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BOHRA COMMUNITY OF MEDIEVAL GUJARAT*

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Trade and commerce is a major element of Indian economy. India is basically an agricultural economy, however, trade & commerce and business has an important place in it.

The criterion which divides different businessmen is - ethnicity, mother tongue, religion and regional affiliation. The term “Business Community” denotes a group of businessmen who, in addition to their common occupational affiliation, share certain socio-cultural features inherited from birth.¹ The merchants of medieval Gujarat were Hindus, Jain and Muslims. The Muslims could be divided into three broad categories- firstly, the itinerant merchants who visited Gujarat for purpose of trade and returned to their native countries after transacting their business. Secondly, the foreign merchants, who hailed from distant lands but settled down in Gujarat, and; thirdly, the local converts from Hinduism to Islam.² The itinerant merchants who subsequently settled down in the coastal towns of Gujarat, some came from far off places like Egypt, Persia, Turkey and Arabia.³ The epigraphical records which have come down to us go a long way to prove that the Arab and Persian merchants had settled down not only in the coastal parts of Gujarat but had penetrated into the towns of Pattan and Junagarh where they were in such large number as to build their mosques.⁴ An Arabic inscription found at Junagarh records furnishes details of a mosque constructed in 1286-87 A.D. by Afif-ut-Dumiyawad din Abdul Qasim bin Ali Al Iraqi, who has been described as “the prince of the ship-masters of the pilgrims to the holy cities of Mecca and Madina.”⁵

Among the Muslims Bohras were prominent. They were divided into Shia and Sunni, and involved in trade with Arabia, Persia and Hindustan. It is said that one Mulla Muhammad Ali who is buried in Cambay and popularly known as ‘*Pir-i-Parwaz*’ was much venerated by the

Shia Bohras. He found the people of Cambay believing in a chief saint.⁶ The original domicile of Sunni Bohras is Gujarat. A large number of Sunni Bohras are still inhabited in different villages of Gujarat and Saurashtra. Their main profession was trade and agriculture⁷

Jugalbhai Mangalran Pandya observes in his work *Khambhat Shaherno Itihas* in Cambay, the main locality was comprised of Brahmins, Banias, Shravakas, Kanabis, Kolis, Kaachhiyas, Rajputs, Khaarwas, Ghanchis and many communities of Muslims. Among these Muslim communities Bohras were prominent. They were wealthy and were engaged in the trade with the China, Jungbar and Japan.⁸

Since Mulla Muhammad Ali was a Shia, his disciples naturally adopted the Shia creed. At Pattan, which was then a big city, they were in the majority. When Sultan Muzaffar took possession of Gujarat, his Sunni followers who migrated with him from Delhi, converted the Shia Bohras of the town. However the Bohras of the neighbouring district and villages remained Shias.⁹

According to *Mirat-i-Ahmadi* - Shia Bohras were divided into following seven sects: 1. Daudi, 2. Sulaimani, 3. Alia, 4. Zaidia, 5. Hajumia, 6. Ismailia, 7. Nazaria.

Some of them came with Sayyid Imam-ud-Din (buried at the village of Giramnth).¹⁰ The Ismaili Bohras were the most prominent among the Muslim merchants of Gujarat, especially in Surat. Being persecuted for their religious beliefs and practices by the Sunni rulers of the area and being “gradually squeezed out of its traditional avocations by a hostile political regime”, the Bohras became rapidly urbanized, and the community tended “to the division of more and more people towards commerce” in which they soon established their skills and leadership.¹¹ Karim Mehmud Master also gives the name of seven divisions of Bohras, but the list varies: ¹² 1. Jaafari, 2. Sulaimani, 3. Daudi, 4. Alia, 5. Nagoshi, 6. Hiptia, 7. Mehdibagwala.

Three names in both the sources are same but rests are different. According to Karim Master, *Sulaimani* and *Ismaili* were the same, earlier they were called *Ismaili* and then after sometime they were known as *Sulaimani*.¹³

As *Mirat* says that for a long time the Sunni and Shia Bohras permitted intermarriages, later from the time of Sayyed Jafar of Shiraz, who is buried inside the fort near the ‘Astodia’ gate, the two communities became completely separate from each-other. The Sunni were called “the big community”, and the Shia “the small community”. The Shias always had a leader who was called a Mulla. He was a learned man and was authorized to appoint collectors of *Zakat* (a religious tax payable by the Muslims) and *Khums* which were paid by their followers.¹⁴ In 15th century A.D. this community came to have larger majority

