

S. 1.3

1935

THE BOHRAS A MUSLIM COMMUNITY OF GUJARAT

The Muslim trading communities of Gujarat trace their descent to Hindu origins. They are divided into the three well-known groups of Bohras, Khojas and Memons, the first two of which are Shi'a Ismā'īlīs and the last Sunnīs. All three communities claim to have embraced Islam about the same time, between the eleventh and the twelfth century A. D. (1).

It appears that at the beginning and for some time afterwards, these communities comprised both Sunnī and Shi'a elements. Today, however, the Bohras are divided into two distinct and exclusive communities of Sunnīs and Shi'as with no social relationship whatsoever existing between them (2). A sectarian controversy in the Khoja community was brought before the Bombay High Court in 1866, and the judge had to decide whether the Khojas were Sunnīs or Shi'as (3). The Memons who, as a whole, adhere to the Sunnī doctrine, seem to have their Shi'a counterpart in a modern branch of the

(1) The first missionaries of the Bohras arrived about 460/1067. The Khojas claim that their first missionary, Nūr Saṭgur, reached Patan in 1166. The Memons, who in the main descend from the same Hindu stock as the Khojas, were converted by a son of 'Abdu'l-Qādir al-Jīlānī.

(2) The Sunnī and Shi'a Bohras still have adjacent living quarters in many towns of Gujarat. The dress of their womenfolk in rural areas, too, shows remarkable similarities.

(3) Advocate General v. Muhammad Husen Huseini, (1866) 12 Bom. H. C. R. 523 ff.

Agha Khan's Ismā'īlīs who call themselves Momnas and who belonged originally to the Hindu caste of Leva Kumbis. The names of both communities are corrupted forms of the Arabic *Mu'min*. In Kutch and Kathiawar large numbers of Momnas live side by side with the Memons. The Momnas have now either attached themselves to the Khojas or have remained as a separate sect with few Muslim traditions and will probably, in the course of time, merge into the Hindu fold, as happened to some of these halfway communities in the last century.⁽¹⁾ It is curious to note that the Momnas who joined the Khojas were given a lower status within the community⁽²⁾. It is probable that these Momnas, with their superficial Muslim colouring, discovered that in their essential beliefs they differed wholly from other Momna and Meman groups and seceded to the Khojas, who admitted them as second-class members.

The initial spread of Islam among these trading and non-trading communities of Gujarat was little more than a personal attachment to the missionaries, mostly Ismā'īlīs, who tried to divert them from their original allegiance. For these first converts Sunnism or Shi'ism had no meaning whatsoever, in an age of Hindu dominance. Sectarian differentiation in such a time would have been inexpedient and fruitless. With the coming of Sunnī political power in northern India, the Šūfī orders engaged in a similar task among the Hindus of the North, and these activities later extended to Gujarat and to Central India in the wake of expanding political power⁽³⁾. A personal attachment to a teacher, Shi'a or Sunnī, which did not involve any drastic change in the daily life of a Hindu, could be welcome

(1) In Gujarat, the Matia Kumbis were one of them. (Matia probably from Arabic *muff*). Others were the Jats, the Surmas, and the Kers Mianas. The Matia Kumbis who have returned to the Hindu faith call themselves Vaishnava Kumbis.

(2) When the judge asked who the Momnas were, defence counsel replied, 'They are a humble community of shoemakers; not Khojas, but adherents of the Agha Khan.'

(3) All converted Sunnī communities still retain their saints (*pirs* and *pirzādas*). The main Šūfī orders in Gujarat are the Qadiri's, the Rifi'īs, the Chishti's and the Jelali's.

under uncertain conditions, when political changes seemed imminent. Most conversions from Hinduism in those days were nominal, and are to be attributed to the efforts of these missionaries. About the same time, too, some of the North Indian Muslims migrated to the South, fleeing before the Ghaznavids and the Ghorids⁽¹⁾.

By this time other Muslim influences had already penetrated into Gujarat. The Bohra Ismā'īlī tradition has it that Sidhrāj Jaysingh, the Solankī king of Gujarat (1094-1133), his minister Bhārmal⁽²⁾ and the Jain teacher of Kumārpāl, Sidhrāj's successor, adopted Islam. How far this conversion to Islam was genuine or not is difficult to say, but there is a strong possibility that it might have been an act of political expediency. In any case, Islam in Gujarat continued in an uncertain and fluid state, which can be seen from the fact that Sunnī Bohras⁽³⁾, Khojas and Memons till the passing of the Shar'at Act of 1937 were governed in most respects by customary Hindu law⁽⁴⁾. The Hindu customs observed by all these indigenous communities in many spheres of life up to the present also indicate how superficial were the roots Islam had taken in them.

