



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

The Role of the Institute of Ismaili Studies

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Abstract

Dr. Esmail begins his article with an overview of how and when the idea of the IIS was conceptualised. He makes it clear at the outset that the IIS is not just a platform for Ismaili scholarship but has a multi faceted role. It is concerned with the issues faced by the Muslim ummah at large, which overlap with issues of human development in general. At the same time it plays an important role in fulfilling the intellectual needs of the Ismaili jamat.

Keywords

Muslim, Islamic Scholarship, Normative, Man Power Development, Religious Education, Islam, Contemporary World, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, IIS

The Birth of a Project

In April 1975, His Highness the Aga Khan chaired a four-day meeting in Paris for leaders from all over the Ismaili world, together with a small number of Ismaili scholars working in the field of Islamic history and humanities. Of all the decisions taken at this conference, the most far-reaching was the creation of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. In November 1977, after the completion of the necessary formalities, the Institute was formally inaugurated in London. In a message sent out specially to mark the occasion, His Highness expressed the hope that from its modest beginnings, the Institute, which had been "created by our own efforts and resources", would one day grow "into an internationally recognised academic centre", and that the day of its inception would be "recalled with pride by Ismailis many years from now".

As the Ismaili Jamats throughout the world move into the twenty-first century, amidst far-reaching changes sweeping the globe and the Muslim world, the Institute has a solemn obligation to play its proper part in the evolution of an Islamic awareness.

Like individuals, however, institutions are empty shells unless they are continually inspired by ideals, which are their *raison d'etre*. What, then, were the principles, the aspirations, that might - explicitly or otherwise - have lain behind the creation of the Institute? Where has it come from that day to now? What are its dreams of today? And whither might it go?

No sooner than one asks these questions, one becomes aware of the larger landscape of history. Institutions owe their birth and their fate to the tides of history. Their relevance, and the scope of their contribution to mankind, is determined by the degree to which they are in tune with the world of the moment. This requires, of necessity, a proper understanding of the past: of the forces or currents that have contributed to the configurations of today. It also

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requires some degree of clairvoyant expertise: the capacity to discern, however dimly, the shape of things to come.

Civilisations are sustained by innumerable small ventures and enquiries. But every now and then, a civilisation has to face great questions about its meaning and destiny.

The Contemporary Muslim Context

The Islamic world is today grappling at once with issues of development and relevance. Development in a world in which the lag between a pre-industrial and post-industrial world is growing ever wider; a world in which demographic and social dislocations, due to economic change and mobility, both voluntary and involuntary, are altering established life-styles and perceptions; a world in which the cry for democracy and human rights continues to be heard, unmuffled, especially in the Third World, despite numerous obstacles that exist in many parts of that world. The challenge of basic existence - the provision of an economic base and political space to the individual, for an honourable and fulfilled life - is difficult enough. But this problem is compounded by that of relevance. As man is neither simply a biological organism nor an economic being alone, but is also a cultural and spiritual being, the question for Muslims of the relevance of their past heritage to the shape of the coming world cannot be shirked. Is the Islamic heritage to be preserved solely in textbooks of history, or else dissipated in movements at odds with the realities of history and the ethos of international relations? With what voice is it to speak today to the minds and hearts of Muslims? Above all, what does it have to say, if anything, that is distinctive to its historical experience, and yet deserving of the interest and attention of a technically advanced but humanly uncertain world of today?

These are questions of daunting magnitude. No one society or nation, let alone an institution or community, can by itself provide the answers. But in innumerable small ways, the impact of these questions is present, and may consciously be addressed, in a variety of educational, academic, and policymaking institutions. For a Muslim, at least three principles must guide one's approach to these questions.

