

**Marvel of Prince Aly Muhammad Aga Khan: Al-Khimyah:
A critical review of Prince Aly Muhammad Aga Khan's documentary¹**

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*O' Friend! Lord, [albeit being] omniscient, [sometimes feigns to be] unaware
Ascetic assembly is the source of bliss
Upon the touch of philosopher's stone (pāras), iron's colour is transmuted
Then shines brightly the twinkling light [of gold]²*

*O' Brother! The true guide is like the philosopher's stone (pāras) and a believer is like the
copper; Only upon their coupling the gold is produced.³*

¹ This review is written in honour of Abdul Rehman Noor Mohammad Kanji and is also dedicated to the memory of Late Vīr Bāi and Late Mīrān Bāi. It is meant to be written for academic publication. Any views on it are welcomed at alijandamani@yahoo.com prior to its final academic publication.

² Translated from a ginān attributed to Saiyyid Muḥammad Shāh (d. 1813). For the complete text of the ginān in Khojkī, see; Saiyyid Muḥammad Shāh, "Jīre Vālā Dhan Re Ghaḍī Jo Dīn Sant Padhāreā," in *100 Ginānnī Chopāḍī: Bhāg Chotho*, ed. Lālji Devrāj (Mumbai: The Khojā Sindhi Printing Press, 1932), 50-1. For the same in Gujarati, see; Saiyyid Muḥammad Shāh, "Jīre Vālā Dhanre Ghaḍī Jo Dīn Sant Padhāreā," in *Mahān Ismāīlī Dharmaprachārak Saiyyad Imām Shāh Ane Bījā Dharmaprachārak Saiyyado Rachīt Gīnānono Saṅgrah*, ed. Ismāīliyā Esosīeshan For Bhārat (Mumbai: Ismāīliyā Esosīeshan For Bhārat, 1954), 213.

³ Translated from a ginān attributed to Pīr Ṣadar al-Dīn (d. 1416). For the complete text of the ginān in Khojkī, see; Pīr Ṣadar al-Dīn, "Ejī Sab Ghaṭ Sāmī Māro Bharapūr Beṭhā," in *100 Ginānnī Chopāḍī: Bhāg Chotho*, ed. Lālji Devrāj (Mumbai: The Khojā Sindhi Printing Press, 1932), 98-100. For the same in Gujarati, see; Pīr Ṣadar al-Dīn, "Ejī Sab Ghaṭ Sāmī Māro Bharapūr Beṭhā," in *Mahān Ismāīlī Sant Pīr Ṣadar al-Dīn Rachīt Gīnānono Saṅgrah 1*, ed. Ismāīliyā Esosīeshan For Bhārat (Mumbai: Ismāīliyā Esosīeshan For Bhārat, 1969), 47.

Abstract:

Inducement to inscribe this article emerged as a result of direct inspiration from the tireless efforts of Prince Karim Aga Khan in the fields as diverse as education, healthcare, economy, environment etc., to improve the quality of human life across the entire globe. Recently, Karim Aga Khan's youngest son, Aly Muhammad Aga Khan, has responsibly inaugurated the documentation of the noble works that have been completed by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), in the form of short films or documentaries. Thus far, Aly has been able to produce two documentaries, both of which are extraordinarily interesting to watch. In this article, Aly's latest documentary, Al-Khimyah, has turned into a subject of critical scrutiny. Aly's documentary has been critically analyzed and evaluated not only in terms of the style, genre, targeted audience etc., but also in terms of the content, which, as we shall subsequently see, is absolutely thought provoking. Precisely speaking, this critical review would allow the readers to comprehend the complexity behind the works of Prince Karim Aga Khan through the example of Al-Azhar park which is well depicted in Al-Khimyah.

Keywords:

AKDN, Al-Azhar park, Imam, Ismā'īlī, Prince Aly Muhammad Aga Khan.

Review

Second and comparatively much longer documentary film in the series entitled 'close to home', Al-Khimyah (also transliterated as Al-Kīmiyā') has been written and directed by Prince Aly Muhammad Aga Khan, the youngest son of His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan. Produced in a considerably improved manner than the first documentary film in the same series, Al-Khimyah takes its audience to a journey of hard work, faith, and transformation. For Aly Aga Khan, the aforementioned series is a personal project aimed at showcasing the learnings which he has accumulated through his travels over the past few years about the works of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Aly Aga Khan, through the use of facts, figures, stats, images, clips, interviews, designs, patterns, sounds etc. in the documentary film, intends to convey to the youth of the contemporary world all those issues which, according to his viewpoint, are of utmost relevance and significance to them.