Leaving the Khojas and the Memons aside, we will now direct our attention to the Bohras, and begin with a few preliminary remarks. The popular account relates that Sultan Aḥmād, a Muslim king of Gujarat (1411-1441), divided the new converts into two groups and called the fighters Mawla'l-Islām⁽⁵⁾

(1) Both Memons and Khojas claim descent from the Lohanas. These people dwell round Lahore, which derives its name from their settlements. The existence of a politically independent Ismā'īlī community in Multan and Mansurah is mentioned in Ismā'īlī and other sources. A section of Khojas are still known as Multani Khojas. The last known attempt by the Ismā'īlīs to regain power in N. India was in 694/1236.

(2) A few Bohra families in Kathiawar claim descent from Bhārmal. Three much venerated Bohra saints come from that family.

(3) The Sunnī Bohras in many parts of Kheda and Broach have come under Wāḥābī influence, and Hindu customs have been largely given up except in some remote rural regions.

(4) The Kutchi Memon Act of 1920 was the first partial attempt to replace the Hindu customary law by Muslim law.

(5) These are today known as Motealam Girasia.

and the non-fighting converts Bohras (1). This is merely a later invention, for Sunni Bohras are mostly warlike peasants preserving their Rajput origins in their physical features and popular traditions. Moreover, some of the Sunni Bohras of Surat, Broach and Baroda claim Brāhmanī, Mārwāṛī and other lower caste descent. Numerous Sunni Bohras in the Surat and Kheda districts of Gujarat bear, in common with many Hindus (2), the family surname of Vohra. The combination of these diverse elements must have been earlier than the coming of Muslim rule to Gujarat, and it is probable that there was a Hindu caste called Vohra (3) which accepted some form of Islam while continuing a Hindu mode of life, and became a refuge for other new converts. With the coming of Sunni rule, divisions appeared within this community which maintained the pattern of a Hindu caste under a thin Islamic veneer. Although the distinction between Sunni and Shi'a Bohras was not noticed in the early stages, it gained in importance with the growth of Sunni political power. Since the early Sunni Bohras had little more than a personal attachment to their Sūfi pīrs, an attachment which even today divides the Sunni Bohras amongst themselves, according to their allegiance to different pīrs and pīrādās, social, including marital relations existed between the Sunni and Shi'a branches until 1535, when Ja'far Shīrāzī asked the Sunni Bohras to cease all social relationship with their Shi'a counterparts (4).

The Ismā'īlī communities of Northern India seem to have been independent and to have had no relations with their

(1) The popular etymology derives the word from *uyawabdar*, i. e. trade. The Sunni Bohra tradition that they were called Bohras because they consisted of several sects or paths (Gujarati: *bahu rāh*) accords, however, better with the early composition of the community of several heterogeneous elements.

(2) These Hindus, too, are not traders.

(3) Elliot, *Races of the N. W. Provinces of India*, I, 43 and 150.

(4) The Bohra tradition asserts that this was one of the largest secessions from the community, and was led by a man called Ja'far who became a Sunni and carried with him about three fourths of the community. These people are known today as Ja'fari Bohras, and they call themselves 'Badi Jamā'at' or 'Chār Yārī', i. e. 'the bigger party' or 'the friends of the four callings'.

co-religionists in Gujarat (1). The Ismā'īlī Bohras, it is true, preserve the tradition that co-religionists of them existed until very recently in Multan. This seems to be merely based on the historical fact that Multan had been an Ismā'īlī principality. Some Bohras have also tried to show that the Bohra missionary, Mawlāya Nūru'd-dīn, and the Khoja Missionary, Nūr Satgur, were one and the same person. Nūru'd-dīn, according to the Bohras, arrived about 1067 A. D. and carried on his missionary activities in Deccan where he died and was buried in the city now known as Aurangabad. The tomb of a Khoja missionary at Navsari (2) gives the date of Nūr Satgur's death as 487/1094. The Fāṭimī caliph Mustansīr bi'llāh died in 1094, too, and it was only after his death that there occurred the split in the Ismā'īlī community, which is the basis of the distinction between Bohras and Khojas. There can have been little, if any, difference between their teachings at that time. The Khoja tradition, however, asserts that Nūr Satgur reached Gujarat only after 1179 (3) in the reign of Bhīm Solankī (1179-1243). In the face of these conflicting claims and the paucity of reliable information, it is difficult to venture any opinion about the time of their arrival or their doctrines. Indeed, the growth of the main bodies of both communities, Khojas and Bohras, has been almost wholly independent of each other.

