

Education System of Ismaili Community of Pakistan

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This paper attempts to explore the education system of the Ismaili community of Pakistan, its historical evolution and influence on the community within the social setup of Pakistan.

The Ismaili community is one of the branches of Shia Islam, headed by the hereditary Imam – the Aga Khan. It adheres to its own interpretation of Islam but shares the Islamic value system with other segments of Muslim *Ummah*. Education is considered to be one of the most important fundamental values of Islam. The purpose of acquiring education in the Islamic context, as mentioned by the Aga Khan,¹ is not only for material improvement, but also to better understand Allah's creation. It has a role in developing humankind, helping them to live fully as rational beings. Further, it enables the community to differentiate the right from wrong. Education is also supposed to inculcate critical faculty among learners in order to enable them to think freely and challenge some of the negative stereotypes.

The Ismaili community, a tiny segment of the population of Pakistan, scared of the ever-present threat of raging fundamentalism and extremism, has preferred integration in the mainstream of Pakistani nationhood while maintaining its own specific religious creed. The community has long believed that it cannot improve its own quality of life independently of the national context in which it is living. Therefore, it has made some efforts to make its presence felt as a developmental partner in governmental and other relevant circles. Unlike other communities where education has received scant attention, the Ismaili community of Pakistan has made huge investment by establishing number of educational institutions of international standard in the areas where community has a sizeable population. It would, therefore, be

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¹ The Aga Khan's address to the community at Karachi in October, 2000.

interesting to explore the historical evolution of the educational system of the community.

History

During the last sixty years of Pakistan, the community has made consistent efforts to pursue the goal of a progressive community with in progressive Pakistan. To attain the goal, it has tried to upgrade its members in terms of education. This has enabled the community to wield much influence in the sphere of social, economic and other service sectors of Pakistani society. The mass education drive within the community has a long history and is a key to modernization and social change. The Ismaili community has tried to engage itself creatively with modernity. The Imam had paved the way for modernization amidst many ups and downs.

In the early period of Pakistan's history, the community in the southern regions of Pakistan, i.e. Karachi and Sindh, was regarded as business-oriented having little knowledge of the world. Their traditional household language or dialects include Kutchhi, Gujraati, and Sindhi. They mostly used Khojki² script to keep the personal record and religious literature. While in the Northern Areas and Chitral, the situation was no way better. It was by and large an agro-based community without a written script. Every area had its own dialects like Baroshishki in Hunza, Wakhi in Upper Hunza, Shina in Ghizer and Khower in Chitral. But the scenario both in the south and the north has undergone a radical transformation over the last sixty years. Now, the youth opt for professions of medicines, nursing, engineering, banking, management, teaching and information technology etc. They speak Urdu and English as *lingua franca*. The younger generation within the community is totally different from its parents in many ways. Similarly the parents are also different from their parents of bygone days. This communication gap sometimes leads to state of disharmony but overall the community is making progress.

The mass education drive within the community has also promoted female literacy. The females are now more active in various professions but mainly attracted towards teaching and nursing. At the community level, they are being appointed for leading positions in various social institutes. This overall process of modernization has produced a middle class who works as a catalyst for change within the community. This middle-class constitutes the backbone of the

² The script singled out for keeping the religious literature in Khoja Ismaili community of India.

community and run numbers of informal community institutes in an honorary capacity. The Aga Khan in his spiritual position as *Imam* has encouraged the honorary service within community. He has termed service to community a fundamental aspect of religion.³

System of education

The system of education within the community is two-pronged: secular and religious. While the community drives towards modernization it strictly adheres to the traditional faith system. It has followed the logic of the path which says that what happens today is largely determined by what was done yesterday,⁴ as the technically obsolete but still persisting layout of typewriter keyboard prevails in the most modern up to date computer. Similarly the great bulk of laws on the statute books at the beginning of a year were placed there, years, decades or even generations before. This logic rings true in case of the Ismaili community. The community's progress is rooted in the history of earlier *Imam* – the Aga Khan-III, who, during his longest period of *Imamat* (1885-1957), had traveled to Europe many times and was impressed by the western model of development. He had deep concern and sense of sorrow for the plight of his Muslim brethren of Indian subcontinent of his time. His name is specially connected with the drive of Muslims' educational development and he headed the All India Muslim Conference of 1928 meant for educational development.⁵ On the creation of Pakistan, his message was to make the spirit of *Quran* - also the spirit of Pakistan.⁶

Secular level

In Ismaili community, late Aga Khan-III initiated the mass education drive in late nineteenth century. He motivated the local Ismaili leadership to come forward and establish educational institutes for the benefit of the community. Thus the first school was established in Gwadar in 1905.⁷ After the World War I, another Ismaili philanthropist named Alijah Alidina Ali Muhammad built a second school at Kharadar, Karachi, in

³ The Aga Khan address to the community members at Karachi dated 25 March 1983.