In the first place, it is essential for Muslims to recover that concept of the spiritual dimension of life, the notion of the sacred, which constitutes the mainspring of his faith. This is not a simple task, one that may be accomplished by mere rhetoric or the repetition of pious platitudes. Modern life has interposed a vast distance between the age of the origins of the great religions, when the axiom of the sacred foundation of life was taken as self-evident, and our own disenchanted age. The overcoming of this distance is a prerequisite for a grounding of our individual and collective life in a fuller sense of existence, one in which rationality and ethics proceed hand in hand. Secondly, Muslims must continually seek to appreciate and cultivate the place of the intellect, in the broadest sense of the word, in the organisation of life. Man is neither the natural master of history, nor its passive plaything. The realisation of a faith through the passage of time entails the perfection of theoretical as well as of practical intelligence. The ethical ordering of life is one of the fundamental elements in the Islamic imperative. Thirdly, for a faith as universal and historical as Islam, it is only to be expected that its expressions in time and place would be truly diverse. This diversity needs to be noted and studied, not in the spirit of a cultural collector, but in the quest of the interplay between unity and diversity that forms the essence of the Islamic civilisation. Through a judicious balancing of the ultimate and the proximate, the enduring and the fleeting, the philosophical



and the pragmatic, the Muslim may yet achieve an understanding of his past which may inspire his efforts for today, and enable him to find a new voice with which to speak to our times.

A Lacuna in Islamic Scholarship

These principles should form the intellectual agenda of Islamic Studies. But seldom do they do so. The reasons are several. Old schools in the Muslim world impart a content and a pedagogy devoted solely to traditional means and knowledge. Today's world demands a new understanding of old verities, an understanding that cannot simply be handed out, but must evolve out of a real engagement of the visions of the great world religions on one hand, and the world of modern, science-based, industrialised culture on the other. Nor can the traditions of Islamic Studies in Western universities address this need. Avowedly neutral, in fact influenced by hitherto, better-known, orthodox definitions of Islam, Islamic Studies in the West has to date paid insufficient attention to the full range of Islamic expressions in history - expressions which promise richer harvests of sensibility than dogmatic theology. Add to this the problem that departments of Islamic Studies are rarely abreast of the intellectual developments in other departments. Seldom have the techniques of modern literary criticism been tested out, for instance, on Islamic literature. Rarely have the principles of mediaeval Muslim philosophy been brought into real engagement with modern philosophy, for a clue as to what is really enduring, and what has been superseded, in the age-old search for truth.

The Jamats Today

This unsatisfactory state of affairs in Islamic Studies was one of the drives behind the creation of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. The other was the need felt within the Jamats for an articulation of the faith which was yet true to its essentials but appropriate for our own times, for a new outlook on religious education, and for suitable manpower as well as materials, as part of a programme of religious formation of the Jamat.

It would be helpful to survey, in a nutshell, the position of our Jamats today, insofar as it relates to our requirements in the field of religious thought and education. Under the guidance of the late Imam and the present Imam, the Ismaili Jamats have, over the past half a century, evolved a variety of institutions in the areas of economic, social and cultural life. At the same time, both Imams have time and again urged the Jamat to preserve and deepen their understanding of the Ismaili approach and interpretation of Islam. Thus the need today is twofold: preservation on one hand, articulation and clarification on the other. A third need is not to lose sight of the context, the external *milieu* in which we live.

Our understanding of the faith must be attuned to our internal as well as external worlds. It must serve at once as a source of meaning for the individual, for our institutions, and for our relationship to the world around us. If the faith is seen solely in theological or spiritual terms, we would have a dichotomy between our institutional and personal lives - something that is not within the spirit of Islam. If our articulation of the faith was unattuned or unintelligible to the world outside, we would be opting in effect for a ghetto, which is the very antithesis of the policies of our late and present Imams. Our articulation must be at once primordial and modern. It must be rationally comprehensible, and spiritually satisfying.



