



# ELIZABETH TOWER



## My first Trip to the UK Time in London



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### Aga Khan Library

My London adventure began with my arrival at Waterloo Station from Exeter. From there, I traveled to King's Cross, eager to explore the city's cultural and intellectual landmarks. My first stop was the Aga Khan Library, a place that truly amazed me. Although I've visited many libraries before, this was the first time I witnessed such meticulous archiving and preservation of resources. The care taken to maintain and present these collections was truly inspiring.



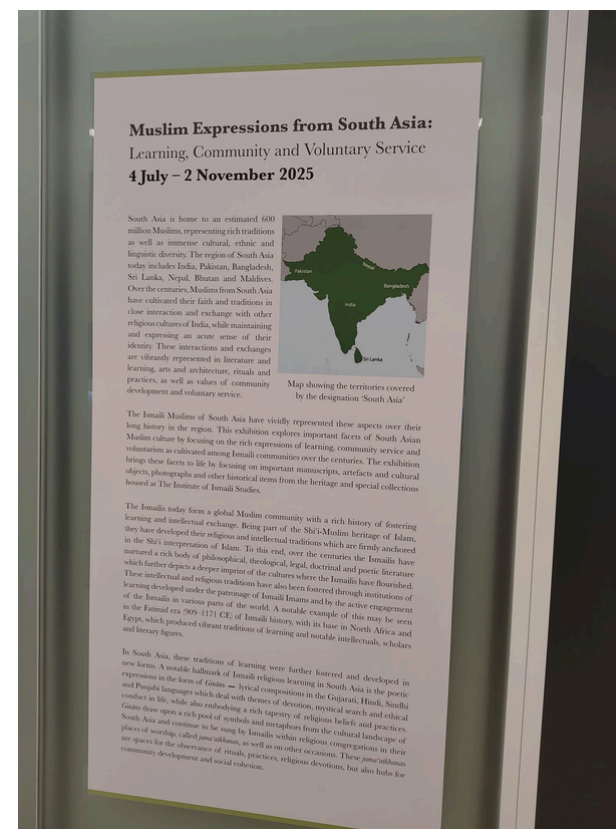
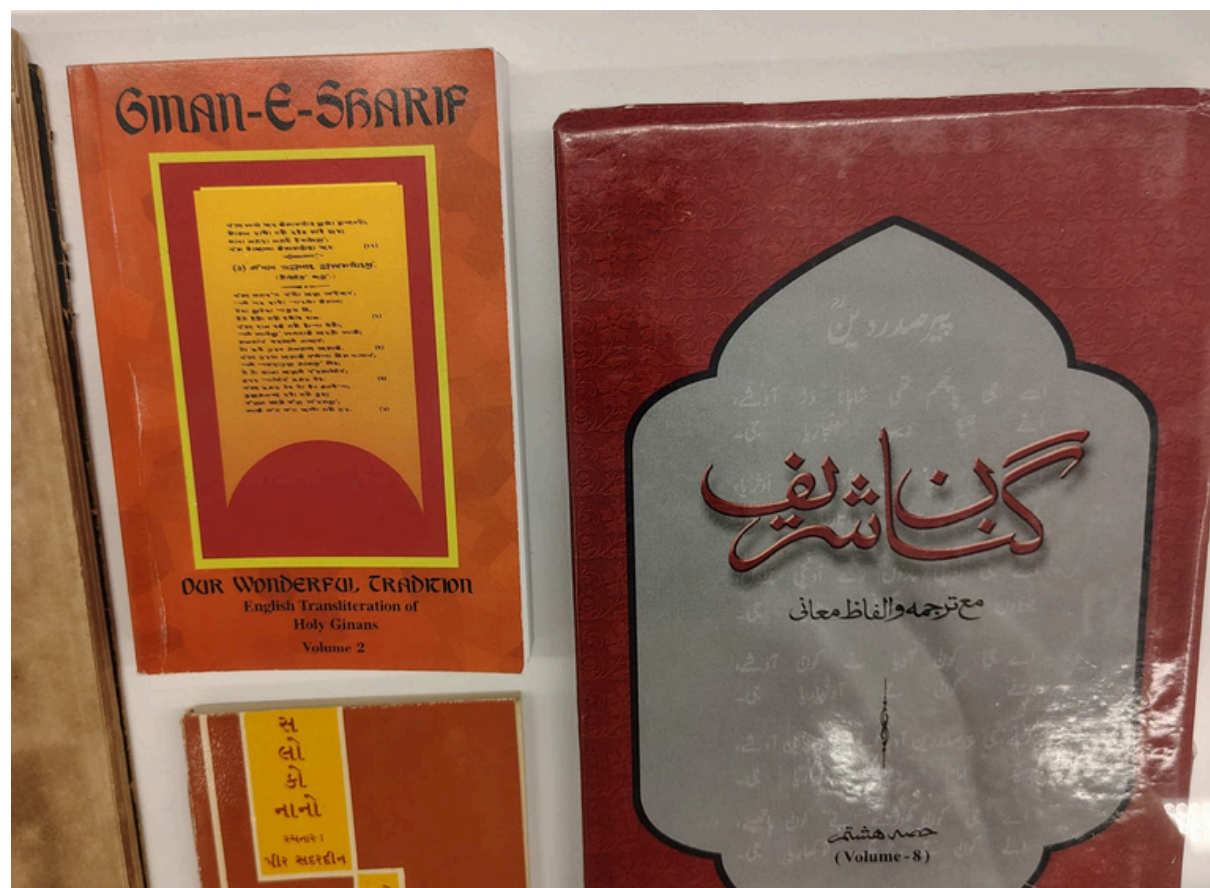
From there, I made my way to the British Library, a massive and impressive building that felt like a temple of knowledge. The sheer scale of the structure, with its grand facades and vast halls, was extraordinary. It was fascinating to see how much history and knowledge were housed within its walls.