⁴ Andorka Rudolf, Tamas Kolosi Rose Richard, *Society Transformed in Hungary* (Budapest: Central European University, 1999) p.14.

⁵ K.K. Aziz, *Aga Khan III, Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Mohammad Shah* (London:

⁶ Message to the World of Islam by Aga Khan III, Ismailia Association for Pakistan, 1977) p.39.

⁷ Souvenir *World Ismaili Socio-Economic Conference*, December, 1964, p.58.

1926 for community benefit.⁸ By the year 1947 20 girls from Ismaili schools appeared in matriculation examination.

The Aga Khan himself gave special grant⁹ for establishing schools for the community children in various areas. In this connection, the Diamond Jubilee schools in Northern Areas are particularly noteworthy which were established out of the grant of late Aga Khan-III Jubilees' endowment.

In the early period of the existence of Pakistan, number of umbrella institutions – born from local initiatives – existed for provision of education at community level. These institutions include the Ismailia Youth Services (established in 1957) and the Aga Khan-III Foundation (established in 1960) etc. In 1962 the present Aga Khan-IV appointed the Central Education Board for Pakistan to coordinate the educational activities and policies. Besides, he donated a piece of land – approximately 14 acres at Aga Khan Gymkhana, Garden, Karachi for construction of a modern school for boys and girls. The school was formerly opened in December 1964.¹⁰ Another major school at Karimabad, Karachi, whose foundation was laid down by the then President of Pakistan in 1964, started functioning from July 1965.¹¹ It was further extended with a new additional block, whose opening ceremony was performed by Begum Salimah (Ex-wife of Aga Khan) on 13 November 1985.

The effort continued with the establishment of numerous other schools and hostels throughout Pakistan and also expanded to a level where the Aga Khan established a world-renowned University of international standard in private sector of Pakistan in 1985 chartered by the Government of Pakistan in 1983. Though primarily these educational institutions were meant for the community children but they do not close their doors to the non-community students. In fact, now there is more non-community students enrolled in these institutions than the community students.

The Aga Khan Education Services Pakistan (AKESP)

Later in March 1986, the Aga Khan-IV established a national service company which incorporated the Central Education Board in Pakistan. It was named as the Aga Khan Education Services, Pakistan (AKESP), with the base at Geneva. This incorporation did not change the

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Qadratullah Baig, *History of Central Jamatkhana*, Gilgit.

¹⁰ Souvenir, World Ismailia Socio-Economic Conference *op.cit.*

¹¹ *Ismaili World* (Fortnightly) magazine, July 1965.

philosophy of providing education to the community but applied corporate structure to enable the education sector to function within the corporate law of the land. His directives to AKESP, clearly advised to envisage what the world, will be in the next fifteen years and make the students ready for future leadership.¹² It has to develop a cadre of leadership by identifying the outstanding students, nurture their development and ease their access to opportunities for higher education in their fields of preference.

At present AKESP mainly operates all the community organizations meant for imparting education at pre-primary, primary and secondary levels. It has developed a major chain of schools in the country – certainly one of the largest chains of schools in Pakistan and probably amongst the largest in a Third World country. Recent baseline data released by AKESP for general public indicates the following.¹³

- AKESP operates around 200 schools
- Located in Northern Areas, Chitral, Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab regions
- Provide education to over 40,000 students
- Offers pre-primary to Class XII
- About 60 % of students are girls

Besides, the AKESP also run hostels where students who come to get education from far-flung areas are provided boarding and lodging. After acquiring education, these students are mostly employed on merit by the Aga Khan Development Network Institutions (AKDN) such as the Aga Foundation, the Aga Khan University and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture etc. and their subsidiary organizations.

The Ismaili community has displayed a sincere commitment to its goal of progressive Pakistan. It has created structures and institutions capable of generating its own financial resources required for their fulfillment. It has formulated solid and admirable plans with full implementation culture that include constant monitoring, evaluation and validation. For the last many years, Aga Khan-IV, through various means has encouraged the community members to see his institutions for their career, He once said:

... I want to add full-time professionals. What this means is that one-day I like to see my schools with Ismaili teachers and nearly exclusively Ismaili teachers... I would like to see our hospitals and our medical facilities with Ismaili doctors and nurses. I

¹² See the interview of AKESP Chairman, published in the *Ismaili Pakistan* (Issue April-June, 1995).

¹³ Figures of 2000 published in *Dawn*, 30 August 2001.

would like to see our financial institutions with Ismaili officers and Ismaili directors...¹⁴

He specially recommends investing more in education sector and personally wishes special meetings/*mulaqats* with students to provide them with a sense of future directions and indicate various paths of careers for selections.

