

The Dā'ūdī Bohras (Musta'īlī Ismā'īlī Shī'a)

Using Modernity to Institutionalise a Fāṭimid Tradition

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1 Introduction

The Dā'ūdī (or Dawoodi) Bohras, a community numbering substantially over one million worldwide, represent one of the two branches of Ismā'īlī Shī'ism to survive into the modern era. Musta'īlī Ṭayyibī Ismā'īlīs (as they are described in denominational terms) are the spiritual descendants of Egypt's renowned Fāṭimid Caliphate. Unlike the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs (who believe that the line of *imāms* continued through the succession of clerics bearing the title Aga Khan), the Musta'īlīs believe that the last Fāṭimid caliph was the twenty-second and final present *imām* (Abū l-Qāsim Ṭayyib). Since the sixth century AH/twelfth century CE, both spiritual and temporal leadership of the community has rested in a line of clerics bearing the title of *Dā'ī al-muṭlaq*, seated first in Yemen and since the tenth/sixteenth century in the Indian states of Gujarat and Maharashtra. Over the past four decades, the Dā'ūdī Bohra clergy has attempted, with great success, to establish a communal identity that is at once universally Islamic and unique to the denomination. It has done so not by rejecting modern or Western ideas and technologies, but by enthusiastically embracing many of them: in this sense, the Bohras have used 'modernity' as a tool to reinvigorate and reinstitutionalise their core traditions.¹ Thus, the Dā'ūdī Bohras demonstrate the resilience and ideological adaptability of Shī'a Islam.

The name 'Bohra' is generally presumed to be derived from the Gujarati verb *vohrvun* ('to trade'), reflecting the occupation of the overwhelming majority of Bohras throughout their history. The bulk of the group's ancestors converted to Islam from mercantile Hindu *jatis* within the Vaishya *varna*, beginning in the fifth/eleventh century. The Bohra community experienced a number of schisms

1 This chapter is adapted from sections of my monograph, *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity Among the Dā'ūdī Bohras* (2001), supplemented by my analysis of the recent leadership schism within the Dā'ūdī Bohra community (2017). A brief history of the denomination with more complete sourcing is found in Blank 2001: 14–52.

in the millennium since, most notably a split in the eleventh/sixteenth century between the followers of two rival clerical leaders named Dā'ūd ibn Quṭub Shāh and Sulaymān ibn Ḥasan (*Mausam-e Bahar* 1884: 343–345; Schimmel 1980: 70–71). While the small sect of Sulaymānī Bohras has maintained a separate chain of clerical succession ever since (as has the still-smaller group of 'Alawī Bohras, product of a subsequent schism), the term 'Bohra' is commonly used as shorthand for 'Dā'ūdī Bohra', the predominant group.² While there is some tension between the group's ethnic and spiritual definition—that is, whether the community should be bounded by Musta'li Ismā'īlī doctrine (as the clergy maintains) or by shared ancestry (as some dissidents argue)—the overlap of ethnicity and religion is close enough to make these definitions largely interchangeable. As a practical matter, the term 'Bohra' is generally taken by members of the community to mean “a practitioner of Musta'li Ismā'īlī Islam, who happens to be of Gujarati descent” (Abdulhussein 1995: 225; Davoodbhoy 1992a: 4). It is in that sense that the term will be used in this chapter.

Until the turn of the fifteenth/twenty-first century, the Bohras were one of an exceptionally small set of societies about which no ethnographic study (at least, none conforming to the standards of academic anthropology) had been published.³ As a result of their sequestration the Bohras are one of the few major communities left to which Marcus Banks' dictum of tainted evidence—

2 The first important Bohra schism occurred even earlier, in the ninth/fifteenth century, when a theology student named Jafar of Patan led a significant number of followers to abandon Shi'ism for Sunni practice; this group subsequently had no shared history or culture with its former coreligionists, and is outside the bounds of any modern definition of 'Bohras'. The succession dispute between Daud Burhanuddin ibn Qutbshah and Shaikh Sulaymān ibn Syedi Hasan al-Hindi was brought before the Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1005/1597, who ruled in favor of Daud; the modern Sulaymānī community is far smaller than the Dā'ūdī mainstream (by some estimates, perhaps one-tenth its size), and concentrated in the Middle East rather than South Asia, but it preceded the Dā'ūdīs in adopting Western education and practices; a Sulaymānī Bohra (Justice 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. The 'Alawī Bohras broke away from the Dā'ūdīs over a succession dispute in 1034/1624, and are today headquartered in the Gujarati city of Vadodara.

3 All prior works presenting primary-source ethnographic data on the Bohras fall into one of two categories:

First, texts published by clerical authorities, generally through the Da'wat-e-Hadiyah, Department of Statistics and Information (including Anjuman-e Burhani 1965; Bekhud 1994a, 1994b, 1994c; Davoodbhoy 1990, 1992a, 1992b, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Da'wat-e-Hadiyah 1975, 1983, 1985; Najmuddin 1992; Niazi 1992; Zaidi 1988). These often contain very useful information: For example, Abdulhussein (1995) is the work of a clerical scholar rather than a propagandist; Raik (1975) presents irreplaceable primary-source photographic documentation of the community shortly before the late-1970s program of orthopraxy Islamisation. Clerically-written histories such as Ismailji (1938); *'Mausam-e bahar'* (1884); and Mubarakpuri (1978) provide narratives (albeit *da'wat*-approved versions) often not available anywhere else.

“the manifestations of ethnicity we study today contain within them the ghosts of previous academic formulations” (Banks 1996: 189)—does not apply. This was not due to geographical remove: far from being an obscure community living in a remote corner of a rainforest, the Bohras are closely integrated to social life in Mumbai, Karachi, Surat, Ahmedabad and other cities in South Asia. Their absence from the anthropological record is due to self-selection: The structure of their society, with a degree of clerical control highly unusual among Muslim groups, enabled them to prevent outside researchers from making inroads into the orthodox community. The fieldwork on which this chapter is based, and the monograph from which most of the information was drawn, was enabled only by the permission of the late *Dā'ī al-muṭlaq* Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin, who gave his *du'ā'* (blessing) for the undertaking on 8 *Shabaa*n 1415/10 January 1995, at the *Jamea-tus-Saifiyah* in Surat, India.

