



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Convocation Address at the University of Sind

His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan

February 6, 1970

Hyderabad, Pakistan

Mr Vice-Chancellor, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

You have paid my family a great honour by inviting me here today to receive an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from this famous centre of learning. I am most grateful to you all, and as a Muslim, it makes me especially happy that this ceremony should be taking place at a university whose development has been so intimately linked with the historic province of Sind.

As you pointed out in your very generous tribute to my forbearers, and particularly my grandfather, both my family and the Ismaili Community have enjoyed close associations with Sind over many centuries.

Today I am addressing an intellectual elite which, very soon no doubt, will hold in its hands, the destiny of Pakistan. I propose therefore to talk briefly about one of the major problems facing Muslim countries everywhere in the world today. It is clearly an important and sensitive topic so that I speak with real humility and no little apprehension. Indeed, I appeal at the outset to your generosity should I falter, and I am fully aware that no single person can claim to offer a complete solution. At most, I can attempt merely to stimulate further thought and discussion, but leading very soon I hope to purposeful action.

The issue, very simply, is this: what kind of nation states do we hope will emerge in the Muslim world during the next century? What are we looking for? What do we want of our society? What kind of institutions should we seek to create?

These questions will have to be answered. And they must be answered by you. Indeed, within thirty years, you will be living in the twenty-first century. You are already living in the largest Muslim country in the world.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, most of the Muslim world was in one form or the other subjugated by the will of the West. England and France between them controlled most of the Middle East including Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, the whole of North Africa with Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya; most of those parts of Africa south of the Sahara which had substantial Muslim population such as Nigeria, Senegal, Dahomey, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zanzibar; and finally most of those parts of Asia which were totally or

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substantially Muslim, including the Indian subcontinent, and Malaysia. Thus at the dawn of the twentieth century, practically no Muslim areas of the world were self-governing. This is a startling fact, but none the less true.

One of the many consequences was that the concept of Muslim statehood was broken in time and in action to be replaced by the concepts which were western in inspiration as well as in practice. The art of government no longer directly involved the Muslims of the world. Those who did concern themselves were never in the position of testing their ideas against the harsh realities of nineteenth and twentieth century power politics. I suggest therefore that there has been a very prolonged vacuum in Muslim responsibilities in this field and that this vacuum in turn provoked a deep apathy towards problems of Islamic statehood. Few men in their daily lives have time to worry about other peoples' problems, and at the dawn of the twentieth century, problems of Muslim statehood were completely dormant.

Within the last 30 years, most of the Muslim world has regained its independence, and now is totally in control of its own affairs. But the loss of control of government in the recent past has left the Muslims of today in a situation either of prolonging the inherited forms of Western Government or of adopting a pragmatic approach, the results of which are impossible to forecast.

If the Muslim countries had controlled their own destinies over a longer and more continuous period of recent history, there is little doubt that appropriate institutions would already have evolved in a form which would have come to terms with this technological and materialistic age. So far, however, there simply has not been enough time.

In the Muslim world of the twenty-first century, what is going to be the accepted form of Government? What institutions will be best suited to provide the Islamic world with stable, progressive government which will have a strong and dynamic sense of direction?

The questions I ask particularly concern Pakistan. It is first of all the largest Muslim state. Secondly, with general elections due here within a matter of months, it is a question you will soon have to answer in any case. Thirdly, Pakistan takes its place in one of the most forward-looking and dynamic regions of the Muslim world which, with Iran and Turkey, and especially through the agency of RCD, is certain to play an increasingly important role in the destiny of Muslims everywhere.

Let us for a moment review, as it is today, the Muslim part of the world; the Arab Middle East has been torn apart and has been in turmoil for years. The sheer pace of events, political and economic, does not seem to have given time and peace enough for the local leadership and society as a whole to develop stable governmental institutions. Largely for the same reasons, regional co-operation under the prevailing conditions in this area has been faced with a virtually impossible task.



North Africa has in my view been a great deal more successful than is yet generally realized; regional co-operation is well underway, the economies of Tunisia and Morocco are developing well, and there has been political stability coupled with dynamic leadership. But the population of North Africa is truly minimal in comparison with that of the RCD and this is why I repeat that it is here, in Pakistan and in the RCD, that lies the most essential area for the development of Muslim statehood which must stem from a society, the goals of which have been clearly established and universally accepted.