Nationalization of the Aga Khan schools

However, the process of modernization in education has not been always smooth, it has had ups and downs during the last sixty years, particularly the period of nationalization (1972-1983) showed a downward trend. The Aga Khan Schools were once known for their high standard and good results before they were nationalized in the first PPP government in the 1970s. The government policy, which said: 'As from the first day of September 1972, all privately-managed colleges shall be nationalized. Privately-managed Schools will however, be nationalized in a phased-manner within a period of two years beginning from 1st October, 1972...' ¹⁵ The teachers of the institutions welcomed the move as government jobs were seems more secure as compared to private ones. Moreover, Bhutto government revised the salaries of the school teachers and colleges lecturers without any sort of appraisal or benchmark. There were no checks on schools' performance, consequently educational standard got deteriorated within few years of nationalization. The Ismaili community who was proud of their schools had to face the dilemma of whether to accept low standard of education in Pakistan or to turn towards the West. The affluent students of the community followed adopted the latter option while the middle class students suffered.

However, in the 1980s during Zia era, these schools were again denationalized and returned to its original owners. The AKESP retook the schools' management and started developing it from the scratch. All teachers, including the Ismaili teachers, were given options either to remain within the system of the Aga Khan Schools or move towards government managed schools. The majority of teachers turned towards government managed schools as they found government service more attractive and rewarding than the Aga Khan Schools' Services. The AKESP appointed new teachers to run these schools but it did not regain the same respect, standard and level which it enjoyed prior to nationalization.

¹⁴ The Aga Khan address to his community at Andheri, India 9 January 1978.

¹⁵ Tariq Rehman, 'Heavy dose of rhetoric', *Dawn* (Karachi), 30 January 2000.

There are number of reasons for the above mentioned state of affairs. One of the reasons stated by many is the instability in term of its teaching faculty. The teachers appointed by AKESP are mostly females, they are low paid as compared to managing staff of AKESP headquarter working at Clifton or else where. Overwork and low salaries made the job unattractive and force the teachers to leave their jobs and move towards other schools. It is also mentioned that now teachers do not consider their job seriously, while previously they performed their jobs as a sacred mission. For example, Mrs. Gul Bano G.Hyder commonly known as Sachwani and Mrs. Shireen Merchant who led the Aga Khan Schools, Garden, in pre-nationalized period were exemplary in their public relations. Majority of parents and teachers regarded them in high esteem. At present, there are also lot of discrepancies in the administration and management. There are number of complaints in the newspapers regarding exorbitant fees charged by the schools.

Besides, much has changed economically, socially and demographically in the recent past. In the 1960s the community was concentrated mainly in Kharadar and Garden areas of Karachi while in the 1990s, the community is more widespread geographically than ever before. The AKESP realizing the fact that it could cater only 20-25% needs of Ismaili community has come up with a new concept of community-based schools (CBS) in the 1990s. It has encouraged the locals to establish CBS in Ismaili residential societies by getting few flats/rooms in the area. The AKESP provides technical assistance to CBS but they lack many facilities such as libraries, labs and playgrounds and sports equipment etc. These are fulfilling the immediate needs of low-income groups. The Aga Khan appointed central leadership consists of affluent people who run most of the community organizations. They usually live in posh areas of Karachi and do not send their children to the Aga Khan Schools. It creates a bitter feeling in the middle class who sends their children to these schools. It is also observed that many new high-standard private schools have come up in almost all cities with a remarkable performance. The community has, therefore, more choice available of selecting schools for their kids, which was not available in pre-nationalized period. The Aga Khan Schools in the Northern Areas were late in introducing English as a medium of education as compared to other schools in the area. Therefore, the community, who was aware of the wishes of the *Imam* regarding importance of English, preferred to send their children in English medium schools.

In the 1960s, the Aga Khan Schools were more Ismaili-oriented; these were known as His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan Boys/Girls Schools in Karachi. Though the schools were following the government-

approved curriculum, but for Ismaili students, the school management used to arrange a separate period of Ismaili *Talimat* (besides Islamiyat) in which an Ismaili teacher taught Ismaili History, Ginans and Imam's Farmans etc. at least once in a week to every class. This practice discontinued during and after nationalization and it was never re-started again.

Though the primary and secondary level schools were nationalized by the government in the 1970s but it did not touch the nursery level schools, these continued to work under the Ismaili management with mostly Ismaili teachers. Therefore, the standard of nursery level schools during the nationalization period was up to the mark. Prior to nationalization announcement, the primary and secondary schools had separate buildings with sprawling playgrounds, gardens, swings and fountains etc., but immediately with the announcement of nationalization policy in September 1972, these widespread primary and secondary schools were brought together in one building overnight, presumably to avoid government control/nationalization of all schools' properties. Thus the schools were deprived of vast playgrounds, libraries, auditoriums and laboratories as these were turned into classrooms to accommodate all students of primary and secondary schools in one building. This particularly happened in the Aga Khan School, Garden, Karachi, whose primary section which was in separate building, adjacent to *Jamatkhana*, was moved to Gymkhana building.