2 History and Doctrine

The roots of the Bohra faith date to the Fāṭimid Caliphate, the most celebrated Ismā'īlī dynasty in history. Like the later divisions within the Bohra lineage, the great schism of Shī'a Islam into rival Ismā'īlī and Ithnā 'Asharī ('Twelver')

Second, texts written by or directly derived from a small group of dissidents placed under *baraat* (*de facto* excommunication) by the clergy (Contractor 1980; Engineer 1989, 1980/1993, 1995; through them, Chopra 1982, Nathwani 1979, Roy 1984). The reasons for this are discussed in Blank (2001: 301–307). Due to their exclusion from all contact with members of the orthodox communities, these authors are reliant on information that was already outdated at the time of their excommunications in the mid-twentieth century. Of particular note is the surprising fact that all of these texts—and virtually every notionally-independent text published by a source outside the community over the past century—can be traced directly to material originally published (in 1317/1899, and more completely in 1338/1920) by a Bohra dissident named Mian Bhai Mullah Abdul Husain of Rangoon. For documentation of this lineage, see Blank (2001: 306–307).

Several scholars have written usefully about the Bohras without conducting fieldwork in the orthodox community, and drawing their information largely from the excommunicated authors above. The most useful is the great scholar of Ismā'īlī history and theology Farhad Daftary (1990; others include Hollister 1953; Misra 1964; and Wright 1975). In addition to these, occasionally facts about Bohra life come up in news reports, or in scholarly texts only tangentially related to social science (for example, genetics: Basu and Gupta 1982, Basu and Jindal 1983).

Independent sources on Ismā'īlī (including Musta'li) history and doctrine are more plentiful. An illustrative, but by no means exhaustive, list includes—in addition to Daftary (1990)—Ali (1954); Corbin (1956, 1967, 1982, 1984); Feki (1978); Filippini-Ronconi (1973); Fyzee (1934a, 1934b, 1965, 1969, 1974); Hamdani (1971, 1976, 1985); al-Hamdani (1932, 1933, 1934, 1937); Hasan (1964); Ivanow (1936, 1942); Jafar (1942); Jafari (1965); Khan (1914); Lokhandwalla (1968); Poonawala (1970, 1973, 1974, 1977); Stern (1949, 1951, 1955, 1983); and Walker (1993).

branches grew out of a succession dispute: Ismā'īlīs believe that the *imāmate* was passed to the descendants of Imām Ja'far al-Šādiq's son Ismā'il (b. circa 100/720), while the Ithnā 'Ashariyya believe it was inherited by the descendants of Ismā'il's brother Musa. Modern scholars have noted that the idea of an *imāmate* passed down in secret from second/eighth to the fourth/tenth centuries (as Bohras today believe)⁴ seems to have been first articulated during Fāṭimid times: if such a doctrine was propagated contemporaneously, the veil of *taqiyya*—a doctrine accepted by most Shī'a denominations permitting public dissimulation during times of extreme danger to the community (Nasr 2016: 54)—prevented it from appearing in the documentary record.⁵ The *dawr al-satr* (period of concealment) ended with 'Abd Allāh al- Mahdī, who was proclaimed *imām* in 286/899, and caliph eleven years later (Stern 1983: 96ff; Tabataba'i 1975: 81–82).

From the tenure of Imām 'Abd Allāh al- Mahdī until nearly the end of the visible *imāmate* (as recognised by Musta'li Ismā'īlīs), the line of *imāms* would be coterminous with that of Fāṭimid caliphs. At its height, the Fāṭimid empire encompassed North Africa, Sicily, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Syria, and the Hijaz (including Mecca and Medina). The Fāṭimids never succeeded in converting Egypt to Shī'ism, nor did they make a great effort to do so, but their rule marks the high point of Ismā'īlī history. As the caliphate entered its terminal decline, it insured its legacy through missionary activity far afield. Imām al-Mustanşir bi-llāh (427–487/1036–1094) saw his power ebb in the Fāṭimid heartland, but in 450/1067 his missionaries established lasting footholds in Gujarat and Persia. The communities they established there would ensure the survival of the Ismā'īlī faith, through its Musta'li and Nizārī branches respectively, long after the Fāṭimid collapse nearly extinguished the denomination in the Middle East. (Hamdani 1976: 185–187; Qureshi 1985: 41–45).

Following Imām Mustanşir's death, the Ismā'īlīs experienced another succession schism: Those who believe that the *imām* bestowed *nass* on his younger

4 In 'Twelver' Shī'a histories, Ismā'il died fifteen years before his father, so his *nass* (designation as successor) was invalid; in Ismā'īlī interpretation, Ismā'il's death had been faked by his father Jafar to protect the true line of the Imamate from 'Abbāsid plots. In the words of the ninth/fifteenth century Bohra *Dā'īs* Idris ibn Hasan, "[T]he time came for Isma'il to dissemble death, using this ruse against his enemies who were full of hatred, enmity and the ardent desire to extinguish the Light of God" (Ivanow 1942: 232–233).

5 Reliable historical dates are unavailable for the three hidden *imāms*: Abdullah al-Mastur, Ahmad al-Mastur ibn Abdullah, and Husain ibn Ahmad. When such dates are provided by much later sources, they are so arbitrary as to be virtually meaningless. Farhad Daftary (1990: 126) states, "the early Ismailis, or at least by their overwhelming majority, originally recognised only seven Imams." When al-Mahdi declared himself the *imām*, Daftary argues, he retroactively declared his three predecessors *imām* as well.

son Musta'li would become known as Western Ismā'īlīs (because of their initial strength in Egypt and Yemen), and are today represented by the Bohras. Those who believe that *nass* was bestowed on the elder son Nizār would become known as Eastern Ismā'īlīs (because of their initial strength in Syria and Iran) and are today represented by the Khojahs and other followers of the Aga Khan. The Western Ismā'īlīs won out in the short term: Musta'li was put on the throne by a powerful *wazīr*, and Nizār died in prison. But the First Crusade shook the weakened caliphate, and the line of the twenty-one *imāms* recognised by the Bohras ends with Musta'li's infant grandson Abū l-Qāsim Ṭayyib.⁶

The Musta'li line of *imāms*, however, continued (and is believed still to continue) in secret. The period of *satr* continues to the present day, with the *imāmate* passed down through the descendants of *Imām* Ṭayyib. The current *imām*, like all those since Ṭayyib's time, lives anonymously in the world, utterly unknown to those around him, periodically in contact with the faithful through his *Dā'ī al-muṭlaq* (Daftary 1990: 283). Specific theological discussion of the 'hidden *imām*' generally falls under the category of *bāṭin* (secret) knowledge, not permitted to be disseminated outside of specially-authorised clerical circles. As explained by *da'wat*-authorised sources (personal communication, 1994 and subsequently), Bohras know neither the hidden *imām*'s name, nor his age, nor anything about him whatsoever, but they consider his presence in the world absolutely essential for the perpetuation of mankind.