(*bahumat*) than Shia Bohras and was popular as *badi jamaat* (big community).¹⁵ During the period of Sultan Ahmad Shah of Gujarat (1411-1442 A.D.), some unusual developments took place. In this period, Shia Ismaili Bohras spread over Gujarat; they were very influential in the court as well. But in Anhilwara Patan, there was a person named Mulla Jaafar Patani, who posed an opposition/confrontation to Shia Ismaili Bohras; as a result of which many Shia Bohras joined his following. They rebelled against the strict rules and some religious views of Ismailis. The new group presented their views intelligently and impressively in front of Shia Ismailis that is why they emerged as Sunni group in Patan, in a quite short span of time.¹⁶ Under the leadership of Jaafar Patani and his followers, a big community of Sunni Bohras came into existence. It was called *moti jamaat* (big community) due its magnitude of followers. This community was also called *Jaafari* Bohras, but nowadays these Bohras are known as – Surati Bohra, Patani Bohra, Kheroot Bohra and Charotari Bohra.¹⁷ But there was a lack of organization (*sangathan*) and discipline (*niyambaddhata*) in this community. As a result this community neither had any organization/institution nor a head/leader to have control over it.¹⁸

Ali Muhammad says that during the reign of Aurangzeb, Shias were persecuted, so they did not openly profess their beliefs, they also kept their sacred texts hidden. However, this much is known- that they count their months according to the Hindu calculations.¹⁹

Many of the Brahmins and Banias of Gujarat had the surname of ‘*Vohra*’, and converts from these people retained their surname in Islam from the time of their first preacher Mulla Muhammad Ali. Their first religious guide being named *Bohra*, the followers were named after him.²⁰

The Daudi have been a regional and largely an urban community; their mores evolved in stages when they had to face persecution; one of their own men. Maulana Jafar, turned dissident leading to large scale secessions in the 15th century; the work was continued by another probable secessionist, Maulana Muhammad Tahir in the 16th century. These waves of reconversion reduced the original community to a minority status. It seems difficult to accept that the agrarian communities had a collective rubric. The Sunni Bohra embraced a number of marrying castes. They originally belonged to the same body, which had been converted to Islam by the early proselytizers, who popularized the Ismaili creed. Nevertheless, after the 16th century, the Ismaili community was reduced to wholly urban. More than 80% were lost to the Sunni faith.²¹ In 1686 A.D., Bohra merchants and craftsmen of Patani came to Surat. Two contemporary manuscripts – *Tazkira-ut-Salitin* and *Tarikh-i-Surat* gives detailed information about their migration. They settled in the locality of Saudagarpura in Surat.

Mohammad Jamal Abdul and Miyan Abdul Hai were included among these Patani Bohras. The above manuscripts also give information about *Shahsaudagar* Mulla Abdul Ghafur bin Abu Baqr.²²

The largest community was of *Daudis* among the Shia Bohras and they were called *lotiyas*, because their turban looks like a *lota* (jug or a utensil which is used to keep water).²³ They were mostly found in Bhavnagar, Rajkot, Junagarh, Kuttch, Bhuj, Mandavi, Ahmadabad, Ahmadnagar, Broach, Cambay, Dohad, Godhara, Gogha, Navsari, Surat and Vadodara/Baroda.²⁴ The highest number of Daudi Bohras was found in Panch Mahal district, followed by Surat and Mehsana. The Daudi Bohras, as is well known, are prosperous trading community. Only a few of them followed any other calling.²⁵ *Vada Mullaji* (big Mullaji) or religious head of Daudis was called *Da'ai* of his community, and he had four people or subordinates for his help and their names were as follows²⁶:

1. *Maazan* : Record keeper and messenger of *Vada Mullaji* to the people (parwangi).
2. *Mushbir* : Worked as executor.
3. *Mashayakh* (plural of *Sheikh*) : worked as lawyer.
4. *Mulla* : Means *vali*, their main work was to teach the youngsters of their *Jamaat*.

The founder of *Alia* sect of Shia Bohras, was the son of Ibrahim (Sheikh Adam's son, Sheikh Adam was the religious head at the time of Ali.).²⁷

The highest number of Sunni Bohras was recorded in Broach district followed by Surat, Sabarkantha, Baroda and Kaira district. The Bohras initially settled in the north, are '*Pattani*' Bohras. The Bohras of central and south Gujarat are trading community, with agriculture as its main occupation in rural areas.²⁸

According to Deepak Bardolika the cities of Ahmadabad, Pattan, Surat and Broach, Bohra merchants traded in cotton, silk, cloth, brocade, paper, indigo, *ghee*, molasses, ornaments, jewelery and the arms material etc.²⁹

There were many Bohra merchants in Gujarat however some were very prominent. Some Gujarati texts give information of such merchants, Sheikh Hamid³⁰ was one of them, he came to Surat in 1640 A.D. and his trade flourished during the reign of Shahjahan.³¹ He owned seven ships. Emperor bestowed upon the title of '*Umdat-ut-Tujjar*' (best/reliable among the merchants), elephant & palanquin, crest of turban and a diamond crest. He also received some land and he was relieved from *mehsool*/tax of around Rs.1,00,000/- from the ruler.³²