It is also stated that the Aga Khan Schools, which run two shifts in single school building (the morning shift for girls and the afternoon shift for boys) do not follow the recognized educational principles of importing education in morning hours. Therefore, most Ismaili parents, particularly mothers engaged in day-time jobs like teaching, nursing or any other service were not in favour of sending their boys in the afternoon shifts of the Aga Khan Schools.

During the nationalization period, the AKESP did not stop its working but directed its efforts towards Northern Areas and Chitral, therefore the nationalization period proved a blessing in disguise for these areas. In 1980, AKESP inaugurated the Aga Khan Schools in Chitral for girls at the following places.¹⁶

- i) Ovirik (Tehsil Lotkot)
- ii) Khot (Tehsil Mastuj)
- iii) Lone (Mulkah)
- iv) Parkusap (Turkoh)

¹⁶ *The Ismaili Mirror*, an internal magazine of the community, Karachi, June 1980.

v) Madaklasht (Drosh)

These were the first Aga Khan Schools ever to be started in Chitral. The AKESP selected five male matriculate teachers for these schools. They were briefed about the role of teacher. Later they were sent to Gilgit for training purpose. Initially admissions were given to female students in Class-I only charging fee of Rs.2/- p.m. Gradually, the network of these schools spread to other parts of Chitral.

Schooling of the orphan and the needy children

Ismaili community has separate arrangements for the orphan and the ultra poor children. A separate community organization named *Ismailia Youth Services*¹⁷ is particularly active in providing schooling, with boarding and lodging facilities to community's orphans and extremely poor children. It manages two separate academies on main National Highway at Malir, for girls and boys with the name of Mohammadi Girls Academy and Prince Aly Boys Academy, established in 1960s. These are being run with the financial help of some philanthropists of the community. These academies are fully equipped with playgrounds, boarding houses, prayer halls, library and other essential requirements. Since last many years, it had served the community by providing proper schooling to orphans and needy. Many orphans and needy who got initial schooling at these academies are now serving the community through various organizations.

Career guidance to youth

Another aspect of Ismaili community is the importance which it accords to its youth. The AKESP has a separate portfolio for future career guidance and scholarship programme to various students seeking financial help to continue higher studies in various universities of Pakistan and abroad.

In the past, particularly during nationalization period, the standard of education was deteriorating in all the Aga Khan Schools, yet the community continued to upgrade its youth by arranging separate classes. In every *Jamatkhana*, especially in Karachi and other major urban centres, there exist students' service organizations such as Kiswa, Noble Student Organization, Ex-Boys and Ex-Girls Associations etc. that render services to the youth to prepare them to enter into the institutions of higher learning. They guide them in the selection of universities, seeking admission, preparing for aptitude tests and moving successfully to these institutions of higher learning. They also arrange extra classes

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, December 1970.

for youth in the subject of importance like Accountancy, English and Computer Technology etc. This practice continued even after denationalization of Aga Khan Schools in Zia era (1977-88) and now the community is more active in preparing its youth for the Aga Khan University, institutes of business management, banking, nursing and information technology etc. Though these service organizations charge nominal fees but the community looks their services with high esteem and regards. They use the premises of Aga Khan Schools, *Jamatkhanas*, libraries and religious education centres for conducting their classes, organizing seminars, workshops and lectures etc. These are manned by honorary professionals who had already gone through the system. They also invite outside lecturers to highlight the future trends in various professions.

For the unemployed youth an Employment Bureau (recently renamed as Skill Development and Placement Committee) under Ismaili Council is set up in almost all *Jamatkhanas* with the purpose to help youth secure jobs of their choice. These bureaus usually contact Ismaili firms and business houses to provide jobs to the unemployed of the community in case they have vacancies. The vacancies are also announced in *Jamatkhanas* and advertisements are placed on notice boards. The Aga Khan Economic Planning Board (EPB) is also engaged in training youth for various skill-oriented vocations, keeping in view the demand of future trends. This aspect of service is, no doubt, commendable but is limited to the students of urban areas while the rural members of the community do not get any benefit. This is one of the reasons why the rural centres are withering and members are on moving towards major cities of Pakistan.

Religious education system

Since its inception, the Ismaili community has a full-fledged *dawa* system. Under this system the role of *dais/pirs* (missionaries) was crucial. They not only founded the community but were also responsible for its subsequent expansion consolidating. They used to be the wandering teachers, visiting area to area, imparting religious education to the existing members of the community and also winning new converts.