Ṭayyib inherited the *imāmate* on his father's death (Bohras believe), but he lost the caliphate: his cousin al-Ḥāfiẓ seized the throne in 526/1132.⁷ The infant *imām* was protected by the most important woman in Musta'li history since the death of the Prophet's daughter Fāṭima. Al-Malika al-Sayyida, the wife of the Fāṭimid *Dā'ī* of Yemen, had taken over the work of her husband in his later years, and after his death had been promoted—in her own right—to the still-loftier position of *hujja*. After Ḥāfiẓ's coup, she ran a rival court based in Yemen, in the name of the infant Ṭayyib. To avoid assassination, the baby *imām* was hidden from public eye. Al-Sayyida elevated the existing office of *Dā'ī al-muṭlaq*

6 Because they take *Imām* Ṭayyib as the last unconcealed *imām*, the Bohras are technically *Ṭayyibī* Musta'li Ismā'īlīs, to distinguish them from the extinct branch of *Ḥāfiẓī* Musta'li Ismā'īlīs.

7 Al-Ḥāfiẓ passed the caliphate to his son and two grandsons, but their status as *imāms* (while contemporaneously acknowledged by the Fāṭimids for half a century) is unrecognised by either of the two surviving Ismā'īlī denominations. *Ḥāfiẓī* Musta'li Ismā'īlism did not survive long after the fall of the dynasty: the last Fāṭimid *wazīr* finally dispensed with the fiction of an independent caliphate, and established his own dynasty under the auspices of the 'Abbāsīd empire: Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb, better known to the West as Saladin, officially ended Fāṭimid rule by having the *khuṭba* read in the name of the 'Abbāsīd caliph in 567/1171. On the death of his master Nūr al-Dīn, he established the Ayyūbid dynasty in his own name.

to the highest visible title (apart from her own) of the Fāṭimid court-in-exile. When she died six years later, the office of *hujjat* died with her, leaving the *Dāʿī al-muṭlaq* the peak of the clerical order. Since that time, each succeeding *Dāʿī* has served as the titular head of a Fāṭimid dynasty that has never theoretically ended (Hamdani 1976 : 92–99; Ivanow 1942: 37–38).

For four hundred years, the seat of the denomination remained in Yemen. During these centuries, the community of Gujarati converts grew more numerous and more prosperous generation by generation. While the *daʿwat* generally enjoyed good relations with local Ayyūbid *amīrs* and other Sunnī political figures on the Arabian peninsula, it was forced to engage in near-chronic warfare with various Zaydī Shīʿa *shaykhs*. And while the Yemeni Mustalī community was often fractious and loathe to submit wholly to the authority of the *Dāʿī*, the Indian converts were far more accepting of central clerical control. (Corbin 1954: 162–172; Ismailji 1937: 93–94).

The first Gujarati *Dāʿī* was Yusuf Najmuddin ibn Sulaymān, who assumed office in 946/1539: his Yemeni predecessor had been so impressed by the Indian cleric's scholarly abilities that he passed over all of the Arabs in the court. Syedna Yusuf's successor, Jalal ibn Hasan, served only a few months, but he transferred the seat of the *daʿwat* to India permanently. Syedna Jalal was also an Indian by birth, as would be all future *Dāʿīs* (with the exception of one Yemeni who served for a single year in the eleventh /seventeenth century). The decision to move the *daʿwat* 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 Ismāʿīlīs that followed (Ali 1954, 74–77; Poonawala 1977: 137–143).

In India, the Mughal rulers Jehangir and Shah Jahan introduced some repressive measures against Shīʿa (as had various pre-Mughal Gujarati sultans), but the worst oppression suffered by the Bohras would come at the hands of Aurangzeb—first as governor of Gujarat, later as emperor. Bohras reverted to *taqiyya*, attending Sunnī services in public while carrying on their own rites in secret. Aurangzeb's attempts to impose Sunnī practice throughout his domains stemmed from deeply-held personal conviction, but was further compounded by his experience of warfare against the Shīʿa sultanates of the Deccan. Grinding years of battle against these states had established the paradigm of Shīʿa as political as well as theological adversaries (*Mausam-e Bahar* 1884: 280–296; Pinault 1992: 60).

The fact that Ismāʿīlīs had no ties to the Deccan sultans (or to these kingdoms' Ithnā ʿAsharī patron in Safavid Iran) earned them no mitigation of Aurangzeb's harsh treatment. Bohras were forbidden to observe Eid-ul Fitr and other rites according to their own calendar, to make pilgrimages to their

shrines, or to practice Ashura rituals. Sunnī *pesh-imāms* were reintroduced to all mosques, and any congregants failing to attend were punished with flogging. All marriage and death ceremonies were required to be performed by Sunnī *qāḍīs* rather than Bohra *ʿāmil*s, and large sums of money (both official taxes and unofficial bribes) were extorted from community members at every possible occasion (Misra 1964: 32–38, following Abdul Husain 1920: 20–21, 38–39).

The advent of British hegemony in India proved highly beneficial to the Bohras. Where many other Indian communities saw imperialistic encroachment, the Bohras saw relief from Sunnī persecution. During the reign of the forty-second *Dāʿī* Yusuf Najmuddin ibn Abdul-Ṭayyib Zakiuddin (1200–1213/1785–1798) the *daʿwat* moved its headquarters to Surat, to take advantage of the protection offered by this East India Company trading post.

