

# *The Bahras*

**Compiled by Mansoor H Dalal**

## GENESIS:

Imam Mustansir (AS) younger son Musta'li, known as Western Ismailis (because of their initial strength in Egypt and Yemen), are today represented by the Bohras.

Nazir known as Eastern Ismailis (because of their initial strength in Syria and Iran) are today represented by Khojahs and other followers of the Aga Khan.

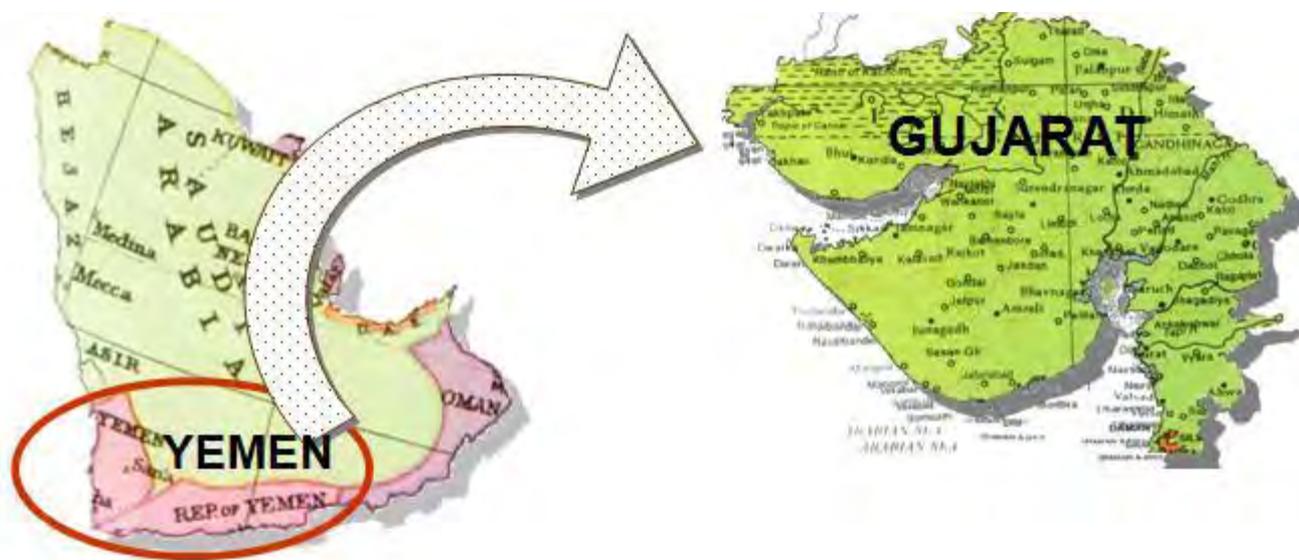
Musta'li's son al-Amir either died or (as Bohra doctrine holds) left a son named Abu al- Qasim Tayyib, aged somewhere between two days and two years, who succeeded him as the twenty first imam.

Under the Ayyubids and the later Mamluks, Fatimid libraries were destroyed and Egyptian Ismailis were persecuted until nearly all of them either converted or fled to exile.

At the death of his father al- Amir, the infant Imam Tayyib (AS) was protected by the most important woman in Musta'li history since the death of the prophet's daughter Fatima (AS). Al-Malika al Sayyida, the wife of the Fatimid da'I of Yemen. During the rule of al-Hafiz, she ran a rival dawat out of Yemen in the name of the infant Tayyib. The baby imam was hidden away from public eye, thus instituting a second period of satr. The period of satr continues to the present day, with the line of imams continuing (Bohra doctrine holds) from father to son, through the descendants of Imam Tayyib. (AS) The present imam, like all those since Tayyib's time lives anonymously in the world, utterly unknown to those around him, periodically in contact with the faithful through his da'i

al- mutlaq. Bohras known neither his name, nor his age, nor anything about him whatsoever- he may be an Internet entrepreneur or an honest street vendor selling vegetables from a handcart, and the faithful may walk past his glittering office building or ramshackle stall without ever realizing it –but they consider his presence in the world absolutely essential for the perpetuation of mankind.

## Transferral of the Dawat to India, and the Sulaimani Schism



Syedna Idris's grandson, the twenty third Da'i Muhammad Ezzuddin ibn al-Hasan (AQ), was so impressed with the scholarly abilities of a Gujarati cleric at his court that he designed him his successor.

On Muhammad Ezzuddin's death. Yusuf Najmuddin ibn Sulaiman became the first Indian to hold the office of da'i al-mutlaq. Syedna Yusuf (AQ) spent the first five years of his reign in his hometown of Sidhpur before returning to Yemen to finish out his term.

His successor, Jalali ibn Hasan, served only a few months, but he transferred the seat of the Dawat to India permanently.

The decision to move the Dawat was influenced not only by the importance of the Indian community, but also by the fall of Yemen to the Ottoman Turks and the persecution of Ismailis that followed.

Syedna Daud ibn Ajabshah (AQ) during his absence from Gujarat had left all community affairs in the hands of Daud Burhanuddin ibn Qutbshah. On the death of Daud ibn Ajabshah, Daud ibn Qutbshah became the twenty seventh da'I with no outward signs of dissent in the community.

However, Shaikh Sulaiman ibn Syedi Hasan al-Hindi a grandson of Syedna Yusuf Najmuddin (AQ) who had been serving as the Dawat's Amil (deputy) in Yemen, produced documents purporting to show that nass( lineage) had been conferred on him rather than Daud.

The Daudis regard these documents as forgery. The succession dispute was brought before Akbar in 1005/1597, and he appointed a tribunal to decide the case. The panel decided in favour of Daud, and Sulaiman died shortly. Both the rival da'is are buried in Ahmedabad, and their tombs are the sites of parallel pilgrimages for Daudi and Sulaimani Bohras to this day.

The Sulamani Bohras took on Western ideas and practices considerably earlier than did their Daudi counterparts. The Mumbai businessman Tyabali became the first member of the community to accept the principles of Western ducation, sending his sons to boarding school in England as early as 1851. Tyabali's descendants, the wealthy and prominent Tyebji family, have been the social leaders and

trendsetters of the Suleimani community ever since. Badruddin Tyebji became India's first Muslim barrister, the first Muslim judge to sit on the Bombay High Court, and the first Muslim president of the Indian National Congress.

