Excerpt: His Highness the Aga Khan on the rational behind the Aga Khan Academies

by NANOWISDOMS ARCHIVE

"I would like to speak initially about the logic behind the Aga Khan Academies programme -- to look at its philosophical underpinnings. For unless those foundations are sound, whatever we build will be inherently vulnerable. We are taking our time in laying those foundations. We are designing for the long-range future and we have thought long and hard about our goals and how to achieve them. We have launched research projects and surveys. We have done our homework.

"At the very heart of our conclusions -- is one, central conviction: the key to future progress in the developing world will be its ability to identify, to develop, and to retain expert and effective home-grown leadership.

"In our lifetimes, the developing world has looked in various directions for the key to progress. For a while, it was thought to be enough that indigenous peoples simply throw off the yoke of colonialism -- which for some was the most important barrier to fulfilment and progress. This viewpoint often evolved into a hope that reasserting cultural identity would unlock the future -- and education sometimes became mainly a matter of tapping into ancient wisdom, expressed in distinctive languages. In many places, the promises of a charismatic ruler also captured the public imagination -- the mystique of the romantic hero -- and public education sometimes slipped into relative insignificance.

"Over time, as frustration mounted, other cures were entertained in parts of the developing world. Ideologies of the left and the right came into vogue -- ranging from the siren songs of state socialism on one side to the allure of unrestrained capitalism on the other. The demands of dogma came to replace the disciplines of reason -- and education too often
turned into indoctrination.

"But none of these approaches proved adequate to the demands of their times -- and all of them seem increasingly inadequate to the demands of the present. A different approach has been needed. I would note that the people of this city and this region were among those who first came to realise this fact -- and to respond impressively to the challenge.

"That response -- here and elsewhere -- has had, as its centrepiece, a distinctive intellectual style and a creative approach to leadership. As the pace of history has accelerated, agility and adaptability have become more important qualities than mere size or strength, and the race of life has gone increasingly to the nimble and the knowledgeable. As the economic arena has been globalising, openness and flexibility have become prerequisites for progress, and success has gone more and more to those who can connect and respond. Specialised expertise, pragmatic temperament, mental resourcefulness -- these are increasingly the keys to effective leadership -- along with a capacity for intellectual humility which keeps one's mind constantly open to a variety of viewpoints and welcomes pluralistic exchange. In such a world, the most important thing a student can learn is the ability to keep on learning....

"Am I saying that we should focus only on educating a leadership elite? Not by any means. Broad public education is still an essential obligation of a just society. But I also believe that the best interests of every society will be best served if its future leaders can be adequately prepared for an unusually demanding future -- if its outstanding students, in short, can be given an outstanding education.

"Every society develops and depends on some set of leaders -- but the great question is how those leaders are developed and chosen. For much of human history, leaders were born into their roles, or they fought their way in -- or they bought their way in. Elites were normally based on physical power, or accumulated wealth, or inherited claims to authority. But social progress can be greatest when aristocracies of class give way to aristocracies of talent -- or to use an even better term -- to meritocracies. The well-led society of the future, in my view, will be a meritocracy -- where leadership roles are based on personal and intellectual excellence.
"Our goal, then, is not to provide special education for a privileged elite -- but to provide an exceptional education for the truly exceptional. This is the fundamental philosophy undergirding our Academies programme."

His Highness the Aga Khan's 2006 address at the Aga Khan Academy, Hyderabad, Foundation Stone Ceremony (Hyderabad, India)

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References

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