The Bohras helped create modern Mumbai, and Mumbai helped create the modern Bohras; neither the city nor the community would have precisely its present-day form if not for the presence of the other. Moving to the rapidly-developing metropolis in the thirteenth/nineteenth century, the Bohras (like fellow *banias* such as the Khojahs, Memons and Parsis—see Asani 1987; Damodaran 2008: 2–4; Sharma 2014: 15–18; Purohit 2012: 10–11) quickly took up work in professions traditionally shunned by caste Hindus: most often, selling hardware, glassware, plumbing supplies, paint, stationary, or soap. They avoided the more traditionally polluting occupations (butchers, sweepers, leather-workers, or vendors of spirits), but within the confines of mercantile trade they concentrated on niches not customarily filled by Hindus. Since Mumbai (until 1995, Bombay) was centred on trade with Europe, there were an ever-increasing number of these niches to be filled.

Modern-day Mumbai is the capital of the state of Maharashtra, but until the creation of this state in 1960 the city had always been at least as closely linked to Gujarati as to Marathi culture. In this cosmopolitan milieu, the Bohras were able to leave behind their stigmatised minority status and become full-fledged members of society. While the bulk of the community opened shops and small businesses, from the late colonial period onward a substantial number entered banking and larger industry as well. The Dā'ūdī Bohras were so successful in their new environment, both in Bombay itself and in the various Gujarati cities administered by the Bombay Presidency, that by the end of the century a colonial gazetteer would write, “the trading Bohoras, originally all Shiah [Shī'a] of the Musta'li branch of the great Ismaili sect, are the richest and most prosperous class of Musalmans in Gujarat” (Campbell 1899: 24).

As the Bohra community rose in power and prosperity alongside the metropolis they helped build, their clerical leadership lost stature in comparison with

the new class of Western-oriented businessmen. The *daʿwat* was racked by internal dissension. A succession dispute in 1255/1840 weakened the clergy's credibility for the remainder of the century. In 1315/1897, yet another schism further discredited the establishment; the *Dāʿī* was subjected to the humiliation of a civil suit brought by one of his own *ʿāmil*s (priests), and even when accused of financial impropriety by one of his underlings he lacked the ability to enforce a writ of excommunication. Increasingly unable to collect community taxes to fund their clerical bureaucracy, *Dāʿī*s were forced to cede large amounts of power to wealthy businessmen such as Sir Adamji Pirbhai (an industrialist who served as the first Indian sheriff of Bombay).

When Syedna Taher Saifuddin ascended the office of *Dāʿī al-muṭlaq* in 1333/1915, the Bohra clergy was at perhaps its lowest ebb in centuries. Syedna Taher Saifuddin recognised the core problem: While much of the community had begun to assimilate into modern society, the *daʿwat* had run from it. As a result, the most dynamic, educated, and prosperous Bohras were distancing themselves not only from clerical control, but from the *Ismāʿīlī* doctrines and Islamic orthopraxy by which the community had been defined. The most forward-leaning individuals and families were melting into broader Indian society. The *Dāʿūdī* Bohra *Dāʿī* was on the path to becoming little more than a figurehead: a path that the *Sulaymānī* and *ʿAlawī* *Dāʿīs* had found ran in only one direction. The smaller Bohra communities had been essentially swallowed up already, and the *Dāʿūdīs* were likewise in danger of losing their unique cultural, spiritual, and denominational identity.

To combat this threat, Syedna Taher Saifuddin set out to revitalise both the clergy and the community through a program of modernisation. He spent the first half of his reign rebuilding the legitimacy and authority of the *daʿwat*, fending off powerful challenges from dissidents, and by the time of Indian Independence his position was stronger than that of any *Dāʿī* in memory. Reversing of the policy of his immediate predecessors, Syedna Taher Saifuddin actively encouraged both modern education and the adoption of a wide variety of Western customs, technologies and practices. He reigned for half a century (longer than his three predecessors combined), giving him enough time to institutionalise these policies.

Syedna Taher Saifuddin conveyed *nass* on his son early enough to avoid a succession dispute, and Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin continued his father's program through his own forty-nine-year reign. Inside the community, it is sometimes said that Syedna Taher Saifuddin focused more on the modernisation side of the equation, Syedna Burhanuddin more on the Islamisation side. But both leaders saw the two sides as halves to a complementary whole: Both aimed to use the tools of modernity to re-invigorate Bohra society and

faith. Not all members of the community support this ambitious program—the strand of overt and covert dissidence has remained present to this day—but few would deny that it has been very successful in achieving its goals. The death of Syedna Burhanuddin in 1435/2014 led to another disputed succession, raising the prospect of another community schism. It is noteworthy, however, that both camps remain firmly committed to the modernisation and Islamisation programme carried out over the past century (see Blank 2017).

3 Centrality of the *Dā'ī al-muṭlaq* as Distinguishing Feature of Bohra Practice

The centrality and all-encompassing authority of the top cleric set the Bohras (and other Ismā'īlīs) apart from nearly all other Muslim groups. The *Dā'ī* is considered *kal ma'sūm*, a state just short of absolute infallibility. In the Sunnī world, no single member of the '*ulamā*' holds anything like the unchallenged sway over believers that Bohra *Dā'ī* exercises. A Sufi *pīr* might wield such power over members of his order, but such jurisdiction extends only to initiates and does not generally reach entire communities. This extraordinary spiritual control has given the Bohra *Dā'ī* virtual hegemony in the political realm as well. Such centralisation of spiritual authority, perhaps more than any other factor, has enabled the Bohra clergy—particularly the two *Dā'īs* reigning between 1333/1915–1435/2014, to promote modernisation and reinstitutionalisation of tradition at the same time.

Even in comparison with other Shī'a groups the level of spiritual authority enjoyed by the Bohra *da'wat* is highly unusual. A Twelver *mujtahid* is expected both to guide his followers towards righteous actions and steer them away from prohibited ones, but this spiritual leadership has always been far more diffuse than that of Ismā'īlīs. The modern Ithnā 'Asharī clergy has never spoken with a single voice, even during the primacy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; since Khomeini's death, the diversity of top-level spiritual guidance has increased markedly (Nasr 2016: 35–39).

