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ON THE ISMAILIS IN GREATER BADA KHSHAN:
HISTORICAL GROWTH AND CURRENT STATUS.

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I - INTRODUCTION OF THE BADAKHSHANI ISMAILIS

A. CENTRAL IDEA:

Any study of the Ismailis and Ismailism remains incomplete without a thorough study of the Ismailis of Greater Badakhshan and the coming of the doctrine of Ismailism in the region. The paper will initially describe the territory of what used to be Greater Badakhshan, that is, it's geographical setting and then deal with the historical emergence of Ismailism in the region. It will then look at the various revivals of Ismailism by the sect's missionaries and dai's, taking us down to the current period. This will include the related periods of both Aga Khan I and Aga Khan III. The paper will then cover an estimated report on the current status of the Ismailis in the various parts of the then Greater Badakhshan, giving brief accounts of their geographical locations with estimated populations, economic conditions, political life, religious status and their communications with the larger Ismaili Brotherhood.

B. BRIEF HISTORY OF ISMAILISM:

In order to better understand and appreciate the importance of Ismailis in Greater Badakhshan, it is necessary to give a brief account of Ismailism.¹ The Ismaili religion, as it is well known, is a branch of Shi'ism, and is identified in Islamic historical sources by various names. Simplistically, it may be said that Ismailism began it's official existence from the time of Imam Ismail, son of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, who died shortly before 148, 150.

This is followed by the period of Daur al-Satr, that is, period of secrecy, which eventually leads to the creation of the Fatimid Empire in Egypt in 297/909. Followed by the Fatimid period itself till the death of Imam al-Mustansirbillah in 487/1094, which led to the great split between the Mustalian branch and the Nizari branch of Ismailism. It is the later branch with which we will be concerned in our further study. Nizari Ismailism then went thru the Alamut period, where they came to be known as the Assassins, followed by another period of secrecy in Anjudan, culminating in the emergence of the Aga Khan Mahlatti, { Followed by the Indian period of the Imams, and then the European period. Their present Imam is His Highness Karim Aga Khan IV, forth-ninth in line, beginning from Hazrat Ali, the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad.

C. GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING:

Badakhshan is a mountainous region situated on the left bank of the upper reaches of the ^uAmy Darya or the river Oxus. J. Marquart² places Badakhshan under Balkh but outside the towns of Tukharistan. While Yaqubi, 288, in his enumeration of the towns of Balkh, and following on the towns of Tarakan (Talaqan), and Badakhshan mentions "the town of Jurm which is the last of the eastern towns following on Balkh, towards the country of Tibet. Here also, the territory of Badakhshan is implicitly reckoned to Balkh. However, to complete our study, we are also concerned with the northern territories of Upper Tukharistan, comprising of Shiqinan and the northern frontiers of what is today, Kashmir and Pakistan. It must be noted that in the old days, the river Oxus was held to

be the boundary line between the Persian-speaking folks and the Turks, between Persia and Turan.³ In the later middle-ages, about the time of the Mongol irruption, the river Oxus came to be called the Amuyah, or Amu Darya. The sources of the Oxus, as Ibn Rustah and other early geographers rightly state, were from a lake in Little Tibet (At-Tubbat) and on the Pamir. Istakhri gives the names of four among the many upper affluents of Amu Darya, the main being the Pyandzh or Ab-i-Panza. The Pyandzh comes down from the eastern highlands, making an immense sweep round Badakhshan, flowing north, then west, and finally south before reaching the neighborhood of Khulm. Some of the other major tributaries include the Andijaragh River, Upper Oxus or Nahr Jaryab, Sughd and Wakshab river.⁴

II - HISTORY OF THE BADAKHSHANI ISMAILIS

The history of the Badakhshani Ismailis could be divided into four different periods, followed by the current status. They include, the Early period, the period of Nasir-i-Khursraw, the first revival, the times of Aga Khan Mahlatti and the Aga Khan III of Bombay. A brief outline is presented of the major events to better understand the current status of the Ismailis in that region.