At the beginning of twentieth century, the 48th Imam of Ismaili community – Aga Khan – III started institutionalization. He formed an education committee in 1901 to propagate the importance of religious education within community. The committee started a religious night school in the compound of Darkhana, Bombay where the Ismaili students were given religious education in the evening. Later the committee also

designed a Khojki textbook for the students with the name of *Sindhi Chopdi*, which remains in use for many years.¹⁸

The concept of religious night schools gained momentum in later years with its establishment in many areas. These were mandated for the provision of religious education with Ismaili interpretation of Islam. Though in Pakistan the *Islamiyat* is taught as a compulsory subject in all private and public schools which covers some aspects of Holy Prophet's life, selected Quranic verses, selected Hadiths and other Islamic injunctions, the Ismaili community never felt satisfied with what is being taught as *Islamiyat* in these schools. This subject basically tends to cover the viewpoint of orthodox Islam, by-passing the wide plurality within Muslim *Ummah*. Besides, the treatment of subject does not encourage students to think and appreciate the truth engrained in the religion. By the provision of religious education to Ismaili students at its own level, the community tries to inculcate in its youths an Ismaili understanding of Islam. It seeks to involve children in the process of religious formation, making them capable of understanding the basic under-currents of Islamic and Ismaili histories and as well as the core principles of *Tariqah*.

In almost every Ismaili *Jamatkhana* in Pakistan and also in a colony/village, with a sizeable number of Ismaili families, there exist a religious night school, renamed recently as Religious Education Centre (REC) meant to impart religious education to the community children. These centres function a little before sunset, as when the parents usually come to visit *Jamatkhana* for offering prayers they bring their children with them. They go to the REC where they remain for hour or two to get religious education till the prayers and other activities in *Jamatkhana* are over. In Northern Area and Chitral these centres function much before sunset because of harsh climatic conditions. There exist more than 900 RECs throughout Pakistan with the enrolment of over one hundred thousand students. These centres are almost manned by honorary teachers, mostly females, with the exception of few in Northern Areas and Chitral, where nominal stipend is paid monthly.

Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB)

The managing body of the Religious Education Centres throughout Pakistan is Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board (ITREB). It was founded by late Aga Khan-III in 1948 with the name 'Ismailia Association for Pakistan'. The present Aga Khan-IV renamed it as

¹⁸ Mumtaz Ali Tajuddin, '100 Ismaili Heros' (See the article on Master Hashim Bhogo), p.290.

ITREB in 1986. It occupies an important place in Ismaili constitution with a prime responsibility of providing religious education at all levels to the community members. It implements programmes for training and upgrading of religious teachers and *waezeen*. Its mission statement says: ...The overall mission of ITREB is to impart an understanding of the essential principles of the Shia Imami Ismaili Tariqah of Islam within the boarder context of Islam as a whole. This, due to variety of traditions, customs, cultures and languages of the community reflects the rich diversity encompassed within the Islamic Ummah itself. The self-understanding to be imparted with a view, to imbibe the principles and practices of the Tariqah in a manner that is comforting to the community member, comprehensible to the reasonable minded people, resonant to the needs of the contemporary society and sensitive to the contexts in which the community lives...¹⁹

In order to fulfil its responsibilities, ITREB also implies many formal and informal ways to impart religious education to the community members such as lectures, *wa'z*, conventions, seminars and workshops, exhibitions, quiz competitions etc. for community members besides publications of religious books and other materials.

During the last sixty years of Pakistan history, the ITREB role in sustaining the community religiously is worth mentioning. At times, the community had become a target of anti-Ismaili forces and it continues to feel under constant threat from them. ITREB provides a comfort zone with sense of direction and guidance to deal with such threats intelligently.

Similarly the religious education system has undergone change during the last sixty years, which has brought an overall social impact on the community. In 1950s/1960s, the religious education within Ismaili community was primarily focused on Khoja segment of the community. As the other segments of the community were remote having little contact with the mainstream community at Karachi therefore, the entire religious education was imparted through series of textbooks written in a script known as Khojki.²⁰ This script has a long history and the community had tried to maintain it secretly over centuries. It consists of 45 alphabets, ascribed to one Pir Sad-al-din,²¹ prevalent in Khoja Ismaili

¹⁹ The mission statement was made available in IIS-ITREB workshop held in London in September 1998 where the author was a participant.

²⁰ Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Ismaili Tradition in Indo-Pakistan Sub-Continent* New York, Caravan Books, p.75.

²¹ Farhad Daftry, *The Ismailis, their History and Doctrines* Urdu Translation, Karachi; Iqbal Bros, p.489.

community for transmission of religious knowledge. All religious material mainly *ginans*, *granths*, *dua* and *Kalam-e- Mawla* (sayings of Hazrat Ali) were preserved in that script. In the beginning of the twentieth century one Mukhi Lalji Bhai Devraj started the Khoja Sindhi Press in Bombay.²² On the creation of Pakistan another community member Amirali Bana came forward with a donation for a new press for Pakistan based community.