The Common Islamic Context

When we look at these needs closely, we cannot help being struck by the remarkable extent to which they are shared by our Jamats and the wider Muslim world today. The need to understand the mainspring of faith, while at the same time studying the promise and problems of the contemporary world, poses a challenge to the intellectual and spiritual resources of the Muslim Ummah, including our own *tariqah*. Thus, the IIS has a dual mandate: to study and formulate this challenge, and work towards a creative response to it, both insofar as it manifests itself in areas of the Muslim world at large, and within our own *tariqah* in particular. The same dual facet applies, in principle, to another key feature, namely, the diversity of Muslim cultures.

In regard to this diversity, two extreme approaches are possible: one is to embrace it in a pluralistic euphoria, renouncing all judgements of unity and coherence. The other is to advocate one culture and one set of views and customs as the only correct one. This is cultural absolutism, which is a recipe for intolerance and, ultimately, self-marginalisation. Because Islam is spread over many countries, with their own cultures and historical legacies, Muslims need to develop an appropriate understanding of this diversity-in-unity.

The same principle applies, though in very different conditions, to the Ismaili Jamats. Loyalty to the Imam of the time has kept Ismaili identity alive through major adjustments and migrations - some of them very trying - imposed by the pace of external events over the last three decades. These migrations and escalating contacts between different Jamats reveal the promise of intercultural understanding and enrichment, provided we approach it in the spirit of tolerance, broad-mindedness and intellectual maturity. Once again, a situation gives us access to a principle. The encounter with a particular situation of diversity introduces us to the principle of unity-in-diversity in Islamic history as a whole. As Ismailis, we must have a special interest in the progress of our own Jamats. But we would be helping our own development if the kind of attention we brought to bear upon our own situation and challenges was informed by a sense of more encompassing principles.

The IIS programmes

The Institute's role is to develop ideas that reflect these principles. But ideas and principles are abstract things, with half-lives of very brief duration. They need to be embodied in programmatic expressions. What, then, are the programmes and activities envisaged at the Institute?

The work of the IIS falls into several categories. There is, first of all, that group of activities that are directed to a sound understanding of the Ismaili *tariqah* itself. The work of the Institute in this area has up to now been channelled in two directions: (a) the training of manpower, and (b) the production of papers, guidelines, and materials of an educational nature. The two are obviously complementary to each other.

The overall work of the IIS may conveniently be divided into two broad categories: (1) research and input devoted to a better understanding of the history, principles, and cultural contexts of the Ismaili *tariqah*; and (2) research and reflection on those issues which affect



Muslim societies in general, especially at the point of juxtaposition between the Islamic past and the circumstances of modernity.

I shall discuss the programmes and activities of the Institute in the above order. The *tariqah*-related functions are described in two stages, beginning with what has been done up to now, followed by an indication of what is envisaged for the future.

The contribution of the IIS up to the present time in *tariqah*-related areas, falls into four domains: (a) the training of manpower, (b) the production of guidelines and materials for religious education for children, (c) the development of a specialized library, and (d) strategic input into specific projects of other Imamat and Jamati institutions and organisations.

Manpower Development

Beginning from 1980, the IIS has accepted a periodic intake of candidates for a four-year postgraduate programme of studies in Islamic subjects as well as modern educational principles and methods. The aim of this programme was to produce generalists with a scholarly base and educational training who might be counted upon to strengthen the capacity of the Tariqah Boards on a world-wide level for imparting religious education to the Jamat. A total of 51 candidates were trained for this purpose, of whom most acquired a Master's degree in Education from the University of London, and a master's degree in Islamic Studies from McGill University (which accepted courses taught at the Institute as satisfying part of their requirements). In addition to courses in Islamic subjects, the students were also given a firm grounding, at the Institute, in the Arabic language.

This Programme is an on-going, ever-evolving one. The instruction they receive has now been considerably broadened, to include courses such as Modernity and Faith, the Sociology of Islam, and the Cultural History of Islam. As before, they also spend a year studying education at London University. Instead of McGill, however, the present batch of students will read for their master's degree at a British university, so as to ensure continuing contact with, and guidance from, the Institute.