Shī'a theology in general, and Ismā'īlī theology in particular, is based on *ta'wīl* (esoteric interpretation of scripture). This doctrine holds that beneath the *ẓāhir* (apparent) aspect of revealed text and religious doctrine, a deeper and more important *bāṭin* truth lies hidden. While any Muslim can try to learn the *ẓāhir* by reading the Qur'ān and other religious texts, only a *mu'min* (true believer) can hope to uncover the *bāṭin* learning with the guidance of the *imām* or his representative. Ismā'īlīs regard the entirety of the Qur'ān as a text with hidden allegorical interpretations underlying even the most

seemingly straightforward of passages (Corbin 1984; Fyze 1965; al-Hamdani 1933; Stern 1983).

It is largely for this reason that Ismāʿīlīs regard the teachings of a living, present human (whether the Bohras' *Dāʿī al-muṭlaq* or the Nizārīs' Aga Khan) as *more* authoritative than unexplicated scripture or *aḥadīth*, a significant point of divergence from Ithnā ʿAsharī Shīʿa. In the Bohra faith, even devout believers are not permitted to explore esoteric texts without the guidance of a master specially sanctioned by the *daʿwat*, and permission to delve into the deepest secrets is limited to a small group of highly trained clerics. It is their unique access to *bāṭin* knowledge—the true, inner meaning of the Qurʾān, *aḥadīth*, and all scripture—that gives both the Bohra *Dāʿī* and the Aga Khan their fundamental spiritual hegemony over their respective communities.

The Aga Khan's status as present *imām* would seem to give him even greater great doctrinal hegemony for the Nizārīs than the *Dāʿī al-muṭlaq* exercises among the Bohras. This hegemony, however, does not manifest in the same way. Recent Aga Khans have lived in Europe, married outside the community, and maintained a regal distance from the bulk of their followers, and, in some cases, from Islamic orthopraxy itself: Sir Sultan Muhammed Shah, Aga Khan III, is said to have justified his consumption of alcohol by holding up a glass of champagne and remarking, "I am so holy that when I drink wine, it turns to water" (Lokhandwalla 1968: 162, n. 16). The *Dāʿī*, however, is intimately linked to every aspect of Bohra life: the very essence of his office is to be physically present. While the *imām* lives in the world but not of it, perhaps guiding by inspiration rather than specific instruction, the *Dāʿī*'s role is to serve as a bridge between the hidden *imām* and the faithful. He *must* be part of his followers' daily lives: It is his central mission.

From the earliest times to the present, there has been relatively little Ismāʿīlī literature devoted to *tafsīr* (external explication) of the Qurʾān or other texts: the *imām* is regarded as a 'speaking Qurʾān' whose presence in the world makes tomes of ordinary exegesis unnecessary. During the *imām*'s concealment, such authoritative interpretation is carried out by his legitimately delegated *Dāʿīs*. One major result of this has been the liberation of Ismāʿīlī thought from the confines of strictly proscribed text: while much Sunnī intellectual debates (at least outside of certain Sufi circles) has been bounded by a literalist interpretation of the Qurʾān and *aḥadīth*, Ismāʿīlī speculation has been much less constrained. For the brief period of the Muʿtazila ascendancy during the ʿAbbāsīd caliphate, Sunnī intelligentsia experienced a similar burst of speculative energy. With the triumph of the Hanbalites and the "closing of the door of *ijtihād*," however, such experimentation fell to disfavor. In general Sunnī intellectual exploration has been circumscribed by text and tradition, while Ismāʿīlī

philosophy has been free to draw on a far wider range of sources (both internal and external) for inspiration (Corbin 1984; Daftary 1990: 239–241).

Ismā'īlī use of Western neoplatonic thought is particularly noteworthy in the context of the present study, for it shows the ancient provenance of modern-day Ismā'īlī openness to intellectual borrowings from other cultures. Whereas various Sunnī and Ithnā 'Asharī schools have flirted with neoplatonism and other Western ideologies occasionally, few (if any) have embraced them so unreservedly or welcomed them so intimately to their hearts. This open-minded, intellectually omnivorous attitude is exemplified by an encyclopedic compendium of knowledge entitled *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa*, penned by Ismā'īlī authors before the Fātimid zenith (Netton 1991).

When today's Dā'ūdī Bohras seek out not only the technology but the education and ideology of the modern West, therefore, they are merely following the example set by their spiritual forerunners. "Seek knowledge," runs a *ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet, often cited by Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin, "even if it be in China." Ismā'īlīs have been harmoniously integrating the ideas of traditional Islam with those of outside societies for at least the past millennium.

As part of the ethnographic fieldwork underlying this chapter, 169 Bohra households containing 1,068 individuals were surveyed on various aspects of their demography, beliefs, and daily practices (for details of the methodology of this survey, and its admitted limitations, see Blank 2001: 7–10). When asked to select the most important aspects of their faith, an overwhelming ninety-four per cent cited direct, personal contact with the *Dā'ī* as among the most crucial. The category was ranked higher than any other element of orthopraxy, including *ḥajj*, pilgrimage to Kerbala, rituals of birth, *mīthāq* (the oath of allegiance taken by Bohras), marriage and death, eating *ḥalāl* food, personal ethics, ties with other Bohras (including endogamy), dress codes, or *ziyaret* (pilgrimage to Bohra shrines). Contact with the *Dā'ī* was not only deemed the most important aspect of orthopraxy in each of the four cities where the survey was conducted, it was rated number one by almost every respondent giving comparative rankings.

The *Dā'ī* embodies personal charisma to a degree very rarely found in Islam outside of certain Sufi traditions (Blank 2000: 474–475). This charisma is transferable to a wide array of objects: any item touched by the *Dā'ī* is believed to have ingrained merit. Not only did eighty-four per cent of survey respondents report having asked the *Dā'ī* to name their children, but a great many reported seeking scraps from his discarded clothing for their newborn babies' *chatti* garments. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported regularly seeking the blessing of Syedna or his *'āmil*s for their home or business, through the ritual of

alamat. The *Dāṭ* confers this blessing by inscribing the word *bismillāh* (Arabic for the words 'In the name of God') or its numerical stand-in ('786') on a plaque mounted on the wall of a new house or office, or on the first page of an account book for a new fiscal year.