Today the Sulaimanis comprise some 10 % of the overall Bohra population. The seat of the Sulaiman Dawat has remained in Yemen since the time of Sulaiman himself. In India, the Sulaimanis are concentrated in Baroda and Mumbai, and speak Urdu rather than Gujarati as their first language.

About three decades after the Sulaimani schism dissidents left the Daudi fold, again over succession rather than doctrine, Syedna Daud ibn Qutbshah (AQ) was succeeded by his aide Shaikh Adam Saifuddin; nine years later, Daud ibn Qutbshah's son Abdul-Tayyib Zakiuddin succeeded as the twenty-ninth Da'i. His nass was challenged, however by Ali ibn Ibrahim, a grandson of Syedna Adam Saifuddin (AQ).

The Alia Bohras have, like the Sulaimanis, maintained a separate line of da'is ever since, while holding to the same basic doctrines as those of the Daudis. The seat of the modern Alia dawat is Baroda, where Syedna Tayyib Diya al-Din holds the office of forty-fourth Alia da'i (the lineage is identical up to the time of the Aliad schism). The community is now said to number only 5,000 and has never comprised more than a tiny fraction of the Bohra population.

The worst oppression suffered by the Bohras, however, would come at the hands of Aurangzeb – first as governor of Gujarat, later as emperor. He threw the thirty-second Da'i, Syedna Qutbkhan (AQ) in prison. The

Da'I' who had assumed office only the previous year, was brought before a kangaroo court at which he was not permitted to testify. Syedna Qutbkhan (AQ) was tried in a single evening, and executed the following morning.

Heavy taxation was imposed, with unofficial extortion by local officers adding an additional burden. During this time, the Rajput dynasty of Daudi Bohra Da'is was ushered in by Syedna Ismail Badruddin (AQ) (1065-1085/1655-1674), who transferred the seat of the Dawat from Ahmedabad to the safer side of Jamnagar.

Syedna Ismail (AQ), the thirty-fourth da'I, claimed descent from the legendary Raja Bharmal (Siddharaj Jayasingha), and the line of Rajputs would hold the office of da'I with only a few brief interruptions for the next 200 years.

In the wake of the defeated 1857 uprising, Indian Muslim intellectuals engaged in considerable soul-searching on the topic of Islam and modernity.

The Bohras remained almost entirely aloof from these debates of the Sunni intelligentsia. They had never identified with the Mughal elites (quite the contrary), so the widespread Muslim crisis of identity did not affect them. The Bohras continued to follow a policy that was simultaneously more or less open to Western influence. While the Sunnis agonized over how best to escape the forest of modernity springing up all around them, the Bohras contented themselves with carving out a small clearing in the trees.

The Daudi Bohra Dawat suffered a constitutional crisis in the years after 1255/1840, when the forty –sixth da'I, Syedna Muhammad Badruddin (AQ), died under suspicious circumstances. Muhammad Ali ibn Jiwabhai, author of the Mausam-e bahar, writes that this last of the Rajput da'is was thought to have been poisoned with a powder of finely ground diamonds-on the night before he was scheduled to announce his successor.

The ascension of Syedna Abdul- Qadir Najmuddin (AQ) (who was of the same lineage as the forty-fourth and forty fifth da'is and whose family has supplied all of the da'is from his region forward) does not seem to have been challenged at the time.

The cloud of doubt overshadowing the nass of the forty-seven da'I did not lead to outright schism, but continued to cast a pall over the dawlat for the rest of the century.

Abdul –Qadir spent dawlat funds extravagantly, ran up huge debts, and ebased the standing of the Bohra ulema by bestowing the title of sheikh on friends, relatives and wealthy donors rather than reserving it for learned religious scholars.

Syedna Abdul- Qadir (AQ) was succeeded in 1885 by his brother, Syedna Abdul- Hussain Husamuddin (AQ), whose most notable achievement was the establishment of musafirkhanas (pilgrims' inn) at many important Bohra shrines.

Syedna Abdul- Husain (AQ) was succeeded by his nephew Muhammad Burhabnddin, the son of the controversial forty-seventh Da'I Abdual-

Qadir (and not to be confused with the current da'i of the same name). Under his stewardship the office of the da'i declined to its lowest level of power and community influence in modern times. The legitimacy of the entire dynasty was challenged by, of all people, Muhammad Burhanuddin's own younger brother Syedi Abdul-Qadir Hakimuddin (AQ). The da'i was subjected to the humiliation of a civil suit brought by one of his own amils, and even when accused of financial impropriety by one of his underlings he was unable to hand down the da'i by the powerful Bohra industrialist Sir Adamji Pirbhai, who demanded that the power of dawat officials be curtailed at all ranks. Pirbhai's sons would carry on the tradition of opposition of Dawat authority, and form the foundation of the modern dissident movement.