The greatest priority for these students is the need to attain intellectual excellence. From the lecturers who are drawn not only from within the IIS but also, indeed largely, from outside, from universities in the UK and elsewhere, the IIS expects an unrelenting emphasis on rigorous standards. Likewise, it expects students to strive, over and above everything else, towards intellectual excellence. In the final analysis, however, the graduates of the programme will need to develop the sensitivity and the skills for applying their knowledge to the benefit of the Jamat. The programme would not have achieved its purpose if it did not go beyond the development of intellectual curiosity, valuable though this is, to the utilisation of the knowledge gained here to address the needs of the Jamat. This is not an ability which can be taught. It comes out of prolonged experience, maturation, and worldly wisdom. Nevertheless, the training must provide a basis for the lifelong development of these qualities. Through teaching practice and participation in Jamati projects, the graduates of the programme are expected to develop sensitivity to the circumstances and needs of the Jamat.

Furthermore, this sensitivity is expected to be international. The student body itself is diverse, being a faithful microcosm, in this respect, of the Ismaili Jamat as a whole. The regular interaction that students from Western, Middle-Eastern, and Eastern Jamats have with one



another, in a learning situation, carries the potential of stimulating self-reflection, tolerance for different cultures and points of view, side by side with a sense of brotherhood that cuts across chasms of race, nation, and language. If this outlook is followed up and opportunities for its reinforcement are made available at the Tariqah Boards and in the localities where the graduates are employed after their studies, it could prove a valuable stimulus to the growth of this outlook in the Jamat as a whole.

Religious Education

The training of manpower is only one part of what is required to address the needs of the Jamat in the area of Islamic learning and education. An equally important function is the preparation of educational materials. In 1983, an Education Unit was set up within the Institute to address this need. The preparation of materials, however, imposes requirements far beyond that of the simple preparation of textbooks. It involves the study and evaluation of modern educational theory and practice, of up to date research on methods of teaching religion to students of various ages and backgrounds, and the adaptation of these findings to the needs and circumstances of Ismaili children. It also requires care to ensure that the content of the curriculum meets a variety of essential criteria, namely those of theological soundness; historical accuracy; harmonisation with the broader contemporary context in which the Jamats are living today; suitability for international use, balanced by adaptability to local cultures and geographical contexts; conformity to educational principles allowing for effective, enjoyable, and progressive learning; and appropriateness, at each stage, to the degree of maturation and cognitive capacities of the child. All these principles need to be reflected in the total curriculum, of which the textbooks are only a part.

Library

When the Institute was established there was no central place where manuscripts and books from around the world on Ismaili history and thought were gathered and preserved. To remedy this lack, the Institute established its own library which now houses over 1,000 manuscripts of Arabic, Persian and Gujerati (including Khojki) works. In all, the manuscripts, together with printed books, constitute a collection of some 13,000 volumes.

The task of acquisition and preservation is a prolonged process. The fact that its results are unlikely to be evident to outsiders till at a much later stage in time is as certain as the value of the task itself. Foundations are indispensable, though, unlike the buildings which rest upon them, they are invisible. A great part of the work of the Institute has consisted in, and will continue to be at the level of, laying the intellectual and conceptual foundations for the generations that are to come. As far as the texts of our past are concerned, this process of foundation-laying comprises a whole sequence of tasks. The texts have to be located. They are acquired, through purchase or donation, through various channels, and in various forms (photographic copies, microfilms, etc). They are physically treated for purposes of preservation. Their contents are analysed for purposes of classification and cataloguing, which is done in accordance with an international system that would render them accessible, in principle, to other organisations and universities.

Once these essential steps have been taken, the content of these works is still far from being accessible to the wider public. The texts have to be verified for period and authenticity by



recourse to a variety of scholarly techniques. Only after a detailed comparison and assessment, based, where applicable, on variant readings between different editions, has been effected, can the texts be identified and placed in their appropriate categories. And only after the texts have thus been identified and edited, can the process of interpretation, translation, or analysis be initiated.

