

South Asia

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Women Pilgrims Boons and Bonds in an Ismaili Sect

The religious life of the Daudi Bohras – an Ismaili sect of South Asian Shi'i Muslims – comprises a rich pattern of beliefs and rituals. Its members adhere to seven pillars of Islam. Besides the well-known five, the other two include *walaya*, or devotion to the Prophet and his relations, and obedience to the twenty-first hidden imam. Visits to tomb shrines constitute a significant expression of devotional observances. Distinct from the Hajj, this type of pilgrimage is known as *ziyaret* in Bohra usage. The following concentrates on domestic pilgrimages or visits to tombs of *dais** (leaders of the missionary effort) and other functionaries in India.

The Daudi Bohras are an endogamous Gujarati-speaking group, numbering a million and scattered across fifty countries, the largest concentration being in South Asia. They are urban-based, the majority living in their ethnic enclaves, and are small shopkeepers, with professionals among their youth. As a sect, the Daudi Bohras are relatively prosperous. The religious life is overseen by a hierarchically organized, exclusively male class of clerics headquartered in Mumbai city. The spiritual leader is variously known as *dai*, *syedna* or *maula*. The *syedna* is the custodian of all shrines and under him the religious establishment works like a corporate structure, offering spiritual services in exchange for cash or kind. Although women may be more visible at shrines than men, they play no role in their management.

The missionary effort of the sect was transferred from Yemen to India in the 16th century and thereafter *dais* of Indian origin graced the leadership. The tombs of the twenty-seven *dais* (numbers 25 to 51) and their deputies constitute the sacred space in India. This space stretches across four states in northwestern India, including fifty sacred spots, the highest density of which is found in the state of Gujarat, home to the largest concentration of the Bohras. While Bohras previously travelled annually on saint's day for *ziyaret*, the post-independence spurt in year round travel may be attributed to the *syedna's* agenda to modernize the facilities as well as the prosperity of the community from migration and expansion of road and rail connections.

A shrine in Galiakot.

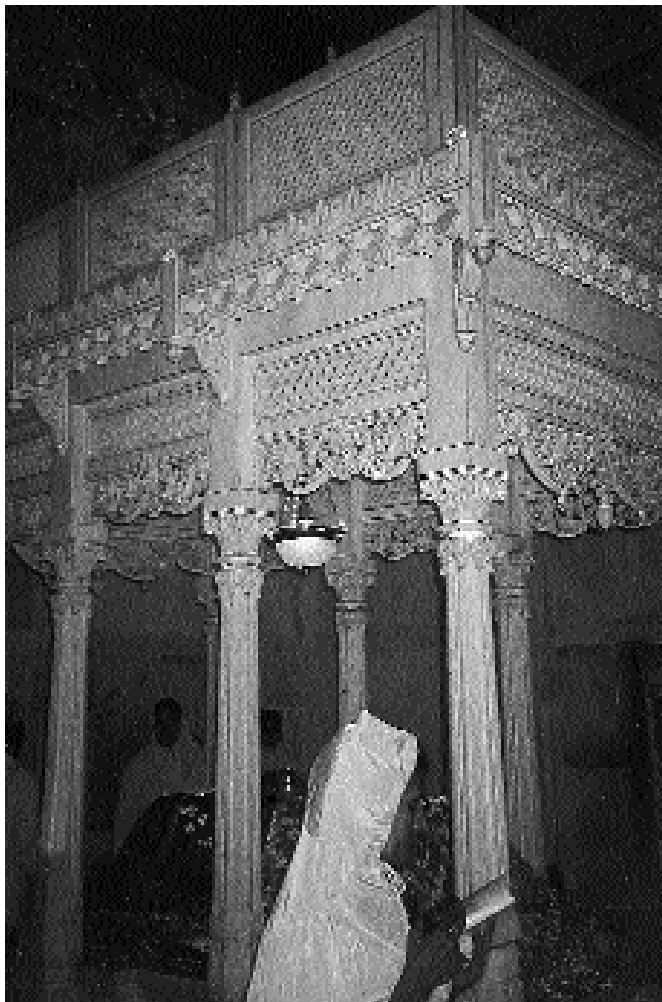


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Pilgrims, sacred journeys, and other trips

Love for the prophet and his relations is incumbent on all believers and in the spirit of this obligation, the faithful – irrespective of class, gender, age, educational background and geographic location – undertake the sacred journeys to tomb shrines (*ziyaret*). However, women more than men (middle-aged and older women more than younger women) and the orthodox take this journey. On the occasion of the saint's day a substantial presence of men can be witnessed. The older men come to sponsor meals and the younger to serve the influx of pilgrims. Pilgrimages are never solitary journeys. Women travel with their families or with their husbands, but more importantly in all women's groups. They travel by train, hired vehicles, and state-run or private buses and taxis. A common method is to travel by train to a major shrine centre and hire a vehicle to complete a selected circuit. By far the most popular circuit is the density of shrines in the state of Gujarat, popularly referred to as *Kathiawar ni ziyaret*, which takes eight to ten days.

In addition to the common practice of travelling for *ziyaret*, women also travel for domestic, social, leisure, and business purposes making practised Islam indistinguishable from other aspects of their lives. In short, shrines provide vital links to what is central to a woman's world. Given the expansion of women's motives to travel, shrines have evolved from being exclusive centres of devotion to being refuges from domestic and urban life, serving as picnic spots or even holiday resorts that provide inexpensive lodging facilities.