A. THE EARLY PERIOD:

The earliest mention of the name of Badakhshan occurs in the Chinese documents of the Seventh and Eighth centuries A.D. It described the country as part of Tukharistan, in the second century A.D. The name clearly derives from the Tokharians who were the rulers of the Graeco-Bactrian empire. In the fifth century A.D., these same territories were occupied by the Haytal or the Hephtalites of the Byzantines. Islam came to these territories sometime in the eighth century A.D., brought by the Arab incursions. There is no precise information on the date of the conquest of Badakhshan by the Arabs and the manner in which Islam was introduced there.⁵ Al-Istakhri (278) describes Badakhshan as the territory of Abu'l-Fath al-Yaftali, whose son Abu Nasr, according to Samani⁶ and Yakut (iv, 1023), fought against Kara-Tegin, the lieutenant of the Samanids. Apart from these facts, we know very little of the political situation during this period.

As for the Ismaili literature from this period, it is almost negligible. However, "the work entitled UMM AL-KITAB, venerated

between 465/1072 and 471/1078. His tomb in Yamgan is a popular place of pilgrimage, and not only the Nizari Ismailis but also the Sunni population of the region regard him as a Sufi Saint.¹⁰

Henry Corbin adds, "in the precise state of existing knowledge, it is not possible to determine when and how the junction between the "orthodox" disciples of Nasir-i-Khusraw in Badakhshan and the Nizari Ismailis of the Alamut reform was effected."¹¹

Nasir-i-Khusraw, during his life-time acquired the reputation as a great poet and a miracle worker but it was not till later that his teachings influenced the local population to convert to Ismailism.

Besides his DIWAN, Nasir-i-Khusraw, wrote many other works on Ismaili doctrine. These include, the RAWSHANAI-NAMA or The Book of Light; the SAFAR-NAMAH or the Book of Travels; Wajh-i-Din or the Face of Religion; GUSHAYISH WA RAHAYISH (Release and Deliverance); JAMI'AL-HIKMATAYN or Harmonisation of the Two Wisdoms; i.e., the philosophical and the religious. Some of his works are unfortunately lost.

C. THE PERIOD OF FIRST REVIVAL:

This period begins in the thirteenth century A.D. and culminates at the end of the Safawid rule in Persia or the coming of the Qajar ^uro^res in Persia, which is also the beginning of the period of Aga Khan I. Corbin refers to this period as the "coalescence of Ismaili ideas with Sufism." Corbin presents three major examples to attest to his concept:

¹ The concept of Ismaili revivalism is found in the celebrated mystical poem GULSHAN-I-RAZ (The Rose Garden of the Mystery) by Mahmud Shabistari.

- 2. The Ismaili adoption, as one of their books, of the great treatise on Sufism, ZUBDAT AL-HAQAIQ (Quintessence of Metaphysical Truths), by Aziz Nasafi (d. 661/1262).
- 3. The fact that the Ismailis regarded the great Sufi poet Farid al-Din Attar (d. 627/1230) as one of themselves.

In addition, Ismaili philosophical writers are to be found throughout the whole of Persian Sufi literature, as well as in the great Shii works of philosophy produced in the Safawid period.¹²

The destruction of the Ismaili fortress at Alamut was followed by the seizure of most of the other Ismaili strongholds together with an effort by the Mongols to destroy completely followers of the sect. However, history has shown that the sect was not destroyed. By the practice of Taqiya or concealment many Ismailis were saved in Persia; many others fled to Afghanistan, to the Himalayas and to Sind. For many years Ismailis had to live under conditions of strict secrecy in Persia and Badakhshan. The movement resembled in some ways to the Sufi Tariqas which were to be found all over the Islamic lands. The necessity of reverting to Taqiya was obviously a contributory factor in the adoption of a Sufi mode of existence.

