for his choice.1

And in these circumstances and in view of the fundamentally altered conditions in the world in very recent years due to the great changes which have taken place including the discoveries of atomic science, I am convinced that it is in the best interest of the Shia Muslim Ismailia Community that I should be succeeded by a young man who has been brought up and developed during recent years and in the midst of the new age and who brings a new outlook on life to his office as Imam. For these reasons, I appoint my grandson Karim, the son of my own son, Aly Salomone Khan to succeed to the title of Aga Khan and to the Imam and Pir of all Shia Ismailian followers and should my said grandson, KARIM, predecease me, then I appoint his brother Amyn Mohammed, the second son of my son Aly Salomone Khan, as my successor to the Imamat.

This section of the will clearly gives an indication of Aga Khan III’s awareness of the complexities of the modern world. Besides, there is the issue of longevity: a younger successor has a higher chance of living longer. He then adds a consultative measure to the institution for the benefit of his successor, and even though the new Imam has his own unfettered authority, the outgoing Imam suggests that the new Imam should be guided by his wife:

I desire that my successor shall, during the first seven years of his Imamat, be guided on questions of general Imamat Policy, by my said wife, Yvette called Yve Blanche Labrousse, the Begum Aga Khan, who has been familiar for many years with the problems facing my followers, and in whose wise judgment, I place the greatest confidence. I warn my successor to the Imamat, never to do anything during his Imamat that would reduce the responsibility of the Imam for the maintenance of the true Shia Imami Ismaili faith, as developed historically from the time of my ancestor Ali, the founder until my own. (Frischauer, 1970: 208)2

Signs of these shifts had begun to emerge before the appointment of the new Imam. The Aga Khan’s will captures some of these in the way he articulates his will. It can be argued that this is a legal document, and this is what it is expected to be, but this argument disregards the position