This close contact between the *Dāṭ al-muṭlaq* and his flock is an essential element of Bohra identity, perhaps the strongest barrier against assimilation to the mainstream of Indian Islam. Until the thirteenth/nineteenth century the Bohra community was small and compact enough for such direct contact to be relatively easy: the population was heavily concentrated in Bombay and Gujarat, and most *mu'minīn* could have personal access to the *Dāṭ* on a fairly regular basis. As the denomination grew larger and farther-flung, however, this direct access became increasingly difficult. By the late thirteenth/nineteenth century, daily contact had come to be monopolised by the coterie of Surti families with kinship ties to the royal lineage of the *Dāṭ*s. This elite capture of the clergy served to weaken the institution: At precisely the period when Bohra businessmen were becoming wealthy and were monopolising access to the *Dāṭ*, the clergy dropped to its lowest level of influence and popular legitimacy in modern history. Without close, personal access to the *Dāṭ*, the faith could not have withstood the twin pressures of ossification and assimilation. It was in large measure to combat this trend that Syedna Taher Saifuddin began the process of modernisation, which served to reinvigorate the faith and bring the *Dāṭ* back into closer contact with the mass of believers.

4 Program of Modernisation and Islamisation

4.1 *Modernisation*

The modernisation piece of the century-long program has two overlapping goals. The first goal has been to provide community members access to the material, social and intellectual aspects of modern life enjoyed by their neighbors, thereby lessening the centrifugal force of assimilation which was pulling many Bohras away from the community in the early fourteenth/twentieth century. The second goal has been to draw community members closer to the clergy, and thereby to restore both clerical hegemony and spiritual unity. A key mechanism for the second goal has been adoption of all manner of modern communication technology and often the modernist ideology that accompanies it (cf. Asani 1994; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

In recent decades, Bohras have used modern technology to recapture the close access to their *Dāṭ* that had been the hallmark of their sect in previous centuries. This effort has not been an accident: it was carefully fostered first

by Syedna Taher Saifuddin and subsequently by Syedna Burhanuddin. Since at least the middle of the fourteenth/twentieth century the *da'wat* has eagerly latched onto every advance in communications: from telegram to telex, from fax to Federal Express, from transatlantic telephone to transpacific email. A Bohra living in Kolkata, seeking advice on whether to expand his hardware business into electrical fittings, need only email the *da'wat*'s headquarters at Badri Mahal to have his question relayed to the *Dā'ī* for consideration. A Bohra living in Auckland, seeking a scrap of Syedna's used clothing for her new baby's *chatti*-garment, can WhatsApp a Mumbai relative to have the cloth sent by the next morning's DHL.

Air travel has shrunk the world, and well into his elder years Syedna Burhanuddin (who lived to be 103 years old, by the Islamic calendar) regularly jetted across South Asia, Europe and Afria. His successors are certain to continue the practice. This hypermobility gives almost all Bohras the opportunity to see their spiritual leader face-to-face at least once in their lives. The *Dā'ī* visits his flock, and his flock visits the *Dā'ī*: eighty-two per cent of respondents in the aforementioned survey had seen Syedna in person more than five times.

The Bohras are hardly the only Muslim community to embrace modern communications technology, but they did so much earlier and with fewer reservations than most other groups. What truly distinguishes the Bohras from most other groups in the adoption of communications technology, however, is the holistic nature of their modernisation: Where some Islamists view Western technology with moral ambivalence (in the mid-1990s, for example, the Afghan Taliban used Russian tanks to crush VCRs, televisions and other examples of 'decadent' technology), the Bohras regard it as something beneficial even on its own merits. New technologies are not adopted solely for the sake of novelty, but anything brings the community closer, or simply makes life easier, is heartily encouraged.

Computer ownership, use, and literacy are far more prevalent in the Bohra community than in most other segments of Indian society. At time the survey associated with this study's fieldwork was conducted, the rate of computer ownership among the Bohra respondents was more than twenty times the national rate of Indonesia, more than ten times that of Thailand, nearly quadruple that of Malaysia, about fifty per cent higher than those of Taiwan or South Korea, and almost on par with that Japan. The rate for Karachi's Bohras was marginally higher than that of ultra-high-tech Singapore. Respondents were a whopping seventy-two times as likely to own a computer as was the contemporary norm in India (see Blank 2001: 176–178). Rates for Bohras and non-Bohras alike have risen since.

Bohras were on the Internet practically as soon as it became globally operational. By January 1995, three linked email networks had been initiated, and in their first year of operation grew to include several hundred subscribers in Canada, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Britain, and Egypt. One network was “a forum for *mu'mineen* [*mu'minīn*] professionals” to facilitate business ties, a second was for social or general messages, and the third was devoted to spiritual discussions. While not officially set up by the *da'wat*, its stated purpose is the dissemination of spiritual material. By the late 1990s, email had replaced the postal service as the primary pathway for Bohras to seek guidance or favors from the *Dā'ī al-muṭlaq*. Videos of important religious rituals were distributed as soon as broadband service made such access possible, and soon every appearance by the *Dā'ī al-muṭlaq* was viewable on YouTube within minutes of the rite's conclusion. Additional streaming services like Periscope now permit such rituals to be viewed in real time. A member of the community in Mombasa can keep track of her co-religionists' activities in the United States or Canada (to name just two) simply by checking the groups' Twitter feeds (@Bohras_USA and @Bohras_Canada).