The first few Imams after the fall of Alamut lived in Azerbaijan.¹³ "By the middle of the fifteenth century, the Imams moved from Azerbaijan, and after settling for a while in the districts of Farahan and Mahallat, moved eventually to Anjudan, a large village in the vicinity of Sultanabad (now Aragh)."¹⁴ The coming of the Safawids, a Shia dynasty, to power in the beginning of the sixteenth century contributed to the emergence of more tolerable

conditions for the Ismailis. Ivanow goes so far as to label the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during which the Imams continued to reside in Anjudan, as a period of "renaissance" for the Ismailis.¹⁵ During this relatively favorable period, the Imams took the opportunity of re-asserting their hold over outlying areas.

As mentioned earlier, during this period, Sufism had gained widespread popularity and Ismaili Dais, taking advantage of this trend, adopted Mystic terminology as a vehicle for propagation of Ismaili Nizari doctrines. Hakim Nizari Birjindi Kohistani (d.720/1320), a Ismaili Nizari poet, also adopted this mode to successfully expound and propagate his faith. During his lifetime, Hakim Nizari secretly but ably and with great success carried on his mission of Ismaili Da'wa. He had developed close friendships with some of the famous Sufis of his time, specially Hazrat Mehmood Shabi^stari^k, Shaikh Solahuddin Shirazi and Shaikh Saadi. Based on the poetical works of Shabistari and Saadi, it is argued that they both had secretly accepted Ismaili faith or developed Ismailitic proclivities under Hakim Nizari's influence. Professor E. G. Browne in his "Literary History of Persia" has ranked Hakim Nizari with Nasir-i-Khusraw.

Besides the Imams of the Persian period and Hakim Nizari, another important figure of the period was Pir Shamsuddin Sabzwari Multani (d.1356 A.D.). Born in Sabzwar in Iran, he spent his early years under the tutelage of his father and was assigned the Da'wa of Badakhshan and Northern India. Conducting his missionary work with great ardour and zeal, his activities ranged from

Badakhshan through Kashmir and from Punjab, Sind to Gujerat, with Multan as his headquarters. On his preaching assignment, his first stop was at ^uGazni where he met and converted the King's son, Sabhaga, and sent him to Badakhshan on a preaching assignment. Sabhaga is reported to have stayed in Badakhshan for quite a long time, however, the precised nature of his activities remain^s unknown.¹⁶ The next Ismaili Da'i known to have travelled to the Badakhshan and Kashmir regions is a ^sdecendent of Pir Shams Sabzwari, Pir Hasan Kabiruddin (A. 853 A.H.). However, he spent most of his life in Punjab and Gujrat. His precised activities in the Badakhshan and Kashmir region remain unknown too. Probably, the only other important Ismaili figure to visit the region was Khaki Khorasani, a poet of the Safawid period. Khaki Khorasani was the contemporary of two Ismaili Nizari Imams residing at Anjudan, whose names he cites in his poems: Imam Shah Dhulfikar Ali (920-922/1514-1516) and Imam Shah Nur^u-Din Ali (922-957/1516-1550). It may be mentioned that under the Safawids, a Shia dynasty, though the Ismailis enjoyed a greater freedom in the religious practice and the expression of their ideology, yet the faithfuls had to be very careful and observe the taqiyya or the practice of concealment. Meanwhile, after the end of the period of Safawid rule, the Nizari Imams moved their residence from Anjudan to the neighboring village of Kahak (Kehk), where the tomb of Imam Nizar II, who probably died around 1722 A.D., is found.