In December 1975 the community had to abandon this script in persuasion of a decision made at International Conference held at Paris in April 1975, the then President (Mr. Kassim Ali Jaffar) of Ismailia Association decided to discontinue religious education in that script in the night schools of Pakistan. In this connection he mentioned that,²³ 'It is also the hidayat of *Sarcar Mawlana Hazar Imam* not to put burden of *Khojki* on students...' The subsequent contacts with other segments of the community also necessitated the forsaking of that script. Thus, the religious education in Pakistan was changed over from *Khojki* to Urdu script.

The Punjab and Frontier

The Ismaili community in the Punjab and Frontier provinces is scattered in many small towns and cities. In the period after independence it had no formal system of religious education. The missionaries from Karachi seldom visited them, therefore, it had to recourse to local Sunni *moulvis* for performing *nikah*, *nimaz-e-janaza* and other religious needs etc. The community children used to learn parts of Holy Quran from local Sunni *moulvis*. However, in early 1970s, some Khoja Ismaili families from former East Pakistan moved to Rawalpindi, Islamabad and Lahore for business purpose and on their subsequent settlement in these cities, they started the religious night schools with the help of ITREB, while in other parts of the Punjab and Frontier, religious education system was introduced in subsequent years.

Northern Areas and Chitral

Similarly in Northern Areas and Chitral, there was also no formal system of the religious education like night schools, which prevailed in other parts of the country. The Northern Areas and Chitral had a hereditary *khalifa* system. The *khalifas* used to perform rituals and they were

²² Information provided by a ITREB retired scholar Mr. Hashim Moledina in 1999.

²³ Mentioned in the letter dated 3.12.1976 address to one Alijah Sadruddin, U/855 Karimabad,Karachi.

considered to be a point of reference in the religious matters. In Northern Areas, the ITREB started its formal activities in 1975 by organizing a Guide Training Programme and, thereafter, started establishing RECs all over in phases. Consequently, the role of *khalifas* in Northern Areas and Chitral become marginalized and ITREB professionals took the lead. It implemented south-based Urdu textbooks entitled *Ismaili Talimat* for various age groups. These books mainly covered the selective aspects of *Tariqah* with some verses of Quran, *ginans*, *manaqibs*, *farmans*, history and Ismaili festivals etc. They remained in use till the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, took over the responsibility of making curriculum, publishing textbooks for worldwide Ismaili community through a centralized curriculum.

The role of the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London

Immediately, after its inception in December 1977, the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London, undertook the task of designing the curriculum of religious education for worldwide Ismaili community. Initially it took five to seven years to come up with textbooks for pre and primary level schools in English. Meanwhile, the old *Talimat* books that were in use since 1960s in Pakistan (first in Khojki and subsequently in Urdu) were abruptly withdrawn from the community-based night schools and children were left with no printed textbooks for more than ten years. The Institute first published pre-school books, followed by primary level books in English and then undertook a massive exercise of translating these books into Urdu along with several world languages such as Gujrati, Tajiki, Farsi, Portuguese, French and Arabic for world-wide Ismaili community. It spent more than ten years till the first pack of Urdu translated pre-school books reached Pakistan from London in mid – 1990s, therefore, the religious education within Pakistan suffered a lot.

When the first pack of primary level books came from London, many raised their eyebrows to see that the contents of books mismatched with the spirit of local Ismaili culture. They lack overt signs of conventional Ismailiness, having little relevance to immediate environment of the Pakistani Ismaili students and their history. While some others observed that the contents seemed to fulfil the needs of newly established Ismaili community in the west, who had no religious education system ever since their establishment in the 1970s. Though they contain modicum of translation of Quranic verses but, in the Pakistani context, the local community wants actual Quranic text with translation and its Ismaili approach of understanding Islam. Thus the community finds it difficult to link these textbooks with the current religious practices. The community also feels that these books do not

present Ismaili *Tariqah* as an inspiration to look for solace at the time of crisis.

Keeping the Pakistani context in view, the content of some of these textbooks appear more difficult for the age group it is meant for. For example the story of *Conference of Birds* by Iranian Sufi Fariduddin Attar for students of Primary Four, Book-II (age 8 to 9 years) seems very difficult to understand. Some of the contents pertain to the groups/dynasties who were hostile to Ismaili community in different periods of history like Mughal in India, Safvid in Iran and Ottoman in Turkey; therefore, the community finds it difficult to own the material about these dynasties. The Institute's books are devoid of Ismaili literature such as *ginans*, *qasaid* and *manaqibs* developed in India and Central Asia during past centuries. The community has emotional attachment with this literature and its popularity within the community necessitates its inclusion in the textbooks. The contents project the Third World problems of poverty, illness and illiteracy more while seem mum about the western world social behavior. It does not highlight the problems of Ismaili community of the West in any way. The IIS-published books seem more India-centred and like in Primary-Six Book III, where, under the topic of South Asia, the starting paragraph does not even mention the name of Pakistan as a South Asian country while it clearly mentions the tiny country, Bhutan. Similarly the map of the subcontinent in a book does not show Kashmir as a disputed area.