Devotion and earthly boons

The devotional expression of the Daudi Bohras is simple and requires no presence of a cleric. Unlike the mosque and the community hall, space is not gendered inside the shrine. Women do need to be ritually clean and the covering dress (*rida*) is mandatory. Men may be in traditional attire or Western clothes. The pilgrims enter the mausoleum (*roza*) barefooted and with their heads covered. They bend from the waist, moving the right hand rapidly between the floor and the forehead, signifying greeting. As a mark of respect they half prostrate before the tomb. They then press their forehead and kiss the sides of the tomb. Additional devotional expression may include an offering of flowers or cash, and prayer. These are usually accompanied by a small request.

The Bohra worldview gives insight into women's motivation for undertaking the pilgrimage. One such motivation is the belief that every earthly possession is a gift from God and that piety thus enhances the possibility of material provisioning. Furthermore, one can accumulate religious merit (*sevab*) from devotional acts, which can offset the weight of minor sins. Although the primary intention of the women is to express devotion and reaffirm their faith in their spiritual leaders, it is quite clear that no woman leaves the shrine without making a request. The most powerful method is to pray, express one's wishes, and express hopes for an earthly boon.

Whereas visits to shrines of *dais* are motivated by respect and the hope to have a request fulfilled, pilgrimages to shrines of holy men known for their service and sacrifice are motivated by the taking of vows. The frequency and nature of vows vary with gender and age. Women take more vows than men, older and middle-aged women doing so more than younger women. Unlike Hindu women's fasting vows, which focus on the well-being of sons and husbands, Bohra women take vows for their own concerns, followed by vows taken for the benefit of their children and the family as a unit. The content of women's requests and vows reflects traditional life cycle concerns. Vows related to children centre on their health and safety. A popular vow is one taken with a view to the economic sustenance (*rozi*) of the family. Men's vows are generally related to (un)employment and success in business.

Vows may be fulfilled by a variety of acts or gifts. Acts may include undertaking a pilgrimage for a stipulated number of days or a pilgrimage on saint's day; or sponsoring a sweet dish, a meal tray for eight, or a religious gathering followed by a meal for all. Occasionally a ritual sacrifice of a goat may constitute the fulfilment of a vow. All meal-related offerings involve cash payment to the clerics. Gifts may include a bed of flowers (*chaddar*) or richly embroidered silk and velvet tomb covers (*ghalef*). More commonly, dates or other fruits and sweets are blessed at the tomb and distributed among those present. Vow-related offerings must be construed as the giving of thanks for the saint's blessing and intercession, thus not as an exchange for boons delivered, for even in the absence of boons these must be honoured. Lastly, women undertake pilgrimages as an act of piety with the intent to accumulate merit.

Status quo or emancipation?

The pilgrimage ritual may be conceptualized as serving a political and social purpose. Women's hegemony over popular Islam can be seen as their having strategically hijacked a ritual to suit their own needs and concerns. Secondly, through a tripartite division of labour, women counteract the economic control of the men and the ideological hold of the religious establishment maintaining a power balance within the family and the sect. The spheres are unequal in status and prestige, but each is vital and all are strongly interdependent. Women cherish the gender roles prescribed within Islam. At the same time, within the bounds of a traditional setting, they increasingly negotiate the distribution of power and resources within the household and the community.

It is important to contextualize what constitutes emancipation. At the micro-level, education, control over personal property, assistance in family business and power within kinship networks have given women space to enhance their status. At the macro-level, the economy must allow for jobs that provide enough pay and status to make them worthwhile. With limited opportunities for well-paid employment, coupled with perceived discrimination of Muslims in the

job market, women are predisposed to structure their status within the conventional framework. Piety is a source of protection to women providing opportunities for agency and action. A woman's ability to communicate with the *dais* and to evoke their favour is the same as that of a man. Given the primacy of traditional gender roles it is not surprising that women seek control over sexuality and reproduction. Through the popular vow taken with a view to economic sustenance, women's centrality in (the success of) their family businesses is symbolically assured, and by implication their role in the sustenance of the sect is acknowledged.

By portraying saints as androgynous – having male qualities but more importantly female qualities such as service and sacrifice – the pilgrimage ritual is an occasion to celebrate femininity. Through devotional engagements women have assured control over personal time and surplus family income. As one male noted: 'When women ask to go to *ziyaret*, men immediately open their pockets.' Sacred journeys widen women's horizons and offer valuable lessons in negotiating with the world on their own.

Besides being a pious exercise, the pilgrimage is a significant part of women's social life. On the road in a mini-bus, women pray in unison, roll the *tasbi* (strung beads), talk, joke, munch on snacks and stop by the wayside to eat and drink. The marble platform (*sen*) around the tomb and the benches outside the rooms provide space for interacting, sharing common concerns and exchanging news about the happenings in the community. Bonds are fostered as women mix with (female) strangers in the (segregated) activities of prayer at the shrine mosque, religious gatherings and communal meals. Despite the vibrant character of the women's sub-culture, it is not aimed at revolutionizing the power structure maintained in the (male-dominated) economic and religious spheres. It is rather aimed at extracting greater freedom and improvement of the status of Bohra women. Since these devotional practices do not challenge the primary duties of women as homemakers and the wider culture remains indifferent to their aspirations, a genuine transformation of their status remains problematic.

Note

* The plural for *dai* is *dai duat*. I have used *dais* for smoother reading.

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