Pakistan was conceived by Muslims and for Islam. Everyone here will agree with me, I am sure, that the source of national motivation in the future must continue to be our faith. But once this is said, how is it to be achieved? If institutions are born from society, then I affirm that it is to our society that we must turn, and ask ourselves: If Islam is to be the source of inspiration, how do we transform this inspiration into practical terms of everyday life? And how do we do this and at the same time continue to make material progress which, as I have said earlier, very often has its origins in the western, Christian world? These questions have a special urgency and relevance in a democratic society such as Pakistan is now seeking to create. It is society which gives birth to its institutions in democracy - and not the institutions which shape and impose themselves upon society.

I am convinced that our faith and our heritage contain all the indicators that we shall need. More than this, I am convinced that it will take relatively little effort to isolate those elements which, through the centuries, were responsible for the amazing development of the Muslim Empire. And once we have identified these basic elements, we should be able, without difficulty, to use them to our advantage.

Let me take as an example one of the most important and fundamental aspects of our everyday lives; the buildings we live in. For five centuries, Muslim architecture led the world in concept, in design, in finish and even in structural ingenuity. Millions of non-Muslims every year visit Islamic monuments in the Middle East, in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, and in North Africa. And yet what is being done today to develop our own Islamic architecture of the twenty-first century? Practically nothing. Our office buildings, our schools, our hospitals, our banks and insurance companies - nearly all are copies, monkeyed and mimicked from styles and designs which have been imported. I ask you today to think about this: is it really impossible to adapt for our modern needs those magnificent finishes and building materials so widely used in our past? If our historic buildings used red stone, tile and marble, must we really now only use concrete and glass? Must we abandon the remarkable wooden and stone carved trellis work that is so typical of our artistic heritage? And what of the fountains that have been so intimately connected with Muslim architecture at all times and in all parts of the world? Are we powerless to build a fountain as a decoration to our most imposing buildings? Is it really beyond our powers to revive traditional concepts of landscaping? Must the gardens of Shalimar remain just a beautiful historic curiosity?

Let me turn to another aspect of Islamic society: our intellectual elite. In the past, much of the dynamism of Muslim society was born from the leaders of the faith: the Imams, the Pirs and



Mullahs. This identity between the leaders of the faith and the empire's intellectual elite was a continuous source of strength both to the faith and those whose duty it was to govern the empire. How many aspiring Mullahs or Imams today enter secular universities and obtain degrees in secular subjects? And vice-versa, how many university graduates, after completing their degrees, turn their lives to directing the flock of the faithful? Let me not be misunderstood - I criticise neither Pirs nor Mullahs nor Imams nor degree-holders. I simply state that in future I believe it will be in our society's interest to have a much wider platform in common between our religious and our secular leaders. Our religious leadership must be acutely aware of secular trends, including those generated by this age of science and technology. Equally, our academic or secular elite must be deeply aware of Muslim history, of the scale and depth of leadership exercised by the Islamic empire of the past in all fields.

It is through the creation of such a new elite, inspired by, and widely read in everything related to our heritage, that there must come about a revival in Muslim thought. The whole approach to education, without becoming archaic, should begin now to re-introduce, as widely as possible, the work and thought of our great Muslim writers and philosophers. Thus, from the nursery school to the university, the thoughts of the young will be inspired by our own heritage and not that of some foreign culture. Again, let there be no misunderstanding: I am not in any way opposed to the literature or the art or the thought of the West. I simply maintain that the Islamic heritage is just as great and that it is up to us to bring it to the forefront again. When our nursery school children first begin to read, why should they not let their imaginations build upon the prowess of the Great Khaled rather than Wellington or Napoleon? And if the student of philosophy seeks a degree, should he not be encouraged to read about even Al-Hallaj rather than Hegel or Kierkegaard?

This has been described as the age of technology and blessed may be those who through their technological discoveries have enabled man to conquer space and to hope one day to draw sufficient food from the earth and the sea to feed himself. Blessed also may be those who have helped eliminate from this earth such crippling diseases as poliomyelitis and perhaps one day cancer. But through all this development, hand in hand and side by side with it, the spirit of Islam must survive. A society without a strong sense of its own identity has time and again in human history proved to be well on the way to decay.

I do not pretend to know an infinitesimal part of the answers to the problems facing the Muslim state in the twenty-first century. But I believe that its inspiration and its institutions must come from a Muslim society which has a clear understanding of the pillars of Islamic greatness in the past.

We are still in the process of disentangling ourselves from a long period of foreign rule, and although the early years of independence have provided immense problems to successive governments, almost a generation has now passed. We must renew our resolve and determination to complete the revival of our own Islamic heritage so that it may become the stepping stone to a brilliant future. The need to break finally with the immediate and largely



alien past, and to rebuild on the foundations of our historic greatness is more than a condition of further progress; it has now become an urgent necessity throughout the Muslim world.