Ishwarlal Ichharam Desai mentions that the family of Sheikh Sarkheji had a copy of original *farman*, in which Shahajahan gave the title of '*Umdat-ut-Tujjar*' to Sheikh Hamid and it contains the seal of Shahajahan, princess Jahanara and *mutasaddi* Haqeeqat Khan of

Surat.³³ His son Sheikh Muhammad Fazil was also a wealthy merchant. He was also honoured by the title of ‘*Umdat-ut-Tujjar*’.³⁴ In 1713 A.D., Farrukhsiyar addressed a *farman* for the mint of Surat to issue 4000 coins daily in order to reward him for his scholarly activities and efforts.³⁵

Another big name was- Mulla Abdul Ghafur, the wealthiest Bohra merchant of the city. He came to Surat in late sixties from the northern town of Pattan.³⁶ He was called Mulla because of his association with the mosque or probably he conducted ‘*Hajj*’ and was generally addressed as Mulla. He held a high position among the Gujarati merchants. Manucci informs us that he was “*the most powerful merchant at Surat, and owns over 20 ships of his own.*”³⁷

He received the title of ‘*Malek-ut-Tujjar*’ from Mughal emperor.³⁸ His son Mulla Abdul Hai was also a successful merchant and received the title of ‘*Umdat-ut-Tujjar*’, an elephant and a dress of honour.³⁹

Mulla Muhammad Ali, son of Abdul Hai, continued his family business. He had a conflict with the Nawab of Surat.⁴⁰ He bought a village called ‘*Athwa*’ (near Surat) and developed a town over here, which was known as ‘*Rasoolabad*’, where he made a fort and a port.⁴¹

The family business of Ghafur continued till the time of the grandson of Abdul Hai- Majiduddin Fateh.⁴²

Bohras were the important part of society. They played an important role in shaping the Gujarati business and trading activities, especially in shipping. This community enriched the culture of medieval Gujarat as well.

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² Tirmizi, S.A.I., ‘Muslim merchants of Medieval Gujarat’, *Business Communities in India*, op. cit., p. 59.

³ Ibid., pp. 61-62.

⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Khan, Ali Muhammad, *Mirat-i-Ahmadi*’ (Supplement), Tr. Syed Nawab Ali & Seddon, Baroda, 1928, p. 108.

⁷ Bardoliar, Deepak, *Sunni Vahora*, Karachi, 1984, p. 9.

⁸ Pandya, Jugalbhai Mangalram, *Khambhat Shaherno Itihas*, Ahmadabad, 1899, p. 4.

⁹ *Mirat-i-Ahmadi* (Suppl.), op. cit., p. 109.

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- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Misra, S.C., *Muslim Communities in Mughal Gujarat*, Baroda, 1964, pp. 25, 27; Gokhale, Balkrishna, *Surat in Seventeenth Century*, Bombay, 1979, p. 35.
- ¹² Master, Karim Mehmud, *Mahagujaratno Musalmano* (part – 1 & 2), Prachya Vidya Mandir, M.S. University, Baroda, 1969, p.139.
- ¹³ *Mahagujaratno Musalmano*, op. cit., p. 140.
- ¹⁴ *Mirat-i-Ahmadi* (Suppl.), p. 109.
- ¹⁵ *Sunni Vahora*, op. cit., p. 10.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 13.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 14.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.
- ¹⁹ *Mirat-i-Ahmadi* (Suppl.), pp. 109-110.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 110.
- ²¹ Misra, S.C., ‘The Medieval Trader and his Social World’, *Business Communities in India: A Historical Perspective*, pp. 49-50.
- ²² *Sunni Vahora*, p. 42.
- ²³ *Mahagujaratno Musalmano* (part – 1 & 2), p. 143.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ *Muslim Communities in Gujarat*, op. cit., p. 70.
- ²⁶ *Mahagujaratno Musalmano* (part – 1 & 2), p. 159.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 166.
- ²⁸ *Muslim Communities in Gujarat*, p. 69.
- ²⁹ *Sunni Vahora*, p. 23.
- ³⁰ Desai, Ishwarlal Ichharam, *Surat Sonani Murat*, Surat, 1958 (reprint-2004), p. 61.
- ³¹ *Sunni Vahora*, p. 26.
- ³² Ibid, p. 26.
- ³³ *Surat Sonani Murat*, op. cit., p. 62; also see *Sunni Vahora*, p.27.
- ³⁴ *Surat Sonani Murat*, p. 62; also see *Sunni Vahora*, p.27.
- ³⁵ *Surat Sonani Murat*, p. 62; also see *Sunni Vahora*, p.27.
- ³⁶ Dasgupta, Ashin, *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat c. 1700-1750*, New Delhi, 1994, p.77.
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- ³⁸ *Sunni Vahora*, p. 27.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 27-28.
- ⁴¹ *Sunni Vahora*, pp. 27-28.
- ⁴² Ibid.