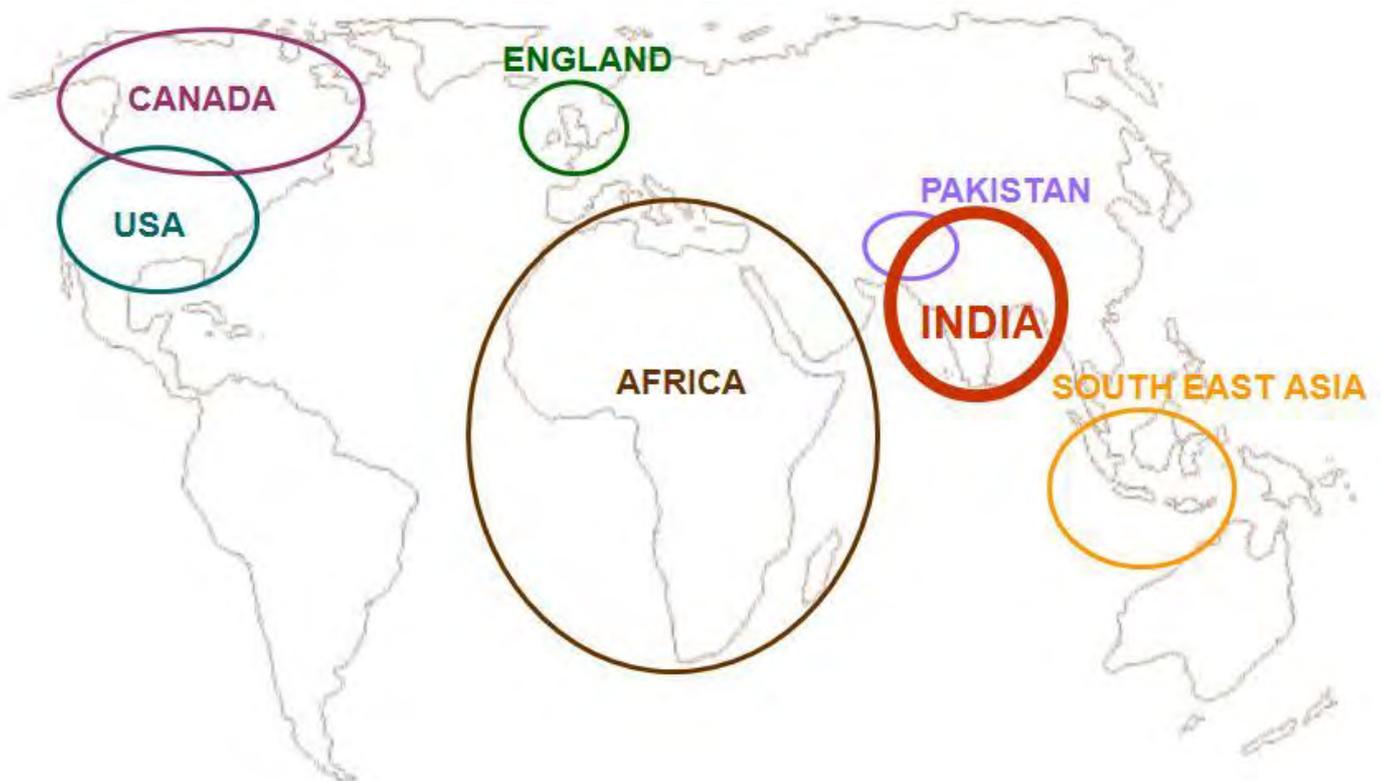
The reign of the forty-ninth da'i saw the last Bohra schism, that of the Medhibaghwalas. In 1897 a man named Abdul-Husain ibn Jiwaji claimed he had been appointed to the office of hujja by the hidden imam. About one hundred families broke away, taking their name from the Nagpur neighborhood that became the headquarters of the new denomination. Shortly thereafter a splinter group split from this splinter group: the Atba-e Malik Vakils. Also called Artaliswalas (Forty-Eighters) for the point when they believed the line of da'is came to an end. Despite their adherence to Islamic norms, Bohras maintained a rigid barrier of identity between themselves and other Muslims.

In 1323/1906 Syedna Muharmmad Burhanuddin ibn Abdul-Qadir (AQ) was succeeded by Syedna Abdullah Badruddin (AQ), the last of the relatively weak reactionary figures who had held power since the mid-nineteenth century. He conferred nass on his second nephew. Taher

Saifuddin, who held the office from 1333/1915 until his death in 1385/1965.

Syedna Taher Saifuddin (AQ) spent the first half of his reign rebuilding the legitimacy and authority of the Dawat, fending off powerful challenges from dissidents, and by the time of Indian Independence his position was stronger than that of any Da'I in a century. Boldly reversing the policy of his immediate predecessors, Syedna Taher Saifuddin (AQ) actively encouraged both modern education and the adoption of wide variety of Western customs, technologies, and practices.

Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin (TUS), the 52nd Da'i al-Mutlaq succeeded his father in 1384H/ 1965. Over forty years of his leadership testify to the powerful transformation of the community—unified, uplifted, and for all its worldly ventures, wedded to the principles of Islam as never before.



# A COMMUNITY DEFINED BY ETHNICITY , CULTURE AND ETHOS:

## COMPARISON WITH OTHER GROUPS

In their economic outlook and practices, Bohras seem to display greater similarity to other Gujarati communities than to other Indian Shi'a denominations.

The Bohras helped create Mumbai, and Mumbai helped create the Bohras. Moving to the rapidly developing metropolis in the early nineteenth century, the Bohras like the Khojahs, Memons, and Parsis quickly took up work in professions , selling hardware, glassware, plumbing supplies, paint, stationary, or soap. The story of the Bohras in India is indeed one of a no confrontational mercantilist community.

Although the mass of the converts were of Vaishya background, tradition attributes the major impetus to the conversion of the Rajput raja of Patan himself. The earliest dynasty of Bohra walis claimed direct descent the Rajput dynasty.



The business outlook and mercantile orientation may, in fact, be one of the prime reasons for the Bohras' comfort with and ready use of modern technology and ideology. The qualities of a successful entrepreneur are particularly well suited to promoting smooth, frictionless modernization: a small businessperson must be adaptable to

new circumstances, open to new ideas and novel methods of production, flexible and forward thinking enough to stay one step ahead of the competition.

## **EDUCATION :**

The Bohras are unusual among Indian Muslims in placing far higher emphasis on modern education than the mainstream of Indian society does. Bohras claim 100% literacy in the community.

Although communal meals were instituted partly to break down Hindu taboos against inter dining, traces of Gujarati Vaishya concern for ritual purity seem to have been transferred to an Islamic context. Diners sit with legs tucked under their bodies, or at least with one leg bent and the other sole pressed compactly against the raised thigh, but never with legs crossed or stretched out. The Prohibition stems partly from convenience ( in close quarters such postures might inconvenience other diners) but more from a sense of respect: meals are vital social bond rather than mere physical sustenance. For Bohras (as for their Vaishya ancestors) food has an aura tinged with religious sentiment, and it should not be consumed while lounging in a posture of disrespectful indolence. In implicit recognition of the quasi-sacral character of a meal, Bohra men and women alike are required to keep their heads covered while eating.