### British Library

After a quick visit to the British Library, I headed to SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies. On my way, I encountered the Gandhi Park and statue of Gandhi and then a peaceful protest advocating for Palestine just in the middle of park, church and SOAS. This combination of historical symbolism and contemporary activism was a striking reminder of how London is a city where past and present constantly intersect.



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## A Story at Agha Khan Library

When I reached the Agha Khan Library, the first thing I did was write to my mentor, Professor Bruce B. Lawrence. He had asked me to keep him updated so he could guide my journey. Although he was in North Carolina, USA, his spirit felt like it was traveling with me. My email read: "Today I am in London and have come to visit the Agha Khan Library. Please let me know if you have any suggestions."

Within minutes, I received his reply: "Dear Rajeev, If you are visiting the Agha Khan Library, try to meet Omar Ali-de-Unzaga, the Academic Coordinator of the Qur'anic Studies Unit at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. He is a wonderful scholar and a great human being, as are most of the folk at the Ismaili Institute."

Unfortunately, Omar Ali-de-Unzaga was not there that day, and I could not meet him. I have so much to say about Professor Bruce—if I began, it would turn into a book.

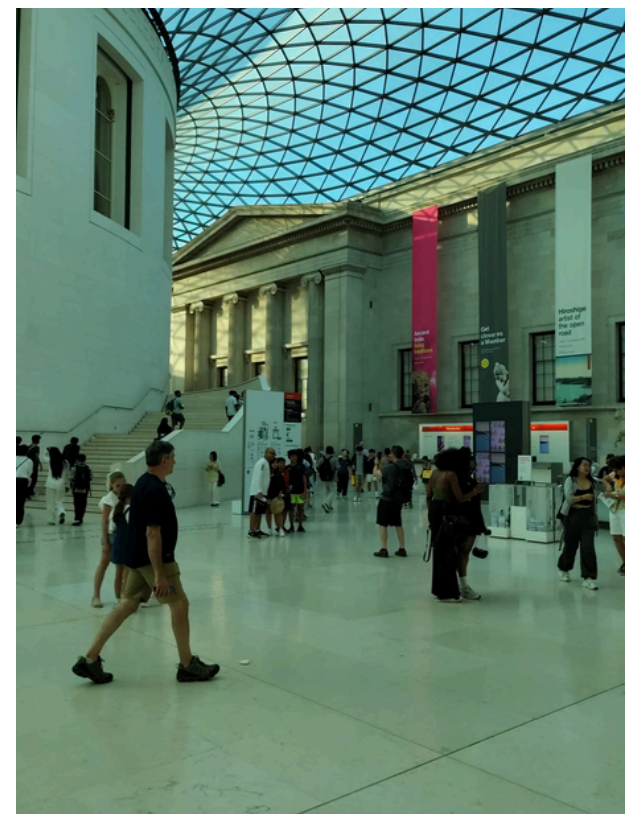
At the library, I met Imran Visram. I loved his name—so syncretic, embodying the soul of South Asia. He, too, had been a participant at the Exeter workshop, but he had left a day before me, promising to meet me at the Agha Khan Library. Having lived in London while completing his PhD at Oxford, he was very familiar with the space. He escorted me through the library and introduced me to several staff members.

Then, we walked to a section on the ground floor where a cultural exhibition was on display. It focused on the Agha Khan and his trustees, as well as Ismaili literature—specifically the Ginān Sharīf, which is originally in the Gujarati language. There, I saw a volume titled Ginān Sharīf, much like

Quran Sharif. In the gallery, a soft recording of a Ginān was playing through a speaker: a woman's voice singing, without any musical accompaniment. It was Yasmin Rayani's "Sahebji Tu(n) More Man Bhaave" (from Ginan Sharif). Her voice was like my mother's, and at that low volume, it touched my soul.

I felt deeply emotional listening to it. It reminded me of my mother singing at home in Bihar while she worked, calling out to me. That moment opened something inside. I missed my mother in London. I was as far from her in distance as I was close to her in my mind.

