

# ORIGIN & MEANING OF THE TERM AGA KHAN

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Title is a name indicative of eminence, affording special distinction to the holder. Every title appears to have meaning or derivation from a word expressive of quality and historical background. Likewise, Imam Hasan Ali Shah, the 46th Imam was the bearer of the title *Aga Khan*. Fateh Ali Shah, the Qajari emperor invested him in 1818 in Tehran. Henceforward, he and his successors became known by this title. How this title was invested? What is its origin and meaning? We will discuss these points as under.

Aga Mohammad Khan (1742-1797) founded Qajar dynasty in Iran in 1796. He was succeeded by his nephew, Fateh Ali Shah (1771-1834), who ruled for 38 years and 5 months, and died on October 23, 1834.

Abul Hasan Shah, the 44th Ismaili Imam was succeeded by his son, Imam Khalilullah in 1780, who resided in Kahek. In 1815, he moved to Yazd, situated between Ispahan and Kirman on the route to Baluchistan and Sind. It was at Yazd that two years later, in 1817, the Imam became a victim of the intrigues of the Ithna Ashri ulema and lost his life in the course of a dispute between some of his adherents and the local shopkeepers. The Ismailis involved, took refuge in Imam's residence and refused to emerge. A certain Mullah Husayn Yazdi collected a hostile mob and attacked the Imam's house. In the ensuing uproar, Imam Khalilullah and several of his followers, including one Indian Ismaili, were murdered, and the Imam's house of plundered.

The mother of Imam Hasan Ali Shah, who appears to have been a lady of vigorous character, came to the court to seek justice for her dead husband. Her pleading was immediately successful. The governor of Yazd, Haji Muhammad Zaman Khan was ordered to send Mullah Husayn and his accomplices to Tehran for punishment.

The death of Imam Khalilullah took place by the end of 1817, and Fateh Ali Shah, the emperor invited his son and successor, Hasan Ali Shah. The Imam compromised with the situation for the interest of his followers and cemented close tie with the regime. In appreciation of Imam's policy, the emperor appointed him the governor of Mahallat and Qumm, and invested the honorific title of *Aga Khan*. Furthermore, as conclusive sign of honour, Fateh Ali Shah gave one of his daughters, Sarv-i Jahan Khanum, in marriage to the Imam. Henceforward, Imam Hasan Ali Shah became known as the *Aga Khan*.

The conferment ceremony had taken place in the palace, called Qasr-i Qajar in Tehran. Our sources fail to furnish details. J.M. Tancoigne however had seen the palace in 1807, describing its location four miles north of Tehran. William Price visited Tehran in 1817 and reports that it was halfway between Tehran and Shemran, surrounded by beautiful gardens. He also regarded it one of the most delightful residences in Iran. Sir Ker Porter (1777-1842) also visited the Qasr-i Qajar in 1818; the year when Imam Hasan Ali Shah was honoured the title. He was full of admiration and writes that, "It stands on an eminently pleasant point of the adjoining mountains, being built on a detached and commanding hill, on the great slope of the Elborz. The edifice is lofty, and when seen from a distance, presents a very magnificent appearance." (vide **Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia during the years 1817, 1818, 1819 and 1820**, London, 1821, p. 335)

It implies that Imam Hasan Ali Shah was the first Imam after the fall of Alamut, to have been officially recognized with his spiritual rights by the Iranian empire. He returned to Mahallat. Upon hearing his arrival from Tehran, the celebrated panegyrist Habib, also known as Qa'ani (1807-1854) addressed to the Imam with a *qasida* of fifteen lines with the opening lines:

*Eternal life in the world were necessary,  
to sing one tenth of the AQA KHAN's praises.*

(vide, **Diwan-i Hakim Qa'ani Shirazi**, ed. Mohammad Jafar Muhjub, Tehran, 1918, p. 180)

The above verse most probably represents an early source documenting the term *Aga Khan*.

It was at the time when Mohammad Shah Qajar invaded Herat in 1837 that the Imam's title first appeared in the official correspondence of the British agents in Iran. Sir Erskine Perry (1821-1893) of Bombay High Court processed the **Khoja Inheritance Case** in 1847 and declared: "The Ismailis have a belief on Aga Khan, who is a Persian nobleman, and is being widely remembered in the Indian history of this age."

Imam Hasan Ali Shah, the Aga Khan made his way from Persia to India in 1842, and cultivated close relation with the British, and "there his title was confirmed by the British who in turn enjoyed his support" (vide **Encyclopaedia Americana**, 1983, 1<sup>st</sup> vol., p. 327). The Imam's name was officially registered with the records of the Bombay Government since 1848 as *His Highness Aga Khan Mahallati*.