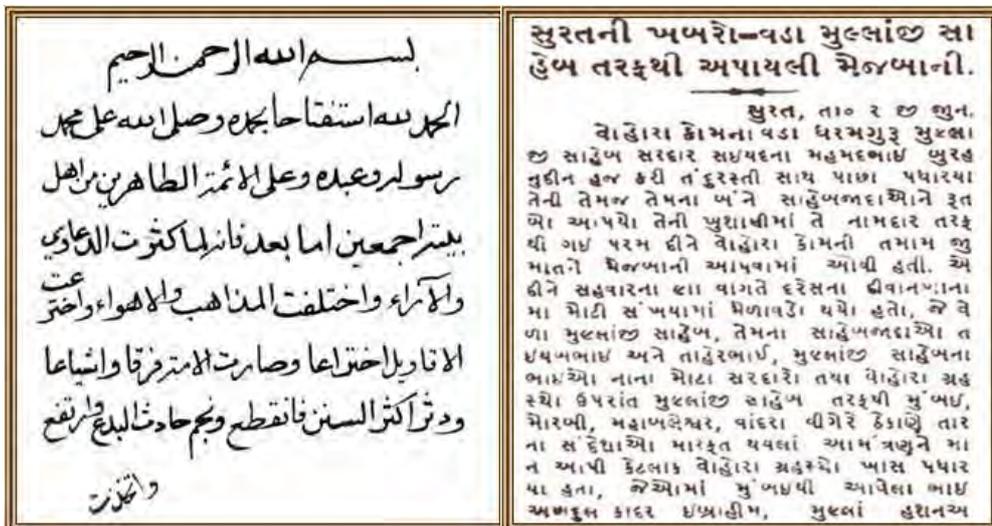
The Bohras set out dishes on a large metal plate, THAAL, mounted on a low stool around which eight to ten people can be seated, denoting equality with all mankind.

## KINSHIP :

Despite their embrace of modernity in other aspects of life, when it comes to matter of kinship Bohras are highly traditional. Almost all unions within the community are arranged and endogamous.

## LANGUAGE :

Interestingly, like the Sindhis their language is written in the Arabic Script and is rajiciseç[Gujarati. It is not for daily usage, but functional in religious discourses and correspondence.



Mother-tongue is Gujarati and for daily usage normal Gujarati Script is followed.

## **HOUSEHOLD TYPE :**

Bohra households are typically extended rather than nuclear or joint families. The preference for joint families (even if this preference cannot be accommodated as often as in the past) is a trait commonly associated with Hindu Gujaratis as well.

Bohras likewise mirror their Hindu Gujarati compatriots in their pattern of moving from joint families to extended or nuclear families as their educational levels rise.

## **SEX AND MARRIED LIFE :**

Family members and outside matchmakers will set up meeting between young people of compatible backgrounds, but the final decision is left to the youths themselves. All dating whether within the community or outside it is expected to be physically chaste. For the large majority of Bohars, however, dating is still an unfamiliar concept.

## **FAMILY PLANNING :**

Syedna encourages couples to have as many children as they can support -and no more. Contraception is not stigmatized, and is even sometimes tacitly encouraged.

## **STATUS OF WOMEN WITHIN THE BOHRA COMMUNITY**

One of the most common misperceptions about Islam prevalent in non-Islamic circles is that the religion is fundamentally antagonistic to the freedom and high status of women. Today, a Bohra husband would treat his wife as an “incompetent minor” only at his own peril. The status of women within the community has risen markedly over the past half-century, a period corresponding closely with the increased availability of modern education. Whether or not a direct link is scientifically demonstrable, it does not seem coincidental that Bohra women are now among both the best educated and the highest status women of any community on the Indian subcontinent.

### **EDUCATION AND STATUS OF WOMEN**

One aspect of Western pedagogical philosophy that the Bohras have particularly taken to heart is the emphasis on education of women. While Bohra women tend to be homemakers, they are seldom stigmatized for working outside the house. In the middle and upper segments of Bohra society, professional careers are strongly encouraged. The openness to female education is facilitated by the Bohras' strictness in their avoidance of dowry.

### **DRESS :**

The modern dress code is both a reaffirmation of pre existing practice and the introduction of novel elements to create uniform, coherent “tradition” in place of less standardized array of customs.

All men are required to wear white pajama trousers with a white knee-length kurta, generally fastened by four tuxedo-style detachable studs, and (ideally) a white sherwani overcoat. Footwear generally consists of either chappals (sandals) or western-Style loafers.



The burqa-rida combinations are of the same pattern, and this pattern can vary widely. It is generally brightly colored, often with elaborate woven designs, and leaves almost unlimited room for individual taste. Boutiques in many Bohra neighborhoods

advertise a wide array of "fancy ridas" (as many rida with a colorful pattern is called), and this Technicolor exuberance of dress immediately sets Bohra women apart from those of most other Indian Muslim communities.

## **CULTURE AND ECONOMIC :**

The Bohra community had always retained many cultural practices from its pre conversion Hindu past. While the community never gave up its Muslim identity, during the middle decades of the twentieth century it saw social ties to Hindus become increasingly common, rigid separation of genders relax, and a wide range of attitudes edge closer to the cultural mainstream of India society.

The most common time for a Bohra to seek *alamat* is the Hindu new year: for the purpose of business (and because of their mercantile orientation Bohras, unlike most Indian Muslims, use Diwali rather than Muharram as the beginning of their fiscal (but not their religious) year. The community has been a mercantile one throughout its history, probably even before its conversion to Islam. The very name of the denomination comes from the Gujarati verb "to trade," and the mercantile orientation is in all likelihood a continuation of the group's pre-Islamic Vaishya ethic. The entrepreneurial drive runs straight through Bohra society, from the wealthiest mogul to the humblest street vendor.

Bohras often claim that no member of the community ever goes begging.

## **DETERMINING COMMUNITY BOUNDARIES**

Bohra ritual life mirrors the community's larger identity. Daudi Bohras share a basic Islamic ethos with Muslims all over the world, and have been emphasizing universal Islamic orthopraxy with increasing rigor in recent decades, but the Bohras are clearly demarcated from all other denominations by centering their spiritual lives on the person of the Dai'i al mutlaq.

The Dawat's position is quite similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church, which considers the pope infallible only when making a theological pronouncement *ex cathedra*.