The Ismā'īlī Bohras are divided into Dā'ūdīs, Sulaimānīs, 'Alīas, Nāgōshīas, Hiptās and two other recent factions. The differences between these branches concern the allegiance to the various persons who claimed the leadership of the community. The history of the earlier divisions is well known (4).

(1) For Ismā'īlīam in Northern India see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s. v. Multan; H. Ray, *The Dynastic History of Northern India*, Calcutta 1931; Hashim Syed, in *Islamic Culture*, I, 1927; Sulaiman Nadvi, *ibid.* VIII-IX, 1934-1935; S. M. Stern, *ibid.* XXIII, 1949.

(2) W. Ivanow, in *JEBRAS*, XII, 1936, p. 60.

(3) T. W. Arnold, *Preaching of Islam*, p. 275 mentions that the Khoja missionary arrived during the reign of Sīdhrāj. This seems to be a contamination of the Bohra and the Khoja traditions.

(4) Cf. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, and *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s. v. Bohras; J. N. Hollister, *The Shi'a of India*, p. 265-306.

These divisions have led to the formation of separate communities whose social existence is as exclusive as that of the Hindu castes. At times, there have been half-hearted attempts by well-meaning Sulaimānīs and Dā'ūdīs to patch up these differences, but as was to be expected, they all came to naught. The Sulaimānī and Dā'ūdī schism was almost inevitable, after the loss of the semblance of political power by the Sulaihidīs in the Yaman. It was almost entirely an Indian-Yamanī quarrel. The causes which led to the final break-away of the Indian element from their co-religionists in the Yaman still exist and a conciliation is unlikely.

The 'Alīas, the Nāgōshīas and the Hiptīas survive only in a few families in Baroda and Ujjain, and these will probably sooner or later merge into the larger communities with whom they are in close contact, either Hindu or Muslim.

The two recent break-aways among the Dā'ūdīs bear a certain resemblance to the Hiptīa schism, insofar as these three groups, in contrast with the other branches of the Ismā'īlī Bohras, accord to their leaders a higher position in the Ismā'īlī hierarchy than that of Dā'ī (or Dā'ī Mutlaq). After the extinction of Fatīmī rule in Egypt, the Yamanī centre of Ismā'īlism, demanding higher claims⁽¹⁾, reached a compromise, by which the head of the community was to retain the grade of Dā'ī Mutlaq. The founder of the Hiptīas, Hibatu'llāh ibn Luq-mānjī, claimed to have been in touch with the Imām through his Dā'ī-Balāgh; this schism occurred in 1780. The first of the two modern secessions occurred towards the beginning of the present century. Its leader, 'Abdu'l-Ḥusayn, claimed to be the Hujja of the Imām, a rank next to that of Imām. His followers are few and are found in Nagpore, where they are known as Mahdībhāghwāllās. The second modern schism is still more recent. Its leader, about 1944, originally claimed the Imāmāte, but soon abandoned this claim for a claim to the lesser dignity of Hujja. The most interesting fact about this incident

(1) The claims ranged from Dā'ī Mutlaq to Hujja. Ismā'īlī sources, mainly the 'Uḡḡūnī-Akhbār of Dā'ī Idrīs, give in detail the differences that arose in the Yaman after the death of the caliph Amīr bi-Amrī'llāh.

is that though the seceders were few, they belonged to the class of religious dignitaries and were considered very learned.

These schisms had a lasting effect on the community: it became more compact than ever and the leader's control of the community became stronger.

The Dā'ūdīs, since the beginning of the present century, have nevertheless suffered many domestic feuds. The headship or Dā'īship of the community was for a long time reserved to the Yamanī families which had migrated to India when conditions in the Yaman became unbearable under Zaidī and Turkish pressure. Although a few Dā'īs were of Indian extraction, it still took a long time for the Indian element to oust the Yamanīs. The last four Dā'īs, and some earlier ones, have come from Indian families with anti-Yamanī leanings. The accession of the 47th Dā'ī, 'Abdu'l-Qādir Najmu'd-Dīn, the grandfather of the present Dā'ī, who succeeded a Yamanī Dā'ī, Muḥammad Badru'd-Dīn, led to a split between the two factions. The majority of the 'Ulamā' and Mashā'ikh claimed that Muḥammad Badru'd-Dīn died without nominating a successor. Since the nomination of the successor by the predecessor is one of the cardinal points of Shī'ite dogma, this created a delicate situation.