According to Professor Hamid Algar,¹⁷ "while throughout this period the following of the Imams was limited, and the Da'wa suspended in Iran, efforts at proselytization were by way of compensation intensified in Central Asia, and still more in north-west

India." As a result of these efforts, a constant stream of pilgrims, bringing tribute and seeking blessing, would undertake the perilous journey to the remote residence of the Imams. In the troubled political conditions, these murids were increasingly exposed to lootings at the hands of Bakhtiyari raiders and rapacious officials.¹⁸ This eventually resulted in a decline of the revenues and thus during the reign of Nadir Shah, the forty-second Imam, Sayyid Hasan Beg, left Kahak for the town of Shahr-i-Babak. Shahr-i-Babak, in south-eastern Iran, a location closer to the homelands of his Indian followers, already contained a number of Ismailis. With the coming of the Imam, it became a centre second in importance only to the Mahallat area.¹⁹ Historically, the move to Shahr-i-Babak also marks the emergence of the Ismaili Nizari Imams from concealment and obscurity to participation in political life.

The grandson of Imam Sayyid Hasan Beg, Imam Abul Hasan Shah became Governor of Kirman in 1756 A.D., and enjoyed excellent relations with the Persian ruler, Karim Khan-i-Zand who followed Nadir Shah. However, in the controversy between the Zand and the Qajar rulers, the first Qajar ruler, Agha Muhammad Khan took over the province of Kirman in 1795 A.D., and blinded Mirza Muhammad Baqir, a brother of Imam Abul Hasan Shah and the Governor of Kirman. Things changed again during the rule of Fath Ali Shah Qajar (1797-1834 A.D.) and Imam Shah Khalilullah come to be held in high esteem. The major reason cited is that Fath Ali Shah had the general tendency to seek the favor of holy men, whether orthodox or heterodox, and since Imam Khalilullah was highly respected as a very pious Sufi. This resulted in the detestment

by the Ithna'ashari Ulema and the murder of the Imam in 1815 A.D. by Mulla Husayn, in the city of Yazd. This brings us to the final period.

D. PERIOD OF AGA KHAN I THRU AGA KHAN III:

The forty-sixth Imam, Hasan Ali Shah, came to the Imamate as the ruler of the district of Mahallat, awarded to him by Fath Ali Shah Qajar, to compensate for the brutal murder of his father. The award included the title of Aga Khan and restoration of a number of Ismaili villages in the province of Qum. Finally, as conclusive sign of honor, Fath Ali Shah gave one of his daughters, Sarv-i-Jahan Khanum, in marriage to the Aga Khan, allotting 23,000 tumans for wedding expenses.²⁰ Later, in 1835, at the coronation of the next Qajar monarch, Muhammad Shah, the Aga Khan Mahlatti was made the Governor of Kirman, the province once ruled by his grandfather Imam Abul Hasan Shah.²¹ However, this was not to last long, as he soon came under a seige by Faridun Mirza, which lasted for fourteen months and he was eventually taken a prisoner in Kirman. It was during this time that Aga Khan Mahlatti met a deputation of Badakhshani Ismailis and accepted their tributes.²² This gives us definite indications that the Ismailis in Greater Badakhshan, though never visited by the Aga Khan I personally, were in close association with his whereabouts and teachings. Due to various political strifes between the court officials and the Aga Khan Mahlatti, he was forced, after staging many revolts to gain control over the province of Kirman, to fled to Qandahar (Afghanistan) and eventually to Bombay (India) where he died in April, 1881.

It must be noted that Aga Khan I was a great warrior of his times. In fact, once under the Qajar rulers, he was the Commander-in-Chief of the Persian Armed Forces. He was definitely an ambitious man. Though in his autobiography he disclaims any desire for a Ismaili State, scholars of history are bound to refute his assertions. This is because of his many revolts against the Persian rulers and his stronghold over the province of Kirman and his large followings in Anjudan and Shahr-i-Babak. However, Professor Algar believes, ".... the end of the Iranian period of Imamate came not as a final attempt to establish a legitimate worldly power, nor even as the desperate insurrection of a persecuted minority. It was rather the result of court rivalries and intrigues, and above all, of the successful search for a patron, one offering wider prospects than those available in Iran."²³