Dissident websites and chat groups soon followed the orthodox community online, giving the movement a new avenue for its battle against *da'wat* authority. When Syedna Burhanuddin passed away in 1435/2014, the succession dispute between his son Mufaddal Saifuddin and his brother Khuzaima Qutbuddin immediately took to cyberspace. Both camps set up rival websites and Facebook pages almost instantly, and each used a full range of multimedia to support its claims with scanned documents, photographs, and videos of the late *Dā'ī*'s pivotal (and disputed) public designation of *nass* on his son.⁸

The most recent manifestation of the role played by modern technology in the shaping doctrinal issues is a still-raging controversy over a practice variously termed *khatna*, *khafṣ*, female circumcision, and Female Genital Cutting.⁹

8 Supporters of the *Dā'ī*'s son Mufaddal Saifuddin say that *nass* was given privately while Syedna Burhanuddin was in a London hospital, and reiterated at a public ceremony several months later. Supporters of the *Dā'ī*'s brother Khuzaima Qutbuddin say that Syedna Burhanuddin had secretly conveyed *nass* decades earlier, and that his public designation of his son Mufaddal is invalid since he had recently suffered a stroke. Each camp cites a video of the public designation to support its own interpretation of the event. The video of the ceremony, which took place on 19 *Rajab* 1432/21 June 2011, is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GegwG2Irv-Q>, accessed 31/10/2018. There is a more detailed discussion of this schism in Blank (2017). Khuzaima Qutbuddin passed away on 30 March 2016, after conferring *nass* (his supporters believe) on his son Taher Fakhruddin.

9 Even the nomenclature of the practice is controversial: Opponents often regard the first three terms as offensive, because they see these names as conferring an Islamic patina to a non-Islamic action; proponents object to the third, as well as to its ideologically-laden

While circumcision of boys is practiced almost universally throughout the Muslim world, the custom has no widely-accepted female counterpart (Boyle 2005). Before the Internet era, it was nearly impossible to offer an informed response to the question of whether such a practice occurred occasionally, frequently or almost never among the Dā'ūdī Bohras: During my initial fieldwork, all reports of which I became aware (whether through personal informants or mentions in the local press) were non-specific, and second- or third-hand. That is no longer the case:

Several recent studies published online (Taher 2017; Anantnarayan 2018) have used academic methodology to document the existence of the practice within the Bohra community, and to suggest that it may be far more common than had previously been assumed, even by community members themselves.¹⁰ The collection of data in these reports would not have been possible prior to the explosion in Internet access of the fifteenth/twenty-first century, and the online dissemination of this data has sparked a growing demand within the community (particularly from previously-under-represented women) for a top-down clerical banning of the practice. This demonstrates two points relevant to the current chapter:

First, these reformists are not necessarily challenging the theological status of the *da'wat*, indeed, some of them are hoping to use this status to implement a religiously-authoritative ban on a practice which they regard not merely as harmful, but as un-Islamic. Second, modernity (both technology, and the intellectual freedom that often accompanies it) works both ways: Just as the *da'wat* has used the tools of modernity to reestablish its own position as sole arbiter on issues of theology (a position that had fallen into serious question before the fourteenth/twentieth century reinvigoration), so too have community members used the tools of modernity to press their own interpretations

cousin 'Female Genital Mutilation', or FGM. The practise is well-documented in certain other communities, both Muslim and non-Muslim, in East and West Africa (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2001; Gruenbaum 2006) but is rarely documented in South Asian communities.

10 These studies surveyed a combined total of over 500 respondents: The study authored by Mariya Taher had 408 (Taher 2017: 45), and the one authored by Lakshmi Anantnarayan with research assistance from Shabana Diler and Natasha Menon had 94 (Anantnarayan 2018: 10). While both studies are associated with advocacy organisations—*Sahiyo* and *We Speak Out*, respectively—both conform to generally-accepted global standards for academic research. This topic is worthy of far more discussion than the current chapter can provide, but one point is of particular relevance here: These studies, and other reports rapidly emerging, have moved a topic that might previously have been left to family custom and clerical *firman* from the realm of *ad hoc* rule-making into the arena of wide-open social and theological debate.

of theological questions that most concern them. If the *da'wat* fails to address such interpretations, it may find the movement shifting quickly from reformist to rejectionist.

4.2 *Islamisation*

Throughout the fourteenth/twentieth centuries, but particularly during the reign of Syedna Burhanuddin, the *da'wat* has paired its embrace of modernity with an effort to re-institutionalise Islamic norms in a community which had run the risk of cultural absorption to the Indian mainstream. Modern technology enabled the clergy to gain increased control over community members' orthopraxy, for example, by instituting a program whereby all Bohras seeking *da'wat* services are issued green, yellow and red cards indicating their level of compliance with doctrine and practice. The process is bureaucratised and (in many sites) computerised, and would have been extremely difficult to implement without the tools of modernity. Perhaps the most visible symbol of the Islamisation project (a term used in this chapter to denote a top-down communal emphasis on Islamic orthopraxy), is the mandated code of dress and personal appearance for all Bohras worldwide.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Syedna Burhanuddin issued several pronouncements setting out guidelines for dress and personal comportment by all observant Bohras. The two most important of these were a 1399/1979 directive that male Bohras should wear a beard and female Bohras should dress in a *burqa*, and a 1401/1981 instruction setting the normative male dress code as white *topi*, *kurta* and *sherwani*. The modern dress code is both a reaffirmation of preexisting practice and the introduction of novel elements to create a uniform, coherent 'tradition' in place of a less standardised array of customs. Prior to the 1401/1981 *firman*, for example, Bohra men had often dressed in white clothing and headgear, but often had worn other colors as well. The newly-mandated use of white makes Bohras immediately distinguishable from Ithnā 'Asharī Shī'a, who often favor black clothing for both men and women. Prior to 1401/1981, Bohra headgear had not been uniform. In colonial times there were at least four types of turban commonly worn; by the middle of the fourteenth/twentieth century, turbans were being worn primarily by clerics, with laymen favoring smaller, less elaborate skullcaps. For ritual settings, however, laymen would often wear a *feta*, a pre-shaped, permanently-coiled turban of gold silk, now seen primarily among the older generation. The specific type of *topi* now deemed mandatory is only rarely seen in pre-1401/1981 photographs, and is subtly different from the headgear of other Muslim communities.

Bohra women are required to keep their bodies covered from ankles to shoulders with a *burqa* and to wear a special style of *rida* (veil). A Bohra

rida—which is essentially unique to the denomination—is less like a veil *per se* than like a bonnet: it covers the hair, neck, shoulders and upper chest, but leaves the entire face exposed. The *rida* has flaps on either side of the face, so that a woman can (if she is particularly scrupulous to detail) obscure her mouth and nose when conversing with a man outside her family; this seems, however, to be most commonly observed in the breach.