Richard F. Burton also introduced the title *Aga Khan* in his **Sindh and the Races that inhabit in the valley of the Indus** (London, 1851, p.249). The source, however, applying the term *Aga Khan* and responsible to make him popular through out India and Europe was the verdict of Sir Joseph Arnold (1814-1886) in **The Aga Khan Case** of 1866 in Bombay High Court. Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah, the Aga Khan III also writes: "My grandfather had been confirmed in his rights and titles by a judgment of the Bombay High Court in 1866." (**The Memoirs of Aga Khan**, London, 1954, p. 9). Robert Grant Watson's **History of Persia** (London, 1866) also brought fame of the Imam in Europe as the *Aga Khan*.

It must be known that the term *Senaga* in Turkish means *gentleman* and *agam* means *sir*. Thus, *aga* or *agha* is a word originally came to use in eastern Turkey to mean *elder brother*, and sometimes in contrast to *ini* means *younger brother*, but Yakut suggests its meaning as *father*. In Ottoman empire of Turkey, *agha* (usually pronounced a 'a or even a) was applied for *chief*, *master* and sometimes *landowner*. It is also suggested that the Turkish *agha* is derived from Greek *akha* or *akhai*, which later on transformed as *agha* in eastern Turkey. The term is also used for chief servant of a household, and generally occurs in combination with many words. For example, *carshi aghasi* (market inspector), *khan aghasi* (inn-keeper), *koy aghasi* (village headman) and *aghabey* (elder brother). In Turkey, the Muslim landowners were chiefly known as *aghas* and the Christian landowners as *gospodars*, which clearly indicates that this term remained specific among the Muslims. The title *agha* gradually spread from Turkey to the Southern Kurdistan after the conquest of Baghdad by Sultan Murad IV in 1637. The word *aga* or *agha* introduced for the first time in Europe in 16th century. John Pory Leo (1570-1635) in 1601-2 in his **History of Africa** spelt it as *agaes*. In 1628, Kenelm Digby (1603-1665) in his **Voyage to Mediterranean** wrote the term as *agaw*.

As a title upto the reform period, it was given to many persons employed in government service, mostly in military. Most notables *aghas* of this kind were the *yeniceri aghasi*, or the chief officers of the Janissaries, who dominated Turkey from 1578 to 1625. In Ottoman empire, this title gradually became official both in military and administrative units. It was also borne by the principal members of the imperial household and the eunuchs controlling the Sultan's harem. Grand vizir was titled *agha*, who also was crowned the word *efendi* with it, and was called *Agha Efendimiz*. After the abolition of the Janissaries in 1826, it became the custom to entitle *aga* or *agha* to illiterate officers upto the rank of *kaim makam*, the literate officers of same rank being addressed as *efendi*. Until the establishment of the Turkish Constitution, there existed military rank intermediate between those of *yuzbashi* and *binbashi*, called as *kolaghasi*, the commander of wing. The earliest inscription in India bearing the term *aga* dated 1606-7, has been discovered in 1910 by G. Yazdani. It is found in the Jami Masjid, Qaundhar Fort, Nanded district, which reads: "During the reign of Ibrahim Adil Shah the Mosque was built during the governorship of Aqa, Aqa Murad."

Iran borrowed the word *aga* or *agha* from Turkey in the form of *aga* or *aqā*. Aga Mohammad Khan (1742-1797) founded Qajar dynasty in Iran. He divided his rule into two branches under the terms *yukari bash* (the higher) and *ashaka bash* (the lower). *Yukari* being the Turkish for higher and *Ashaka*

represent Tartar *qa'an*, the special title adopted by Oktai, the son of Chengiz Khan. Marco Polo applied *kaan* for Kublai Khan, the Chinese emperor.

Iran also adopted the term *khan*, which became common in all the provinces. John Malcolm (1769-1833) was in Iran in 1810, writes: "In the provinces especially *khan* meant originally what *chief* did in Scotland among the clans. Now-a-days, *khans* are as common in Tehran, as esquires are in London." In Iran, it was in courtesy applied to all men above the position of servant (*beg*), and the ladies were termed *khanam*, the feminine form.

Summing up the extant lexicons, we safely come to a conclusion that the word *aga* means *lord, prince, nobleman, master* or *chief*; whereas *khan* means *master, head, owner, ruler* or *prince*. Originally, the Turkish rulers combined *agha* and *beg* to make it *Agha Beg* – a new title for the highly reputed person. The Qajari rulers also followed the pattern in Iran and joined *Aga* and *Khan* together, making a title of *Aga Khan* or *Aqa Khan* for the nobleman.