Not adhering to the traditional standards of documentary film making, Aly Aga Khan has set the film to inaugurate in an interesting manner, depicting various simple designs and patterns. With the flow of gentle music in the background, these simple patterns and designs subsequently turn into complex artistic layouts, which ultimately form the map of the Cairo city. Not only it is a beautiful way to start the documentary but also a picturization of the statement "sometimes simple ideas led to ambitious and complex projects" given by the first and most-referred to interviewee of the documentary. Importantly enough, this use of images, sounds, clips etc. to support the content being examined can be observed by the watcher throughout the film. In the film, what precedes the brief and commonly accepted definition of Al-Kīmiyā', is the description of Cairo, almost bereft of greenery, as a 'grey city'. Of course, the absence of explicit mention of the rationale behind the selection of the name Al-Khimyah for the film, cannot be blanketed under the numerous strengths of the documentary. It was only possible through further research to acknowledge that the 'transformative' aspect of Al-Kīmiyā' is, in actuality, the selection's nonexplicit *raison d'être*.

An important point to note about this petite but extremely significant documentary is that it highlights many of the complex challenges such as child labour, poverty, inequality, poor infrastructure, low standard of living, extensive barren land masses, pollution etc. with respect to which the Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP) of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) had to plan out effective strategies to build an amazing lush green park, renowned today as the Al-Azhar park. For its audience, the documentary carefully situates the urban space of Cairo in terms of diverse contexts, which include, but are not limited to historical, sociocultural, economic and ecological. Not only it in this regard that the documentary is mesmerizing, but also with respect to the fashion in which the narration of the story related to the park's construction unfolds. All the major phases in the construction process are beautifully depicted in this eye-catching film. From the time when a seminar was conducted by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1984, to the time when new challenges like Americans' wish to construct three water reservoirs, to the year in which the park's construction was finalized in the form in which it exists today; all of it is portrayed elegantly in the film through the aid of fantastic images, sounds, narrations and clips.

To retain the interest of the watchers, the documentary wonderfully couples the audio with the video. For example, the sunsets shown in the film are backed by the softening of the sound and lowering of the pitch and the tone of the music. This audiovisual pattern is consistent for the entire duration of the film, which is exactly fifty-one minutes and fifty-five seconds. Not only collectively the audio and video complement each other, save at an individual level too, both are a delight to eyes and ears of the audience. The controlled pitch, loudness and tone are indeed emotion-provoking. Likewise, the terrific usage of the camera to capture wide, narrow and aerial views are worth a million appreciations. Upon watching this film, many individuals would find its audiovisual makeup fascinating, also because both the audio and the video, precede and proceed vis-à-vis each other. For example, at about two minutes and 30 seconds, the sound of the work being done by a young boy precedes its clip. Of similar stature is the spread of the diverse voices of the interviewees throughout the film. However, what is more noteworthy is the wise decision to allow different voices to speak over the same subject, allowing audience to grasp the issue from a multifaceted point of view.

On a personal note, the greatest strength of the film, which impressed me the most, was the neutral attitude of Prince Aly Muhammad Aga Khan towards the subject of the documentary. This is to say that the film does not fail to demonstrate the shortcomings and mistakes which were made by the people in charge of the park's construction project. The documentary, however, also clearly illustrates how those mistakes were turned into learnings by the skillful and motivated team involved in the project. Nevertheless, no speech in praise of the documentary can substitute its inadequacies which, albeit negligible, must be briefly mentioned in this epigrammatic paragraph. Arabic translations could have been improved for a few English words. For example, at forty-nine minutes and thirty-four seconds, the Arabic translation for the word sound is incorrectly inscribed as "Tasvīr". At any rate, such deficiencies do not impact the overall significance of the work, for it would be foolish to concentrate on a single small black dot on a fine large whiteboard.

Last, but by no means the least, the construction of the Al-Azhar park remains a developing situation throughout the film until the clips from the opening ceremony of the park, in which His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan is seen as beautifully summarizing the long journey, are shown. Conclusively put, words fall short when one intends to describe the monumental construction of the Al-Azhar park. To me, honouring any of the marvelous works of His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan through earthy wordings is merely a task which, in its essence, is totally metaphysical. Neither any pen nor any author can fully appreciate the merits of his works. However, efforts in this regard should be made in various possible forms. Indeed, this documentary film is one of such efforts; and therefore, it surely does not belong to the genre de jour. Surely, none of us, except those who were a part of this journey in any possible way, could experience its real thrill, however, Al-Khimyah, without any doubt, is the next best alternative.