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Who was the Aga Khan IV? And who are the Nizari Ismailis, the community he led?

The Aga Khan IV passed away in Lisbon on Tuesday. He will be remembered by many as the 'Imam of the Atomic Age'. Indians are most familiar with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which has restored Delhi's Humayun's Tomb and the surrounding area.

Written by [Arjun Sengupta](#)

New Delhi | February 6, 2025 11:56 IST



EXPRESS Shorts

6 min read



EXPRESS explained. CULTURE

In this April 7, 2015 file photo, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prince Karim Aga Khan IV during a meeting, in New Delhi. (PTI Photo)

Prince Karim al-Husseini, who was the [Aga Khan IV, died in Lisbon on Tuesday](#) (February 4). He was 88.



Why proposed new 3x15 scoring system might not be remedy to make badminton more exciting

Sports 44 min ago

HS Prannoy, one of the older players on the badminton circuit, could benefit from the BWF's recent announcement endorsing 3x15 scoring system. But Prannoy is unsure if it will benefit the sport and suggests changing other aspects like scheduling and broadcast. The...

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Considered to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali, the Aga Khan is the Imam of the Nizari Ismaili Shias, and holds near-divine status among the community.

Twelver, Sevener, Fiver Shias

By the time of the Prophet's death in 632 CE, Islam had taken hold over much of Arabia. His demise sparked a battle of succession, and split the community.

Some argued that leadership should be awarded only to qualified individuals, while others insisted that it be passed solely through Muhammad's bloodline. The former group went on to become the Sunnis, while the latter became the Shias.

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The two main branches of Islam differ fundamentally on matters of doctrine, law, ritual, and religious organisations. However, neither branch is a monolith.

Among the Shias, for instance, there are three main denominations: the Twelvers, the Ismailis, and the Zaydis. All three trace the descent of Muhammad through a chain of Imams or religious teachers, but they differ in the specifics of what the line of descent comprises.

Twelver Shias, the largest of these denominations comprising 90% of the total Shia population, follow a line of 12 divinely-ordained Imams, with the 12th Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, believed to be alive and in occultation.

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The Ismailis or Sevener Shias concur with the Twelvers till the sixth Imam, after which the two lines split.

The Zaydis or Fiver Shias split from the other lines after the first four Imams.

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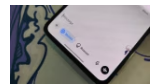
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Nizari Ismailis & the Aga Khan

Among the Ismailis, there are two more subjects — the Nizari Ismailis and the Dawoodi Bohras. The fundamental difference between the two communities is that while the Nizaris trace the Prophet's hereditary descent all the way to the Aga Khans, the Dawoodi Bohras recognise direct descent only till the 18th Imam, and follow today a line of Dais who are representatives of the concealed Imam.

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Also in Explained | Who are the Dawoodi Bohras

The title of Aga Khan was bestowed on Hasan Ali Shah, the 46th Imam of Nizari Ismailis by the Iranian king Fath-Ali Shah Qajar in the 19th century.

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Today, the Nizari Ismailis are spread out across more than 30 countries, although most trace their origin to Persia or the Indian subcontinent. They are not a majority community in any location.

Following a deal with the Portuguese government in 2015, the Aga Khan IV declared Lisbon as the global seat of the Nizari Imamate.

'Imam of the Atomic Age'

Born in Geneva in 1936, Prince Karim was the eldest son of Prince Aly Khan and the grandson of Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, or the Aga Khan III. After growing up in Nairobi and Switzerland, he went to Harvard to get a degree in Islamic history.

Prince Karim's grandfather passed away in 1957. In his will, the Aga Khan III named his grandson as his successor, bypassing both his sons.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW THIS AD

He wrote: "In view of the fundamentally altered conditions in the world...including the discoveries of atomic science, I am convinced that it is in the best interests of the Nizari Ismaili community that I should be succeeded by a young man who has been brought up and developed during recent years and in the midst of the new age..."

And bring a modern outlook Prince Karim did.

The "Imam of the Atomic Age", as some of his followers like to call him, became a transcendent figure. As the British magazine Tatler wrote in its obituary: "Few people bridged so many divides — between the spiritual and the material; East and West; Muslim and Christian — as gracefully as he did."

Spiritual leader with taste

The Aga Khan was a man who appreciated the good things in life. He inhabited a world of luxury superyachts and private jets, had a particular penchant for thoroughbred horses, and even owned a private island in the Bahamas.

He moved with people from the highest echelons of society, and if not for his title, might have enjoyed global renown as a venture capitalist alone.

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Yet, he was the spiritual leader of his flock, and a man who helped Nizari Ismailis navigate crisis after crisis in the 20th and 21st centuries, "from the end of the Cold War, the end of colonialism in Africa and communism in Central Asia, and the continuous turmoil in the Middle East, where militant Sunni[s]... brand the moderate Ismaili as apostates," Tatler's obituary said.

“An imam is not expected to withdraw from everyday life,” the Aga Khan once told Vanity Fair. “On the contrary, he’s expected to protect his community and contribute to their quality of life.”

Aga Khan’s philanthropic work

The Aga Khan Development Network, the Aga Khan’s main philanthropic organisation, deals primarily with healthcare, housing, education, and rural economic development. With an annual budget of more than \$1 billion, it works in some 30 countries.

“The engagement of the Imamat in development is guided by Islamic ethics, which bridge faith and society. It is on this premise that I established the Aga Khan Development Network... it has long been active in areas of Asia and Africa to improve the quality of life of all who live,” he said at a symposium in 2004.

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Among the most prominent entities that are a part of this network — and perhaps a reason why many in India and especially Delhi, are familiar with the Aga Khan’s name — is the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Seeking to “impart a more informed understanding of the diverse cultures of the Muslim world”, the Trust works to promote artists and musicians, renovate and refurbish important monuments, and keep alive traditions of art and culture across the Islamic world.



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According to its website, the Trust’s largest cultural project to date has been the restoration and revitalisation of the Humayun’s Tomb Complex, including its gardens and the neighbouring Nizamuddin area, along with the rehabilitation of Sunder Nursery in Delhi. In Hyderabad, the restoration and transformation of the Quli Qutb Shahi Tombs into a heritage park is currently underway.

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