The modern sources render the meaning of the Turko-Iranian word, *Aga Khan* as *honorable chief, great lord, chief commander, lord chief, great chief* or *lord chief-viceroy*.

In the light of its origin and derivation, it should mean ***Honorable Chief Lord***.

It appears that the title ***Aga Khan*** greatly influenced the Mughal empire in India. For instance, in the period of emperor Humayun, the daughter of Khawaja Abdullah Marwarid was known as ***Khanam Agha***. The wife of Mu'nim Khan was known as ***Agha Kuka*** and the mother of Ibrahim Sultan Mirza was called ***Khanish Agha*** etc., vide, **Humayun-nama** (tr. Annette S. Beveridge, Lahore, 1974, pp. 128). The treasurer of the emperor Akbar bore the name ***Aga Khan***, vide **Muntakhabut Tawarikh** (tr. W.H. Lowe, Karachi, 1976, 2<sup>nd</sup> vol., p. 218) by al-Badaoni. Emperor Jahangir gave a title of ***Khan Beg*** to the Vazir-ul-Mulk, vide **The Central Structure of the Mughal Empire** (Karachi, 1967) by Ibn Hasan. One military general during emperor Aurengzeb is also traced out, known as ***Agha Khan*** who defeated the Afghans at Gandawak in 1667, vide, **A Short History of Islam** (Karachi, 1960, p. 547) by Sayyid Fayyaz Mahmud. One another ***Aga Khan*** reported to have flourished in the period of emperor Shah Jahan, and he died in 1670. His tomb is near the Mumtaz Mahal in Iajganj, vide **An Oriental Biographical Dictionary** (Lahore, 1975, p. 36) by T.W. Beale. Major T.W. Haig has also discovered in India an oldest inscription dating 4th October, 1624, which reads: "Her Highness ***Khanam Agha***, daughter of Mir Maqsud Ali Tabataba... the tank which is situated in the vicinity of the market of Khairabad has been built by her." vide **A Study of Muslim Inscriptions** (Poona, 1944, p. 144) by V.S. Bendrey

It must be noted that the title ***Aga Khan*** was not an hereditary. When Imam Hasan Ali Shah died in 1881, his son, Ali Shah, succeeded him. The contemporary world, chiefly the Indians had identified the new Imam, Ali Shah as ***young Aga Khan*** and the term ***elder Aga Khan*** was given to Imam Hasan Ali Shah. It was in fact, the distinctive terms for two Imams. The title ***His Highness the Aga Khan*** was so widely popularized that the terms ***elder Aga Khan*** and ***young Aga Khan*** melted away in usage, and the ***Aga Khan first*** and ***Aga Khan second*** came to be referred in between 1881 to 1885. Neither Imam Hasan Ali Shah, nor Imam Ali Shah had ever declared to their successors as the bearers of the title ***Aga Khan***.

Imam Sultan Mohammad Shah, the successor of Imam Ali Shah ascended in 1885, was chiefly known in the world as ***Aga Khan III***. He was the first to regard this title as hereditary. His famous Will reads:- "**I appoint my grandson Karim, the son of my son Aly Salomone to succeed to the title of *Aga Khan* and to be the Imam and Pir of all my Shi'a Ismailian followers.**"

There is a reason for making it hereditary. The early Qajar kings had invested the title ***Aga Khan*** to few other noblemen in Iran, but the practice seems to be discontinued during the rule of Nasirud-din Shah, who ruled from 1848 to 1896. The holders of the title ***Aga Khan*** were either died, or retired and they could not gain popularity in Iran. Hence, this title became a specific with the Ismaili Imams in India. The ***Aga Khan*** in a general sense was meant, ***the Imam of the Ismailis***. If some holders of the title ***Aga Khan*** were alive; they could not achieve prominence in comparison with the Ismaili Imams. This changing time was responsible to let Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah to make it hereditary.

There is one another reason that the relation between Imam Hasan Ali Shah and the Qajar empire was restored and this friendship had also confirmed the title of *Aga Khan*, and the favorable time came in the period of Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah to make it an hereditary. The present Imam of the Shi'ite Ismaili is His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, who is widely known as the Aga Khan IV in the world, and none exists to be known as such.

It is very much difficult to trace out the persons bearing the title of *Aga Khan* during the empire of Qajar. One among them was Mirza Nuri Aga Khan who held the post of foreign affairs during the rule of Nasiruddin Shah from 1851 to 1857. Another Mirza Abdul Hussain Kirmani or Mirza Aga Khan (1854-1896) was an Iranian nationalist, also a son of Abdul Rahim Mashizi, and grandson of a close companion of Imam Hasan Ali Shah. In addition, the governor of Yezd was also called Aga Khan Irvani, from 1848 to 1849.