The IIS-published textbooks, at the first look, seem to be of international standard, being published and printed in London, therefore, these are of highest quality in terms of paper, printing and illustrations, they are child-oriented, encouraging various indoor and outdoor activities and above all these are pedagogically sound. Each class material has several items like textbooks, activity book, posters, picture cards and guide for the teachers and the parents. But to teach these books to the children of Third World, especially in the remote mountainous regions of Northern Areas, Chitral and in far-flung areas of Punjab and Sindh need more homework. For example, before teaching these books to the children, the teachers need to be trained, they had to be provided back-up material, good physical infrastructure like class rooms facilities and other teaching aids etc. and, above all, parents are to be convinced to buy these books even at subsidized rates. Books given to the children, with these missing elements created a complex situation. Moreover, the IIS just provided the textbooks with educational tools for assessment, monitoring and evaluation etc.

In the IIS-ITREB orientation meeting held at Karachi in December 1997, the problems were raised and discussed thoroughly. At

this point, it was decided that a vector programme, aimed at strengthening teachers educators would be conceptualized at the IIS in partnership with the Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development (IED) and ITREB to build and upgrade the religious education system. Till to date, many episodes of this ventor/professtional teachers education programme have been conducted in Toronto and Karachi at international level but its impact at the local level is yet to be seen.

Regarding other problems, no remedies were suggested. In Pakistan, the majority of religious centres have no physical infrastructure. With the introduction of IIS published textbooks for pre-school children (age three to five years) in 1990s, ITREB undertook the exercise of building pre-school rooms all over Pakistan on yearly basis, but this exercise was too slow and insufficient, while attention to primary sections was overlooked. The children of the Northern Areas and Chitral usually sit in an open space in a harsh climate during winter when the maximum temperature remains around 8-10 degrees. The rooms built have maximum capacity of 30-35 children only while other students sit in veranda or in open space in circles around their teachers. Similarly, the situation else where in the country is in no way better, especially in Karachi where REC is held in upper floor of *Jamatkhana* prayer hall. Hundreds of students sit together in circles around their teachers in a big hall and each circle's noise disturbs the other circles. In this situation, the religious education is in a pathetic condition, unless some concrete efforts are made to build separate classrooms for meaningful education.

In any REC, the children spent an hour in real terms with many off-days in a single month. The total contact hours with children for whole year are aggregated to 80-90 hours a year. This seems insufficient to teach them the bulk of IIS-published textbooks. It provides little room for teachers' creativity within classroom as they have less time to initiate any activity of their own. Further these textbooks need to be re-looked in terms of contents as these contain some textual/factual errors: For example:

- i) Who use camera obscura first? Ibne al-Haytham or Al-Khawarzmi. The Primary-Five Book III, (page 27) says, '*... al- Ibne Haytham was the first person known to have used the camera obscura.* While Teacher's and Parent's guide (page 79) of the same class says '*... One of the interesting inventions that resulted from this kind of work was the camera obsurca, a very simple form of the camera, first used by al-Khawarzmi.* Book II (page 22), it is mentioned that '*... the first book on algebra was written by great Muslim mathematician al-Khawarzmi...*'

- ii) The Primary-Five Guide (page 80), (points for discussion) mentions two names of *Al-Jazari* and *Banu Musa* with no hint in any Primary-Five Textbooks, the question arises as to where from, the teachers would get material concerning these two personalities.
- iii) The Primary-Five Guide (page-52) and Activity sheet-9 need to be consistent. The Guide mentions ‘... *The map shows the town of Zanzibar with some of its historic buildings and sites...*’ While Activity sheet-9 says ‘... *Imagine that you live on a small Island. You are a part of a team of people, which is planning new facilities for the main seaside town... Below is a map of this town in which you live...*’ There are no buildings on the map.
- iv) The Primary-Six, Book-III, (page-12) under sub-heading ‘*National languages*’ says *that Turks migrated from Eastern Asia...*’ whereas, the present-day Turkey lies in the Western Asia, part of which is in Europe. However, historically there was a Kok Turkic empire around 622 c.a in Inner Asia where the present-day Mongolia is situated.
- v) The Primary-Five Book-II, (page-38) described the name of the Aga Khan Academy, Hunza, as Karimabad Academy, while Karimabad is a new name of Baltit town, where the Academy is situated.
- vi) The Primary-Six Book-I (page-18) (Pilgrim of different faith) says: ‘... *Varanasi lies in North-West India,...*’ while this city is situated in the Northern India, in the State of Uttar Pradesh.
- vii) The Primary-Six, Book-I (page-14), (*travels of Ibne Battuta*) says ‘... *Ibne Battuta’s last trip took him across the Sahara - to the West African Kingdoms of Sudan, while Sudan lies south of Egypt in northeast of Africa continent.*
- viii) The Primary-Five, Book-III- *People helping People-* has been referred to in the Primary -Six Guide (page -81) as Book-II, whereas it is Book-III.
- ix) The Primary-Six, Book I, describes Spice route --- to be one of the greatest sea route. If it was a sea route, then how it was link to Central Asia which is a landlocked region, as described in Book-III (page 10) under land and its features
- x) The Primary-Six, Book-I, (page 6) says that ‘...*Al-Idrisi was called by King to lead a team of Scholars to create a new map of known world in year 1145.*’ Again on page 7 says, ‘... *that Al-Idrisi took fifteen years to make a final map (i. e 1160).*’ Then it is mentioned *that this map was destroyed in year 1160.* A question can be