It is their unique access to batin knowledge – the true, inner meaning of the Qur'an, hadith, and all scripture- that gives both the Aga Khan and the Bohra Da'i their fundamental spiritual hegemony over their communities.

## **COMPARISION WITH OTHER COMMUNITIES**

The mandating of specific visible markers has succeeded in sharpening the distinction between Bohras and members of other communities when dressed in Topi and Kurta or burqa and rida, an individual is automatically identified as a Bohra by observers both within the denomination and outside of it. The sight of readily identifiable coreligionists is a daily reminder to Bohras of their identity and communal bonds to make a profound symbolic statement: Bohras are both unique, and uniquely Islamic

## **QARZAN HASANAH :**

The most important Bohra innovation has been a network of credit unions to provide no-interest loans at the local level.

## **SECULARISM :**

Orthodox Bohras regard all aspects of all life as a holistic package, with the spiritual and the mundane inextricably linked. In this view, Islam (and the Daudi Bohra interpretation of it) is not merely a set of beliefs, but an integrated manner of living. There is no way of drawing a line between areas in which an individual is obliged to obey spiritual directives and areas in which no such obedience is necessary.

## **RITUALS:**

### **BIRTH AND INFANCY**

#### **SELECTING A NAME :**

The responsibility of the sister-in-law is the finding of a suitable name. In many (if not most) cases the child's name is not selected by the relatives, but bestowed by Syedna.

#### **BIRTH :**

The very first words that a Bohra hears upon entering the world are those of the adhan (the call to prayer) chanted into his or her ear.

A hallmark of Bohra attitudes towards birth is the complete complementarity of traditional and modern practices. In all matters relating to the health of mother and newborn, Bohras avail themselves of every modern medical tool, drug, and practice.

#### **Circumcision :**

Rituals surrounding khatna (circumcision) are given significantly less prominence by the Bohras than by many other Muslim groups. The operation itself is generally performed at the hospital shortly after birth, by a medical professional rather than a traditional practitioner.

## **Khak-e shifa Mahti :**

Each day for these days the newborn is fed a tiny pinch of Khak-e-shifa mahti- soil taken from the holy ground at Kerbala.

## **Chatti :**

On the sixth day after birth the chatti ceremony is held at home, for close relatives. This is time when the sister-in-law announces the name she has solicited from Syedna.

## **Aqiqa :**

The major ritual of childhood is the aqiqa ceremony: it can be held on the seventh, fourteenth, or twenty-frist day after birth. Where the chatty ceremony is small, informal, and limited to the close family, the aqiqa is a large, ritualized, semipublic affair. All of the baby's hair is shaved off, weighed, and buried in the ground. Later, the family will present a fakir with coins and the sum is nominal.

After the hair is shaved and weighed, the family sacrifices a flawless goat and daubs the infant's forehead with its blood. This ceremony is in part a reenactment of the legendary episode in which Ibrahim's sacrifice of his son Ismail is avoided by the divine substitution of a goat for the infant.

## **CHILDHOOD**

### **First words :**

Some Bohras try to insure that the first word out of their child's mouth be "Allah". Bohra parents may teach their children the names of the family central to their faith: Muhammad, Fatima, Ali, Hasan and Husain.

### **Salaam –e-Syedna :**

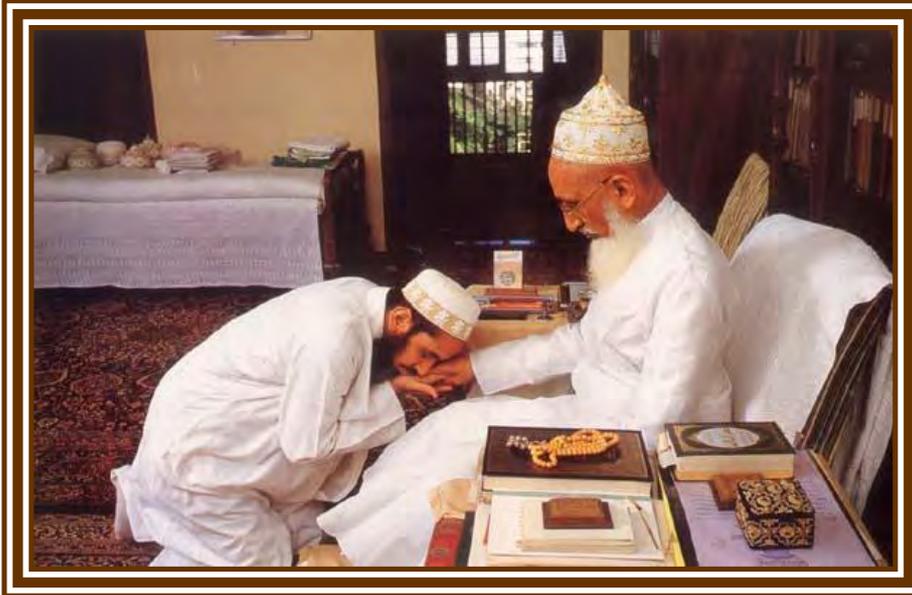
An observant Bohra makes personal salaam to Syedna as often as an opportunity presents itself. The first time a child makes salaam is an important rite of passage, the culmination of much parental coaching.

### **Namaz :**

Learning how to say namaz (Arabic: salat) marks a major step in the development of every Bohra child. Like all Muslims, Bohras pray five times each day. Like most Shi'a, they say the five obligatory prayers at three times: fajr (dawn) prayers in the morning, zuhr and ash'r (midday and afternoon) prayers in the middle of the day, and maghrib and isha (sunset, and night-time) prayers in the evening.

## **ADOLESCENT:**

### **MITHAQ :**



The central rite of passage for Bohras is Mithaq, the only major ritual unique to the denomination. In addition to spelling out the duties a believer owes to Allah, it includes an oath of allegiance: a

vow to accept the spiritual guidance of Syedna wholeheartedly and without reservation. Before mithaq, a Bohra is a child. After mithaq, he or she is an adult, with all the rights and responsibilities of any mature member of the community.

On the eighteenth day of the Islamic month of zyi -Hajj, every Bohra congregation renews its mithaq vows together.