The task of acquisition, preservation, study and classification, is part of the internal activity of any library, and as such is an ongoing one. In the future, an effort will be made to supplement the textual collection of the library by building up an archive of the oral heritage of Ismailis residing in different parts of the world. In addition, the library is currently at the stage - admittedly an early one - of building the basis for an information system through the joint efforts of the library staff and computer consultants at Aiglemont.

Inter-institutional collaboration

From time to time, various bodies from the AKDN and the Jamati institutional framework call upon the Institute for advice or input into their projects or assignments when these have dimensions relevant to the mandate of the Institute. The IIS' input into these issues is now an established part of its contribution.

Human Resource Development

One of the most serious handicaps in our endeavours has been the relative shortage of manpower, within the community, in the field of Islamic Studies.

The remedy to this shortage is not a simple matter because the problem itself is rather complex. The knowledge of Islamic languages and texts is very far from being sufficient for excellence in this area. Factual knowledge is of relevance to the potential scholar only in the sense that literacy is a basic condition for intellectual attainment. Just as literacy does not make an intellectual, book-knowledge does not make a good scholar. The ability to mould the ideas of the Islamic past into a form that is both intelligible and usable for today, requires many qualities in addition to factual knowledge of Islamic history and thought. These qualities include a deep familiarity with the modern world and its conditions - social, economic and political - and the kind of knowledge of human nature which leads to a wise, informed, and practical outlook on the world. A scholarly mentality is no substitute, by itself, for wisdom, realism, and a pragmatic understanding of the ways of the world. The ideal Ismaili intellectual would be one who combines worldly wisdom, international outlook, and fluency in modern languages, with a corresponding knowledge of Islamic history and thought. In the long run, such a cadre of intellectuals will emerge only when gifted young individuals, who have the potential to succeed with distinction in any of the demanding professions of today - such as science or law - feel the vocation to devote their lives to Islamic Studies instead. The field of Islamic Studies ought to beckon those for whom it is the first choice, not those whose attraction to this field is a refuge from other demanding walks of life.



Research and Publication

Internal research at the Institute is at present devoted chiefly to Ismaili thought, seen in the broader context of Islamic history. To supplement the internal work, the IIS selectively commissions external scholars to do specific research on its behalf. Over the next five years, the fruits of the research will become available to the Jamat through two channels: (1) guidelines and perspectives on the theological and cultural aspects of Ismailism made available to the Tariqah Boards, to shape and inform their own programmes and thinking; and (2) publication of translations, along with explanatory contexts, of selected literary texts in Ismaili history.

Special Seminars

The Institute recognises the need to provide, especially to those who occupy leadership or potential leadership positions, either in the community or in related institutions or walks of life, an opportunity for listening to qualified lecturers as well as discussing and reflecting actively on issues that affect the Muslim world today as it endeavours to understand itself anew in relation to its past. This understanding is of interest in itself, and also as a means, on one hand, to understand ourselves better, insofar as the Ismailis share some of the same concerns with the rest of the Ummah, and, on the other, to a more nuanced and informed analytic understanding of the environment in which we live.

The first seminar of this kind to be organised by the Institute is scheduled for August 1990. The nature of this seminar leads us logically to a broader issue: the Institute's contribution to reflection on the relationship of the Islamic past to the shape of our times. It is to this that we must now turn.

Islam for the Contemporary World: Future Horizons in Research and Reflection

The contact of the Islamic tradition with modernity generates a variety of tensions and reactions. A fashionable trend, to which Muslim youth influenced by modern secularism are susceptible, is to assume religious ideas and the spiritual needs of mankind to be no longer relevant. To write off centuries of spiritual thought and expressions as "out-dated" is no sign of broad-mindedness. On the contrary, it is a manifestation of one of the narrowest mentalities of our times, a mentality that elevates the prejudices of our own age to the rank of timeless truths.