The only reference of any Ismaili leader visiting the region of our study, in this period, is made in "Great Ismaili Heroes".²⁴ It mentions the possibility of visit to Afghanistan Ismailis by Pir Shahbud Din Shah al-Husayni (d. Dec. 1884 A.D.). However, it fails to mention any historical records of the visit or the activities, if any, during the visit. Reference of a visit by Ismaili Pir Sabzali is also made in the same text, during the time of Aga Khan III (d. 1957 A.D.). He is supposed to have visited Badakhshan, Khorashan, Chinese and Russian Turkestan, Afghanistan, Dir, Chitral, Gilgit, Kashmir, Hunza and Africa. Again, the nature of his activities remain unknown. This information can be correlated with another source. According to Walter Kolarz, "In Pamir mountains, Communist Party members continued to pay the gold tribute (zakat) to the Aga Khan, like all the other Ismailite

faithful throughout the world."²⁵ The continued collection of this tribute after the establishment of the Soviet regime was one of the strangest things which happened in the Islamic territories of the USSR. The collectors travelled from India to the remotest villages, first with frontier passes, later illegally. The authorities tried to discourage the payment of the tribute by denouncing the collectors as "spies".²⁶

III - CURRENT STATUS OF
THE BADAKHSHANI ISMAILIS

A. NAME:

The Ismailis of the Pamir-Ferghana race are called by many names, including Pamir Mawlai, Tajik, Ghalcha, Badakshi and their regional names. However, their proper name is Pamiri Tazika or Ismaili Taziks. It is a term embracing speakers of Iranian Languages, of the Shia Ismaili persuasion, who live in the Gorne-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast of Tadzhikistan SSR (Wakhi, Iskashimi, Shugni and Roshani); Badakhshan Province in Afghanistan (Zebaki, Munjani, Gharani, Sheikh Ali Hajara, and all of the above); Kashmir-Pakistan (Hunzakuts and Chitralis) and the Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China (Sarikolis).

B. LANGUAGE:

The tadzhik language has long served as a means of communication between the various Pamiri Ismaili groups-- the Dari form of dialect is very well known in these territories. While, the Chinese Ismailis speak the Sarikoli dialect. To top it off, the Hunzakuts speak Burushaski, a language unknown and unrelated to any other languages of the region-- non-Aryan as well as non-Turkish! I have learned that Burushaski is presently being studied at a local University in Paris, France.²⁷
MONTREAL, CANADA.

C. ECONOMY:

All Pamiri Ismailis share certain common features in their economies and in their material and spiritual culture. Their methods of farming and livestock raising are adapted to the harsh

conditions of the Western Pamirs, as are their traditional work implements, dwellings, and clothings. Ismailis in Russia are probably the most progressive, at least materially. Most engage in land cultivation and livestock breeding on collective farms. While, increasing number^s of them are advancing in scientific and technological fields. A few of them even hold political offices, including Provincial Ministerships.²⁸ Again probably, the worst off, are the small number in China, who seem to have yet to be appreciated by the Chinese government. While, those in Afghanistan and Kashmir are self-sufficient but are being increasingly threatened with material shortages, including grains, due to a tremendous rate of natural increase in local population.

D. POPULATION:

This is probably the most difficult topic to get any definite information. Different scholars and travellers, from time to time have provided data which either tally or are extremes. Particularly, in the case of Ismailis in China, we have to rely completely on the experts and travellers^e alone. China has not taken a Census since 1910. However, an effort is hereby being made to give the best possible estimates based on information available and logical analysis.