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## British Museum

My next destination was the vast British Museum. I was excited about this museum for many reasons- first to see how British have collected and preserved all the historical facts from all around the world for which they have been always criticized. Second I was reading about the British Poet like Percy Shelley and other were very much inspired in writing poems like Ozymandias. I explored the Chinese, Korean, Indian, Greek sections, marveling at the ancient artifacts. The Egyptian and Mesopotamian exhibits were equally captivating, especially the Assyrian artifacts that brought ancient civilizations to life. One of the most fascinating sections was dedicated to the evolution of watches. It was amazing to see how timepieces developed over the centuries, and many of these intricate watches were still working, each one telling its own story of human ingenuity. I also found the ancient chess sets fascinating, showcasing how this timeless game evolved.

Building of the Museum was so massive from the inside that I can not express. They were expert in creating massive facades. Seeing artifacts and well documented, many times I was saying that at least Indian could not do what they have done. They value it, and collected and they believe in preservation and history. We South Asian believe in present not in preservation.

The British Museum was so vast that I had to move quickly from one section to another, and even then, I couldn't see everything. It was impressive that such an incredible experience was free of charge.

### ISKCON temple

After exploring the British Museum, I headed to the ISKCON temple, guided by my friend Taiba Riaz. The temple was a vibrant space where spirituality and community intertwined. I enjoyed a delicious and affordable Indian meal there, which was a welcoming experience. After the meal, I joined the bhajan session, letting myself get lost in the music and the collective energy of the gathering. It was good that I came here. For research purpose it was good. I could experience the live space and performance that I could not sense it in video. It was moving to see people from different backgrounds come together in this spiritual celebration- British, African, European, Indian.

The next morning, I participated in the temple's storytelling session and question-and-answer time. While I appreciated the spiritual teachings, I also became aware of the fundraising aspect that was integrated into the activities. It made me thoughtful about how spirituality and practical needs often go hand in hand, and how religious spaces sometimes navigate these complexities.



I also had a chance to talk to the devotees and when I asked whether they know Bhakti movement, they said they do not know what is it. When I asked Chaitanya Prabhu, they said yes and they started from there. I was talking to the devotee from Philippines. I had a long and interesting chat with an Indian devotee which was ultimately leading to Vedic scripture as the ultimate source of knowledge. Because, he claimed only knowledge can lead to the right path and Veda is the ultimate knowledge. Yet he was could not answer my question when all our sense can



deceive and can not provide right knowledge and then we can not even get the right knowledge of Veda, even Veda is the ultimate knowledge. I had to leave the conversation due to my schedule meeting but I got their phone number to talk further. What was impressive no one asked me my surname.



## Whitechapel and Bengali Diaspora

I had a meeting with a Bengali brother named Nayeem. I had known him from distance only. And this was the first time I was meeting him in person. He invited me in Whitechapel. I got out from Whitechapel station and I see many Bengali and when I turned I see Bengali language written on wall Whitechapel Station. This area was of Bengali diaspora. My friend Naeem took me on a tour of the area, introducing me to the local mosque and sharing insights about the community. It was fascinating to learn how different diasporas have created their own neighborhoods, like the Bengali community in Whitechapel and Canary Wharf. It was eye-opening to see how each group maintains its cultural identity while contributing to the diverse tapestry of London.



The East London Mosque is the biggest mosque in Europe and it is built by Bengali diaspora. It is in the main city of London. Right beside the mosque is a building owned by the mosque itself, which supports its funding through rent from shops and guest house and conference rooms.

There is a big hall and gallery for events and exhibitions, and a conference hall used when needed. Many courses were going on—some organized by a Somali women's group. There was also an exhibition on the Bosnian Genocide.

Reflecting on my experiences, I couldn't help but compare the distribution of the Qur'an and the Bhagavad Gita that I encountered. The Qur'an distribution was a welcoming experience, with free copies, water, and snacks offered to everyone. Many youths were picking up the Qur'an themselves. I could not see such Islamophobia and all the drama I see in India.



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In contrast, the Bhagavad Gita distribution by ISKCON initially seemed free but later involved a request for donations, which felt a bit uncomfortable. It made me reflect on how different communities approach sharing their spiritual texts and the fine balance between spirituality and sustaining their efforts. But let me be direct but not polemic. Islamic group was more concerned with iman and Islam but ISKCON group was selling the religion or doing business with it. Even I felt all business class diaspora was involved with ISKCON and such community.



As I concluded my London journey, I felt a deep appreciation for the city's rich history, its vibrant cultural diversity, and the many layers of experience it offers. Honestly, it was a bit overwhelming—the scale, the architecture, the sheer presence of the city. I saw buildings that were six stories tall, built even before the Industrial Revolution. I was stunned not just by their size but by their functionality—how they were designed for administration, for training armies, for housing officers, for managing entire systems. Each building seemed to have a purpose, a role in the machinery of empire. And the fact that they were already standing so powerfully before the Industrial era began told me something deeper.

It made me think: this is how civilizations are designed—not just through ideas, but through space, structure, and the confidence to build. The British had this confidence. They had architecture, planning, military training, even a



sense of aesthetic in their churches and offices. I could begin to understand how they felt powerful, proud, even entitled enough to speak of things like the “white man’s burden.” They believed in what they were building—and they had the space and materials to back it.

Seeing all this in person wasn’t just sightseeing—it was a reflective moment. I stood there, thinking about how architecture becomes thought, and thought becomes power. It helped me understand the mindset that shaped empires.