## **BIRTHDAYS:**

Traditionally birthdays are celebrated by the parents or elders circling the head three or seven times with a Thal containing coconuts and sweets.

This is a custom carried over from the Bohras' Hindu ancestors, the sweets represent the hope of sweetness in life, while the coconuts (as

has been noted in anthropological literature) are a symbolic representation of fertility, longevity and prosperity.

## **RITUALS OF ADULTHOOD:**

### **MARRIAGE :**

The legal institution of marriage for Bohras, as for all orthodox Muslims, is nikah. In practice, the area of marriage customs shows the Bohras' synergetic melding of universalistic Islamic and local Hindu traditions: while nikah formally "makes" the marriage, informal shadi rites (generally borrowed, like name, from Hindu usage) are the focus of more lavish celebration.

### **Engagement (Nizbat) :**

For most Bohras, nizbat is the next life ritual after this coming of age ceremony. With high-school education becoming the minimum norm and higher education increasingly expected of both spouses.

### **Mahr :**

Like other Muslims, whether Shi'a or Sunni, Bohras give mahr (dower) at every wedding. Mahr is paid by the groom – to the bride herself. In the Bohra community the amount of the mahr is often Rs.786, a number equivalent to the numeric value of the letters in the Arabic.

Under the provisions of the special Marriage Act of 1954, any Indian Muslim has the option of marrying either by nikha or by civil law. Civil

marriage are bound by the secular provisions that apply to the rest of the civil population. While those who select nikah are governed by the shariat of their own community. The shariat for Bohra nikha is in basic accord with that of other Muslim groups- with the crucial addition of Syedna as the ultimate sanctioning agent.

In order for a marriage to be acknowledge as legitimate , the woman must give her free consent in front of two shahideen (witnesses). Generally the amil will take the bride aside before the ceremony and spend a few minutes talking with her in private. He makes certain that she is agreeing to the marriage of her own free will. At very least this indicates that female consent is more than a mere formality.

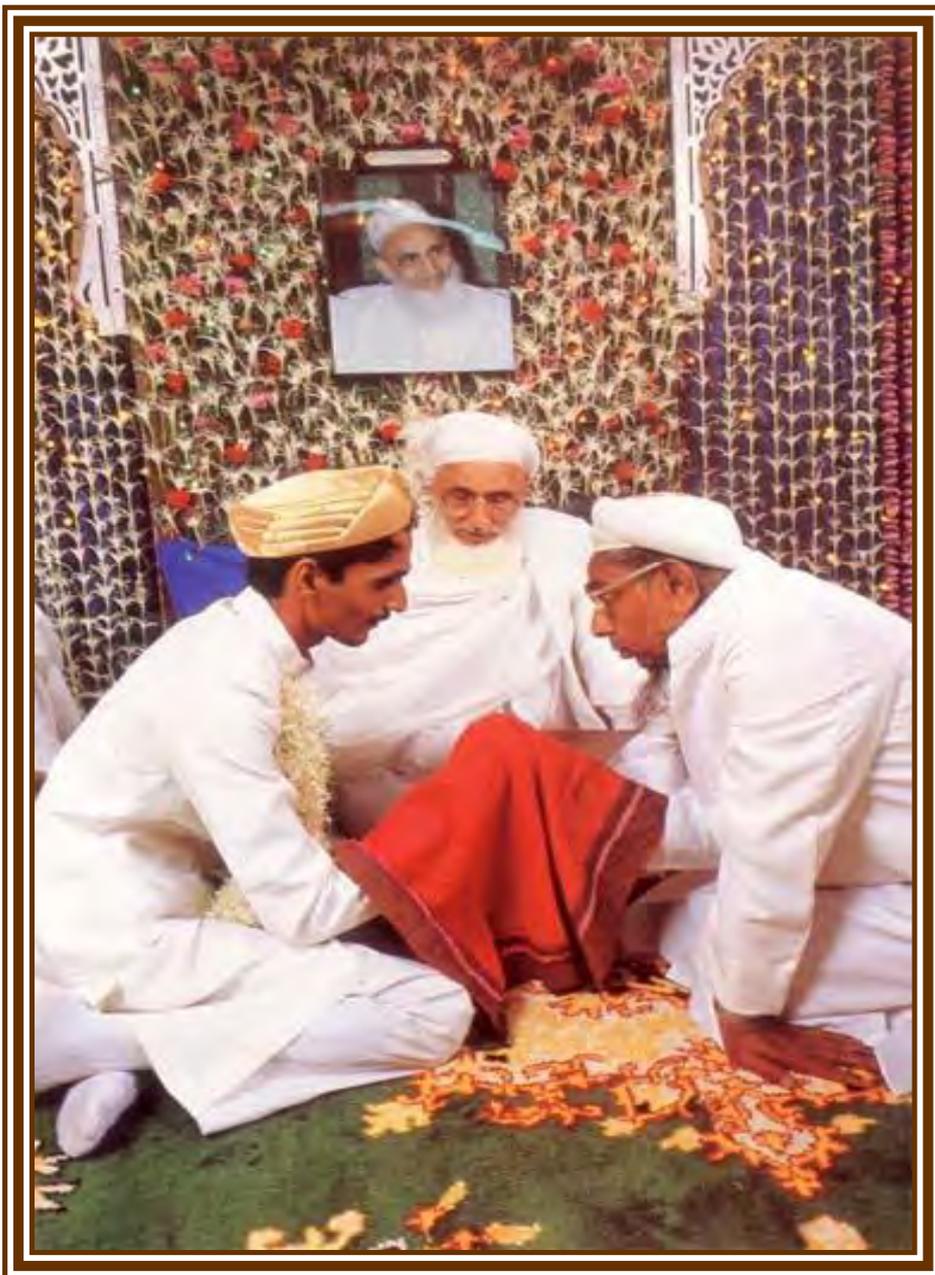
The guidance, permission, and blessing of Syedna (directly or through his local amil) are fundamental aspects of every important action an observant Bohra may undertake. This central role of the Dawat adds a sacral element of nikah that is largely absent in most other branches of Islam. While Hinduism and Christianity treat marriage as a sacrament, almost all Muslim denominations regard it as a civil contract.