Afghanistan:

There are close to 200,000 Ismailis (max). 80,000 live in the vicinity of Kabul, where I am told, presently there are four Jamat-khanas.²⁹ The 80,000 includes the Sheikh Ali Hazaras who live in the Bamian Region (township of Doshi and Besud). They practice a high amount of secrecy and as such their exact number

is impossible to calculate. The rest 120,000 live in the Pamir Mountains, particularly in Shughnan, Roshan, Munjan, Zebak, Wakhan, Ishkashim and Gharan. There are officially at least three Jamatkhana in these townships. It has only been ten years that the Afghan Ismailis, in some areas, have been permitted to practice Ismailism freely. This is because, most of the Ismaili areas are surrounded by the Sunni (orthodox) majority.

Pakistan:

In the Hunza region alone, there are close to 50,000 Ismailis who practice Ismailism very freely. Historically, the Mirs of Hunza have had official contacts with the Emirs of Bukhara (U.S.S.R.) and Kasghar (China). The Mirs used to collect governmental revenues from the populations extending from the Sarikols to Afghan and Soviet Badakshan. The Mirs, in turn paid royalty to the Emirates of Bokhara and Kasghar, for political protection. I would imagine, diplomatically this may have been one of the reasons why Ismailis survived in these region for so many centuries, besides the fact that the region is so inaccessible for political adventurers. Another 50,000 plus live in the townships extending from Gilgit to Chitral, which have historically had trade routes.

China:

The only significant population, I have come across, are in Tashqurghan, a sizable town in the Sarikol region of the Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China. Their current estimates range from 15,000 to 20,000. In any case, they form 85% of the township's population. Tashqurghan is on the famous Silk Routes from Kasghar/Yarkhand to Hunza/Gilgit. It is of interest to note

that in most cases Ismaili townships are located either on the banks of a river or on a popular trade route, and sometimes both. Insignificant Ismaili population also exist on the trade routes from Tashqurghan to Kasghar/Yarkhand and in the two Chinese Cities itself. However, traces of any other major Ismaili areas is yet unknown.

Soviet Union:

All the Russian Ismailis live in Tadzhikistan S.S.R., a satellite, Soviet, Islamic State. Of the 60,000, almost 95% live in the Gorno-Badakhshan Automonous Oblast, with it's capital at Khorog. All the Ismailis on the Upper Oxus (Pyandzh) fall in the Russian areas. Their largest Ismaili population is in Shughnanskiy (russianized) with approximately 30,000 (max) and the smallest on the Russian side of Gharan (skiy) with approximately 4,000. The rest are in Rushan (skiy), Wakhan (skiy) and Iskashim (skiy). There is also an insignificant population of Ismailis in Darwaz (skiy), according to some sources.

The above information has been collected from many different sources.³⁰ Validity of information cannot be achieved due to secrecy practiced by Ismailis in the region and also lack of Census data (as Ismailis, are accounted, if at all, as Muslims or Tadzhiks, and not specifically, as Ismailis).

E. CONCLUSION:

Presently, the Ismaili Imamate is neither interested in spreading its Da'wa activities nor is it making efforts to hold on to the current strength of the followings. Though, the present Imam, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV has denied any communication with

the followers in China and Russia, it is assumed that some sort of communication must exist between the Ismailis in Kashmir/Afghanistan (who visit the Aga Khan whenever he is visiting India/Pakistan) and Ismailis in China/Russia. As for the Ismailis in Afghanistan, it has only been the last ten years that they have been permitted to practice their religion openly. While, those in Kashmir (Hunza and Gilgit) always enjoyed political autonomy, as a separate Ismaili State, and have practiced Ismailism very freely. While, in China and Russia, though a great amount of secrecy is still maintained, more and more knowledge about their secret prayer places (Khanates) are coming to light. In the past few years, the present Imam, the first one in the 1300 years history of Islam, has visited Hunza and Gilgit, alongwith Prime Minister Bhutto of Pakistan. This was a landmark in the history of Ismailism. It is hoped that in the coming years, as Ismailism is practiced more openly in Afghanistan, China and Russia, Ismaili Imams would visit these areas more frequently. However, at the same time, it must be noted that Ismailis are not necessarily persecuted in any of these areas, atleast not on humanitarian grounds.