A contrary, widespread approach - one which, under the pressure of historical accidents and circumstances of our world is becoming increasingly vocal - is for Muslims to dismiss the modern world as irrelevant. The natural, other side of this coin is to celebrate a frozen, supposedly timeless brand of Islam. In the meantime, awash between the clashing tides of secularism and traditionalism, separated as these are by mutual incomprehension, Muslim societies face challenges in a variety of spheres of life. The essence of the challenge is to foster development without losing sight of the ethics or human basis for it; and to do this in a way which avoids passive dependence on the Western models of today, but encourages, instead, a creative venture sensitive to both local and civilisational legacies. Examples of the spheres where this thinking is needed are: law and development; medical ethics; the cultural



dimension of health-care; technology and environment; ethics and institutions; education; communications. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, with its major subsidiary programmes such as the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, has sought to assist in, indeed catalyse, creative reflection in at least one of these areas, namely, the built environment. Over the next five years, the IIS will seek to play a part in this process, in the more philosophical areas of selected concerns of the kind listed above.

The approach of the Institute to these broader issues has sometimes been characterised, in our communications, as 'non-normative'. The terms 'normative' and 'non-normative' express a convenient, rule-of-thumb rather than an absolute distinction. They deserve a general explanation here.

Non-normative thinking or writing is that which is not intended to further the point of view of any one given denomination or school of thought within Islam. It would certainly shirk sectarian polemics as a matter of principle, and would treat religion as an aspect of the broader, human heritage of civilisation. Accordingly, the purpose of this activity would be inquiry and analysis, not the delivery of ready-made solutions. Certainly, it is not the intention of this branch of work to provide prescriptive discourse about specifically Ismaili doctrines or practices.

The Institute has a dual mandate, to foster normative as well as non-normative thought and research. For the Jamats, normative considerations are, in an essential sense, primary. For they constitute, after all, the foundation of the community. At the same time, Ismaili intellectuals who are temperamentally attracted also to broader concerns have every right to look to the Institute to provide a space, a perspective, and the organisational resources, to enable them to pursue these concerns jointly with other Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals throughout the world.

The Jamat will need to bear the above distinction between normative and non-normative activity in mind when the IIS organises public activities or issues publications. The research and publications described in the preceding section constitute, for the most part, the normative thrust of the Institute. The inquiry and publications embodying the ideas indicated here will form its non-normative arm. A readiness, on the part of the audience or readership in the future, to distinguish between the two categories, with their differing aims and methods, would go a long way towards preventing misconceptions based on wrong expectations about either group of activities.

Concluding Remarks

In the context of the times through which we are passing, the Institute of Ismaili Studies has a truly historic obligation, both to our heritage, and to the generations that are to come. Its founding, over a decade ago, is a statement not only of the currents of our times. It is a statement too of the boldness and initiative of the Imam of the time to take positive steps, in all the arenas of the life of our community, to address the challenges, as well as the opportunities that history has brought to our doorstep.

In the last analysis, the success of the Institute depends not only on those who have the mandate to govern and manage it, nor only on those well-wishers, especially in the academic community, who have been associated with it over the years; it also depends on the support



and goodwill of the Jamat as a whole. I have addressed this communication, describing the history and role of the IIS, to the community at large in the conviction that they have not only the interest, but also the right, to know about the mission and work of the Institute, as well as the circumstances and challenges amidst which it is operating today. I would therefore invite everyone to ponder not only on the Institute but on the great questions and tasks to which its creation and existence are but a pointer: the questions of human destiny, of what we have to learn from our past and what we have to bequeath to our children. Our awareness of these tasks has to be built on a sense of fidelity to essential principles, matched by an objective understanding of the context in which we live today, and by a spirit of openness to the future. If this is done, there can be no better start for an institution of this importance, which might one day become a living testimonial to an Ismaili contribution to the realisation of the human mind and spirit, in accordance with the great ideals of Islam.