### **Nikah :**

It is a union of families more than of individuals, a wedding not of two people but of two bloodlines. The bride, therefore is represented by the head of her patriarchal bloodline.

At the masjid, the groom sits to the right of the Amil and the bride's father sits to the left. They clasp their right hands together with fingers interlaced, and the Amil wraps a handkerchief around their wrist. The

Amil makes the groom promise to accept the bride to keep her happy, never to beat or mistreat her, never to abandon her or divorce her without good cause. The groom so promises, then the father of the bride says to him' "I give you my daughter in God's name, and accept X amount of mahr (on her behalf)." The mahr is then given, and the families exchange whatever gifts they wish, sometimes using the Amil, as intermediary.



The point on which a Bohra nikah differs most strikingly from those of all other Muslim groups is the oath of allegiance. A basic and absolutely necessary requirement of every Bohra union is mithaq :not only must the bride and groom have made their pledge before nikah can be finalized, but their parents must have done so as well. This is a powerful tool in the enforcement of clerical hegemony.

## **Shadi**

Bohra wedding feast is generally associated not with the nikah, but with the complementary custom of shadi. It seems likely that when the Bohras converted from Hinduism they retained many of their traditional social customs for marriage while adopting the Islamic nikah as a legal standard of legitimacy.

In a direct holdover from Hindu custom, the groom is often daubed with turmeric; the bride and all women in the wedding party paint their hands and forearms with elaborate mehndi patterns that stay on for days, or even weeks. As is the custom in many Hindu communities, during the shadi festivities the mother of the groom tossed sweets or money into the assembled crowd of well-wishers. In yet another holdover, some practices, such as the breaking of coconuts to symbolize fertility and vibrant offspring, are unmistakably Hindu in origin.

## **Divorce :**

In theory, divorce is as easy for Bohras as it is for members of other Muslim denominations. The Bohra Dawat generally bolsters the institution of marriage with all its spiritual authority. Just as nikah is not an entirely private contract for the Bohras, neither is Talaq: both require the permission of Syedna or his representative. When an individual or couple requests such permission, the local amil will generally try all manner of counseling and moral persuasion before granting the request.

## **Polygamy :**

Like most Muslim communities in India, the Bohras accept polygamy in theory but practice it very rarely indeed. Monogamy is the norm in modern Bohra society, and has probably been the norm for most Bohras throughout history but polygamy has always remained an option for some.

According to a report of the National Committee on the status of Women published in 1974, at that time polygamy was practiced by 15.2 % of tribal adivasis, 5.8% of Hindus, and only 5.7% of Indian Muslims.

## **DEATH :**

The next step after marriage (in a ritual sense at least) is death. Bohra death rituals all require specific Dawat approval, and are therefore a powerful tool in the maintenance of clerical authority. No member of the community can receive funeral rites or be buried in a Bohra cemetery without the explicit permission and blessing of the clergy usually given through the local Amil. The last words a Bohra hears when departing the world should be the same as the first ones he hears upon entering it i.e the Adhan, whispered softly in his ear. After death, the body is taken to a masjid for the final ghusal (bath). The deceased is washed and perfumed with fragrant spices, either by elderly relatives or by a staff attendant of the masjid.

After Ghusal, the deceased is dressed and brought out for public viewing. A cloth covering the face is removed, and for several hours (sometimes a whole day) mourners of both sexes can pay their respects

and offer each other comfort, side by side. This is the last time that women will be a part of funerary rites. Whether the deceased is male or female, the transportation of the body to the grave and the rituals at the cemetery are performed by men alone.

The Bohras maintain their own cemeteries separate from those of their sunni or Ithna. Before proceeding to the cemetery the pallbearers all perform wuzu (ritual washing) and go to the main chamber of the masjid for the deceased's final prayer (Jenana ni Namaz).

Jenazah ne kanda apvu (to give a shoulder to the coffin) is an important way for a Bohra man to show his respect for a fellow member of the community and to gain spiritual merit as well.

Bohras consider it highly meritorious to help transport the coffin of a relative, friend or complete stranger. It is also a strong incentive to treat all members of the community with kindness throughout one's life. When the procession reaches the tomb site, a large chader (sheet) is set up above the newly dug grave. Under the symbolic screen of the chader, the body is removed from the Jenazah and lowered into the grave.

Often a letter of prayer (raqqa) signed by the officiating Amil is placed in the hand of the deceased; the raqqa may be given before or after payment of the death tax (haqqunnafs). As prayers and Qur'anic verses are recited each mourner pours three double-handful of sand into the grave.

On the third day after death, the day on which the soul of the deceased is believed to be judged by God, the family holds a suyyum (wake). The only fully public ritual of death, the suyyum consists of a feast accompanied by prayers. Communal feasts are also given on the ninth day after death (nomia), the thirtieth day (masma), the fortieth day (chehlum), and the one-year anniversary (varsi). There will be no marriages in the family until at least the chehlum, sometimes not until the varsi.

In the Bohra worldview, every visit to a graveyard is a beneficial act: it reminds the visitor of the transitory nature of life and encourages repentance of sins while time still remains.

The Bohras base their ritual calendar not on actual sighting of the new moon, but on astrological charts dating to the Fatimid caliphate. For this reason, Bohra observances of universal Islamic holidays do not correspond exactly with those of other groups; in recent years, they have preceded the Sunni and Ithna – Ashari dates by several days.

## **THE DAWAT POSITION: A COMMUNITY DEFINED BY THEOLOGY**

The Dawat, quite naturally, defines the community in strictly religious terms. In the view of the clergy, the society is bounded by the oath of mithaq: those individuals who take it and keep it are Bohars, those who do not are not. Fundamental to this enrollment is acceptance of Syedna's dominance, without reservation or abridgment: " The Dawoodi Bohra believes in the complete authority of the Dai over all areas of his life."

The Dawat have compared the Dai's status to that of the pope of the Roman Catholic Church.

## **CERTIFICATES OF ORTHOPRAXY: ID CARDS AS A MODERN TOOL FOR HEGEMONY**

The Dawat has long maintained its religious and political control by social pressure as well as persuasion. The threat of Baraat (social ostracism) is a strong disincentive to theological revolt: not only is an excommunicate unable to participate in any ritual of the faith, he or she is technically barred even from having the most casual contact with observant family or friends. Individuals associating with a person under Baraat are themselves liable to be excommunicated, so any such contact is both clandestine and problematic.