Boutiques in many Bohra neighborhoods advertise a wide array of 'fancy *ridas*' (any *rida* with a colorful pattern), and this technicolor exuberance of dress immediately sets Bohra women apart from those of most other Indian Muslim communities. At important social or religious functions, it is not uncommon for a Bohra woman go through three or four changes of 'fancy *rida*' during the course of a day's varied activities. In a conscious attempt to distinguish themselves from Sunnis and Ithnā 'Ashariyya, Bohra women seldom wear plain black clothing. Prior to the mandated dress code, Bohra women had often adopted the clothing styles of their Hindu neighbors.

Close examination of a 1395/1975 Gujarati text entitled *Gulshan-e Malumat* (Raik 1975) yields an extremely valuable baseline for analysis of the *da'wat*'s dress code reforms. Privately published in a limited edition distributed to various *da'wat* offices, the *Gulshan* is a 'Who's Who' of important Bohra community leaders throughout the world. The directory contains photographs of 3,177 men: 2,078 residing in India, 1,099 residing abroad.¹¹ Of these dignitaries—who can be assumed to represent a higher-than-average level of orthopraxy—a mere thirty-seven per cent were in compliance with dress and appearance guidelines that are normative today. While the association of wearing a beard with the *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad is well-established, a solid majority of men pictured in the *Gulshan* had stopped wearing beards by the 1970s.¹²

11 As in most official or semi-official Bohra texts, for reasons of modesty no photographs of women are printed.

12 Nearly one-quarter (twenty-three per cent) of those living in India are shown in wholly untraditional ways (generally in Western clothing with no beard, but occasionally in Indian garb unassociated with Bohras). Well over another quarter (twenty-nine per cent) wear Bohra headgear but no beard, indicating easy mobility between the traditional and nontraditional worlds: all of these men could put on a *topi* for a photograph or for official occasions, but would blend perfectly well into the Indian or Western mainstream as soon as they removed their headgear. For Bohras living outside of India, only sixteen per cent had an appearance that would be acceptable today. When figures for India and other countries are combined, the population of over three thousand individuals breaks down roughly into thirds: thirty-seven per cent have a traditional appearance, thirty per cent have semi-traditional appearance (community headgear, but no beards), and thirty-three per cent offer wholly non-traditional self-presentations.

If such a work were published today, it is highly unlikely that *any* of the more than three thousand men pictured would present themselves without a beard or dressed in anything other than uniform *topi/kurta*. In every *da'wat* publication examined for this study, and every Bohra function attended during the course of the fieldwork on which it is based, adherence to mandated community dress codes has been close to universal. Dress is but one element of orthopraxy—but it is among the most visible, and stands as a statistically-measurable proxy for a much wider range of behaviors (including fasting during Ramadan, avoidance of alcohol, and communal prayer) that the Bohra *da'wat* monitors with similar attention.

5 Conclusion

As Margaret Mead noted, “Technical change is as old as civilisation. Since time immemorial the ways of people have been transformed by the introduction of new tools and new technical procedures” (Mead 1953: 9). There would be little noteworthy about the Bohras’ modernisation if it were limited to the adoption of technological conveniences. What makes the program remarkable is its use of both ‘hardware’ (technology) and ‘software’ (modernist ideas, particularly in the educational field)—to reinvigorate core beliefs. The Muslim world has seen instances of reformers using Western practices to downgrade the position of Islam in society—for example, in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s Turkey (Okyar 1984; Rahman 1984), or Mohammad Shah Reza Pahlavi’s Iran (Yalman 1991; Ansari 2001). The use of modern pedagogy and a Western intellectual framework paired with a re-institutionalisation of Islamic orthopraxy, however, is far less common.

Syedna Taher Saifuddin began promoting modern education about a century ago, and he is generally credited for the attitudinal sea change on Western pedagogy that has swept the community since that time. There are currently more than 350 Bohra schools throughout the world, all of them operating under the late *Dā'īs* educational philosophy of combining Western and Islamic learning into a single curriculum. The highest centers of Bohra education are three universities, the *Jamea-tus-Saifiyah* campuses in Surat (India) Karachi (Pakistan), and Nairobi (Kenya), whose students must all follow a full curriculum of both Western and Islamic subjects.¹³ When asked to state the highest

13 The Jamea-tus-Saifiyah was first established, in a less ambitious form, in the 1224/1814 in Surat, and became the cause of considerable contention between the clergy and dissident reformists before the *da'wat* established full control in the fourteenth/twentieth century. The Karachi campus was inaugurated in 1404/1983. Construction of the Nairobi campus

level of education attained by any member of their household, ninety-one per cent of respondents to the survey cited secondary school or higher; only fifty-eight per cent of the same families reported such educational levels for their previous generation. Such a survey, if carried out today, would almost certainly yield even higher numbers.

This adoption of Western pedagogical philosophy is directly related to unusually high levels of female education in the community: eighty-nine per cent of survey respondents reported full educational parity between the male and female members of their extended families. This is not an accident: over forty years ago, Syedna Burhanuddin explicitly directed Bohra families to provide equal educations to their daughters and sons alike. Education has led to economic and social empowerment: in the space of just two generations, Bohra women have moved into the professional world at a pace that would have astonished their grandmothers. Today, the presence of Bohra women (often wearing community dress and observing other elements of Islamic orthopraxy) in professions such as medicine, finance, law or scientific research is so common as to be almost quotidian.

Many traditionalist Muslim communities have adopted modern technology while rejecting the educational philosophy and other ideas accompanying it. A smaller number of Muslim groups—for example, the Nizārī Ismā'īlī followers of the Aga Khan—have taken on Western education and ideology even more unreservedly than the Bohras, but have placed less emphasis on using these ideas to re-institutionalise Islamic orthopraxy. Dā'udī Bohras have eagerly done both: they have enthusiastically embraced key elements of modern ideology as well as technology, but paired this embrace with a conscious attempt to re-invigorate doctrines and traditions that were losing ground to assimilationist pressures of the wider society. This is perhaps the most noteworthy and unusual part of the Dā'udī Bohra identity program, and bears study by scholars of other traditionalist communities facing similar challenges.

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