named asked how the maps when was furnished in 1160 was destroyed in the same year i.e. 1160?

- xi) The Primary-Six Book-I (pages 17 and 48) need consistency in terms of a phrase 'The Adventures of Sinbad the sailor' and 'Adventures of Sinbad'
- xii) The Primary-Six Book-II (page 39) describes '... In 1590, Akber captured the rich and important trading city of Surat in northern India...' while Surat is a port city on the western coast of India.
- xiii) The Primary-Six Book-II, (page 40) under the sub-heading 'Mughal poetry' the description is given about Mughal painting.

These are just few examples of textual/factual errors, the Institute needs to evaluate the books in terms of its contents and assess its durability for the future. Some even did not appreciate the idea of centralized curriculum and felt the reminiscent of old colonial hegemony of pre-independence days, when every thing used to come from London. It is not clear to what extent that IIS-published textbooks would be helpful to respond and serve the Ismaili community's needs in Pakistan. During the last many years, the radical trends at the helm of politics in Pakistan have enhanced their pressure compelling government to increase the volume of Quran-reading in *Islamiyat*. The recent establishment of Aga Khan University Examination Board at national level through A Presidential Ordinance 2003 created ripples in the radical circles, targeting the community at various levels. The Ismaili parents have reflected their worries at various platforms. Due to this pressure, the secondary students, particularly the youth have to confront incisive questions about various aspects of religion in their colleges, universities, offices, friendship circles and other places. In view of this peculiar situation, many feel that centralized curriculum is not a healthy move in an era of decentralization. Local community needs to be empowered to address its own issues and prepare the coming generation for its own society. The Aga Khan in his address at the AKU convocation in 2006 referred to the same as aspect:

...A vast decentralization of decision-making is already occurring in many countries; it has the advantage of placing new responsibilities in the hands of local communities.²⁴

The IIS-Secondary level material has yet to be finalized, these will take years in actual classroom level implementation all over Pakistan. Meanwhile the IIS has started a Secondary Teachers Education Programme (STEP) in collaboration with the University of London, IOE, from 2007 in which eight candidates from Pakistan would participate to

²⁴ Aga Khan speech to AKU convocation in December, 2006.

get 2-year teachers' training with double Master degrees in Education and Teaching courses. The IIS intends to pilot secondary education programme at six major world cities including Karachi from 2009 and would subsequently implement it to other areas.

The Quranic education

ITREB, looking the environment of Pakistan, has come to the terms by introducing Quranic education for Ismaili students. The need of Quranic education, even for teaching faculties at headquarter and regional offices had long been felt. In this connection the earlier ITREB boards in 1980s hired Pakistani renowned *qaris* (Qari Asif Qasmi and Qari Waheed Zafar Qasmi) to teach Quranic recitation (*Qira'at*) to trainees of various professional training programmes. Now the ITREB has full-time professional *qaris* in Northern Area, Chitral, Frontier, Punjab and Sindh conducting programmes at local levels. In the recent years, the ITREB has also published few books of selected Quranic verses to meet community requirements. As a result students have become more fluent in reading *Quran* and are also going for its deeper understanding.

ITREB efforts in sustaining the community and transforming it into modern, enlightened community are, no doubt, well accepted among the community members. ITREB applies modern methods of education in its multifarious programmes by keeping itself abreast of new methods. It sends its faculty members to various educational institutions to upgrade their knowledge. It has kept pace with the coming trends of modernization and has also started periodic planning of its activities to address the issues.

Conclusion

The Ismaili community, through its education system has not only served its own members, but has contributed largely to the development of Pakistan. Though the system has seen many ups and downs but it has impacted the national development in many ways. It has also provided numerous avenues to its members to serve Pakistan. It has established the principle that education both secular and religious, is must for material and spiritual development. By equipping oneself with modern tools of education, one can share its knowledge and expertise to wider national progress.