A Bohra wishing to make use of any Dawat services may be called upon to produce a document of compliance signed by the local Amil. These certificates are commonly referred to as "cards", and they come in three varieties: green, yellow, and red.

A green card indicates that the holder is in full compliance with the dictates of Syedna on all matters public and private.

One step down from a green card, a yellow card indicates that the bearer is in basic compliance with the most important requirements of the faith, but deviates from normative practice in one or more particulars. A typical yellow card holder might refrain from alcohol, keep a full beard and pay all the appropriate dawat taxes, but might wear topi and kurta only in ritual settings, and fail to observe various fasts or important ceremonies.

The holder of a red card is still legitimate member of the community, but a member who has strayed from Syedna's direction in one or more major areas. Reasons for red card status include drinking alcohol, failing to keep a beard, failing to keep a halal household, and being delinquent in taxes. According to one source, red card holders are typically "only obeying ten or fifteen per cent of Syedna's instructions." Red card holders are not stripped of the rights and privileges enjoyed by other community members, but they are regarded as probationers who will eventually be brought to a more complete level of compliance.

### **Taxes :**

An important part of the Dawat's program of re institutionalizing Islamic norms has been the strengthening of collection of a variety of taxes and fees paid regularly by all observant Bohras.

The three main taxes, generally paid to the local Amil during Ramadan are:

- 1) zakat. Like all Muslims, Bohras are obliged to pay 2.5% of their accumulated wealth every year.
- 2) Sila-Fitra. These separate taxes (sila al-Imam, a uniquely Ismaili levy: fitra, a tax uniform throughout Islam) are generally paid together.
- 3) Sabil. The tax is levied on households rather than individuals.

In addition to these standard taxes Bohras make voluntary contributions to the Dawat at certain occasions in their lives. The most notable are:

- 1) Haqqun-nafs: a fee paid on the burial of a relative.
- 2) Nikah: a fee paid to an Amil for officiating at a marriage.

- 3) Salaam e- Syedna: a cash offering made to the Da'l (through the local amil), generally on Syedna's birthday or other symbolic occasions.
- 4) Nazar al - Maqam: Offerings to the imam in concealment. These voluntary contributions to the Dawat are proffered in times of special trouble or spiritual need.
- 5) Khums: In modern times, it is interpreted as a semi-voluntary 20% tax on capital gains.

### **QASR-E ALI: THE ROYALS**

The Qasr-e Ali consists of the children and grandchildren of the fifty-first Da'l, Syedna Taher Saifuddin (AQ), along with their spouses and descendents. In all, there are upward of 200 members of the Qasr-e Ali. Just as the children of Fatimid imam-caliphs were princes and princesses in every sense of the word, so too are the children of da'is today. The sons and daughters of da'l are given the titles of shahzada and shahzedi (prince and princess), respectively, and they represent the apex of the Bohras' clerical social and political hierarchy.

The three highest officials have the same titles as those current when Imam Tayyib (AS) went into concealment: Da'l al-Mutlaq, Mazoon, and Mukasir. Paramount authority rests with the Da'l, who serves as the earthly representative of the imam during the period of seclusion. Succession to this office is determined by nass: each Da'l inspired and guided by the hidden Imam, appoints his own successor.

Ideally, nass should be opened and clear, like that which the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) conferred upon his wasi Ali.(AS). There is no

inherent necessity for the title to be dynastic, but it has generally been so throughout history: since the ascension of the forty-seventh da'i Abdul – Qadir Najmuddin (the great- grandfather of the present Da'i) in 1840 all Da'is have been members of the same extended family.

## **ZIYARET: PILGRIMAGE TO THE SHRINES OF DEPARTED DA'IS**

One of the most important instruments of societal cohesion for the Bohras is the institution of ziyaret. Bohras perform ziyaret to the tombs of imams, da'is and syedis in various parts of the Middle East and India.

Burial places of Da'is and imams in Egypt and Yemen have become important sites for ziyaret in recent decades, but the tombs of the Indian Da'is have always been (and continue to be) the most widely visited Shrines. Ziyaret may be performed at any time of year.

All Bohra shrines are open to and highly popular with women as well as men. At every important place of pilgrimage, the Dawat has established a musafirkhana (travellers' lodge) for the use of any Bohra visitors- a total of 137 throughout the world.

## **SAIFEE MAHAL**

The primary residence for the close family of Syedna is the Saiffee Mahal compound, near the hanging gardens on Malabar Hill in Mumbai. The main building is a very large, stately structure in the late colonial architectural style sometimes labeled Indian Gothic.

The apartments in Saifee Mahal are rather modest, both in the old and the new parts of the compound. The newer buildings are clean and well maintained, but indistinguishable from other modern apartment houses found throughout middle-class Mumbai.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The Daudi Bohras shatter stereotypes about traditionalist Islam today. As a community of up to one million devout Shi'a whose faith is every bit as fundamental to them as it is for Afghans, Saudis, or Iranians, they present an example that must be taken seriously. While adhering faithfully to traditional Islamic norms, the Bohras eagerly accept most aspects of modernity, strongly support the concept of a Pluralist civil society, boast a deeply engrained heritage of friendly engagement with members of other communities, and have a history of apolitical quietism stretching back nearly a thousand years. As a community largely located in urban areas, possessing immovable property and livelihoods, the Bohras do not have the option of engaging in violence and then taking refuge in the hinterland.

The Bohras are a community converted from Hindu Vaishya castes. The prevailing ethos, from the centuries prior to conversion right up to the present, has been that of the mercantile Vaishya rather than the martial kshatriya varna.

The Bohras regard Deen and Dunya (spiritual and temporal concerns) as two halves of an integrated whole: it's not an either- or proposition, but a way of looking at both religious and everyday concerns in a

holistic manner. In the meeting of heritage and humanism, there need be no victor or vanquished.



The Daudi Bohras, have always managed to adapt to the world around them without losing their souls. Modernity, for them, is nothing new.

*Matter and Quotes freely taken from the book 'MULLAHS ON THE MAINFRAME' by Jonah Blank*