The 'Ulamā' and Mashā'ikh, however, hushed the matter up by keeping the information from the community, and arrived at an agreement that 'Abdu'l-Qādir Najmu'd-Dīn should assume the headship of the community and abstain from claiming the spiritual position of Dā'ī. The agreement seems to have been faithfully carried out at first, but once securely established, and having overcome the Yamanī opposition by winning over or isolating the remaining hostile elements, Najmu'd-Dīn assumed the title of Dā'ī⁽¹⁾. Nothing much of importance happened under his successor, Ḥusāmu'd-Dīn, brother of Najmu'd-Dīn. The 49th, Dā'ī, Muḥammad Burhānu'd-Dīn, a son

(1) It was admitted by the opposition that Badru'd-Dīn intended to nominate Najmu'd-Dīn, but since it is essential that the appointment should be public, the succession of Najmu'd-Dīn was not recognized. The public nomination is called an-naṣṣu'l-jalī. For the stand of both parties see the Burhanpur Durghah case, (1947) 75 I. A. 1, and the Chāpds Bha'ī Gulla case, (1921) 24 Bom. L. R. 1060.

of Najmu'd-Din, succumbed to the resurgent Yamani element and admitted in a document (1) that his father and his uncles, the 47th and the 48th Dā'īs, were not Dā'īs but merely caretakers of the community. He was succeeded by his brother, Abdu'llāh Badru'd-Din. The Indian element, however, absolutely re-established itself with the accession of the present 51st Dā'ī, Abū Muḥammad Tāhir Sayfu'd-Din, a son of Burhānu'd-Din.

The first action he took was to disperse the opposition group by appointing their members to distant administrative posts in the community. Thereafter, by threats of excommunication, he extracted from many of them written admissions that they accepted him and his three predecessors as duly nominated Dā'īs, and thereby achieved the unquestionable leadership of the community. The few who refused to agree were expelled from the community on various grounds. The weapon of excommunication proved to be very potent, for the leader of the community controlled the means of livelihood of the 'Ulamā' and Mashā'ikh, and could easily reduce them to poverty by refusing to appoint them to administrative posts, or by sending them to some remote areas where the sparse Bohra population was insufficient to support them.

At first, the excommunicated faction established their centres in Burhanpur, Bombay and Surat (2). This could not be considered a breach in the community, for although they were regarded as outcasts, pretenders (*mudda'ī*) (3) and objects of hatred, they still held themselves to be Dā'ūds. With the establishment of these three small groups, a few more individuals

(1) Before the original of the document was destroyed, the opposition had copies made, and these were introduced both in the Burhanpur Durgah case and in the Chānda Bha'ī Gulla case.

(2) Minor centres were also established in Kathiawar. The opposition soon began publishing two weekly Gujarati papers, *Baḡ-e-Mur'mān* in Amreli in Kathiawar, and *Guzār-e-Ḥakīmī* in Burhanpur. The first stopped publication at the death of its editor, the second still appears regularly. The Dā'ī's party, too, has its own paper, *Nasīm-e-Bahār*, which is published in Bombay.

(3) The term *mudda'ī* was first applied to the opposition when they filed the suit in the Bombay High Court. The opposition, on the other hand, calls the party in power *mudda'ī*, because they claim the Dā'īship.

were encouraged to oppose the ruling party and to join them; their life had by now become tolerable, after many privations resulting from the complete cessation of all social contacts with the rest of the community and the reprisals undertaken against them by the more fanatical followers of the Dā'ī.

The right of the Dā'ī to excommunicate was tested in court, in the famous Burhanpur Durgah case (1). After the case had passed through several stages, the Privy Council upheld the right of the head of the community in this respect.

In the thirties, another group consisting of about sixteen families was excommunicated in Karachi. The reason for excommunication was different here. The Burhanpur, Surat and Bombay groups were the orthodox opposition, whereas the Karachi party, consisting of the members of the Bohra Young Men's Association, ventured to question the validity of some of the more stringent measures which the Dā'ī had taken in order to control the community and collect the fees. The Karachi group claimed to be reformist and differed entirely in its outlook from the orthodox opposition. Their main complaints were against the necessity of securing the permission of the Dā'ī or of his agent for every ceremony, and against his high-handedness in the use of communal property (2).

In 1923 already, the Bombay government had put on the statute book the Waqf Act which required trustees, real or implied, to give an account of the trust property every year. The Dā'ī, supported by his followers, tried to be exempted from this provision; he claimed to be « the Lord of the wealth, the persons and the souls » of all his followers. The protests against the Act from the community were widespread and, for the most part, genuine, the response of the faithful to the wishes of the Dā'ī; but the Bombay Government did not yield.

Meanwhile, the opposition was not idle and a suit was

(1) Seth Tayabali v. Mulla Abdulhusein, Suit No. 25 of 1925 in the court of the First Class Sub-Judge of Burhanpur, C. P.; Hasanali v. Mansoorali, (1947) 75 I. A. 1; (1947) 50 Bom. L. R. 389.

(2) The Karachi party started its own monthly journal, which was discontinued after their readmission.