
SHABBIR HUSSAIN MUSTAFA
(B.A. (Hons.), NUS)

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Between Community and Secularism
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Bibliography
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I take sole responsibility for the many imperfections in this work. None of the individuals whose assistance I have acknowledged is in any way liable.
SUMMARY

The Dawoodi Bohras are a small Islamic community concentrated in the Indian subcontinent, with an increasing diaspora over the past three decades. An Ismaili group, the community traces its creed back to the 10th century Fatimids of Cairo and remains relatively undocumented. Located as a critical enquiry into the historical contingencies which have shaped Bohra self-identity in late-colonial and post-colonial India, this thesis focuses on internal debates within the community about agendas of ‘reform’ during the tenure of two High Priests of the community, namely, Syedna Taher Saifuddin (1915–1965) and his successor Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin (1965–present). It looks at the ideas and works of those individuals and groups who attempted to critique the authority of the High Priests over spiritual and temporal matters of the community by raising these agendas of ‘reform’. In doing so, the thesis problematises issues of theological authority embodied in the institution of the High Priest and engages with questions of jurisdiction over family and civil law matters and control over community resources and institutions. It focuses on the period c. 1915–1985, during which the Reformists initially used lawsuits under newly introduced legislation by the colonial state to put pressure on Syedna Taher Saifuddin to recognise the need to ‘modernise’ the community. The High Priest responded with selective re-adaptation of Fatimid beliefs to legitimise his position. He also increasingly used modern technologies such as print, rail and air travel, as well as modern organisational systems to expound his ideas.

In the context of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin’s tenure as High Priest (post-1965), taking advantage of the post-colonial ‘secular’ state, the Reformists harnessed print media and civil society institutions in an attempt to undermine the authority of the High Priest. Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin responded by embracing secularism, eschewing Islamic extremism and reasserting the ideals of self-reliance. The landmark 1979 Conference of Fatimi Knowledge (al-Multaqa al-Fatimi al-Ilmi) symbolised these measures, which were aimed at achieving greater cohesion within the community. In overall terms, the High Priest succeeded in re-invoking bonds of culture, traditions and the past embodied in community institutions. He also addressed many of the issues raised by the Reformists, while never acknowledging their locus standi. In a wider sense, the thesis ends with a discussion about the community’s contemporary identity mix and how ideas of devotion to the High Priest operate trans-nationally, reinforced by the annual Ashura commemorations, which take place at different locations around the world.
GLOSSARY

Aga Khan
The leader of Nizari Ismailis. While Dawoodi Bohras believe that the Imam is in concealment and represented by the Dai-al-mutlaq, the Khojas believe that the Aga khan is the hazir (‘present’) Imam.

Ahl al-bayt
People of the household. Refers to the family of Prophet Muhammad, especially his descendents through his daughter Fatemah and son-in-law Ali.

Aisaheba
Title given to the wife of Dai-al-mutlaq

Ajraf/Ashraf
Two broad categories of Indian Muslims. Ajraf communities (the overwhelming majority, a group that includes the Bohras) are descendents of indigenous converts. Whereas Ashraf communities are descendents of Afghans, Persians, Arabs, or other Muslim ruling elites from outside the subcontinent.

Amilsaheb
Assistant cleric in the Bohra hierarchy who serves as the Dai’s personal representative in a given locality. The title is often translated as ‘priest’, a term that would be out of place in almost any Islamic context other than an Ismaili one.

Ashura
The tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram, which commemorates the martyrdom of the grandson of Prophet Mohammad, Imam Husain and his 72 faithful followers in Karbala in 61H/680AD.

Ayatollah
The highest rank of Ithna-Ashari clerics.

Badri Mahal
Located in downtown Mumbai, is the office from where matters of the Bohra Dawat are administered.

Bania
Member of a Gujarati mercantile caste or community. Bania communities include Bohras, Khojahs, Memons, Parsis and various subgroup of Jains and Hindus.

Baraat
Social ostracism imposed by the Bohra Dawat. Since outright excommunication is legally precarious in India since the Prevention of Excommunication Act was introduced in 1949, the Dawat has relied on baraat to achieve somewhat similar purposes. (Not to be confused with similar words meaning ‘wedding party’ or ‘India’)

Batin
Secret theological doctrines and esoteric meanings of Islamic orthodoxy.

Bhaisaheb
Bhai referring to ‘brother’, the appellation given to every Bohra man. Bhaisaheb is the title reserved for men of the Qasr-e Ali.

Brahmin/Brahman
The highest of four varnas (‘classes’) in the Hindu caste system. Several Bohra families claim descent from priestly Brahmans rather than mercantile Vaishyas.

Burqa
Modest dress worn by traditional Muslim woman. For Bohras, the wearing of a burqa is a central part of the post-1980s Islamization program.

Caliph
‘Successor’, i.e., successor to the Prophet Mohammad. The eleventh through the twentieth Ismaili Imam (as reckoned by the Bohras) ruled the Fatimid Empire with the title of caliph.

Crore
An Indian mathematical unit equalling 10 million.
**Dai**

‘Missionary’. In Fatimid usage, a cleric involved in propagation of the faith. In contemporary Bohra usage, shorthand for the Dai-al-mutlaq.

**Dai-al-mutlaq**

The apex cleric of the Bohra community. The Dai-al-mutlaq is believed to be in contact with hidden Imam. This title was of only intermediate rank in the Fatimid hierarchy. All orthodox Bohras pledge to obey the dictates of the Dai al-mutlaq in both spiritual and temporal matters.

**Dawat**


**Dawr-al-satr**

Period of concealment, during which the Imam lives in the world but is hidden away even from his own followers. Ismailis of both the Nizari and Mustali branches believe a *Dawr-al-satr* encompassed the reigns of the seventh to the tenth imams (148-268H/765-881AD). Bohras believe a second *Dawr-al-satr* began when the twenty-first imam entered concealment in 526H/1132AD.

**Deen**

Matters of spiritual (as opposed to strictly temporal) concern.

**Dua**

Blessing, prayer.

**Dunya**

Matters of worldly (as opposed to strictly spiritual) concern.

**Durgah**

Mausoleum. In Bohra usage, typically the Mausoleum of a Dai or Sayyedi.

**Fatimi/Fatimid**

Spiritual descendent of Fathema, the Prophet Mohammad’s daughter.

**Fatimid Empire**

Based in Cairo, and at its height including most of North Africa and the Near East was the most powerful and historically significant example of an Ismaili state. Bohras regard themselves as the spiritual and cultural inheritors of the Fatimid caliphate, and guardians of the Fatimid tradition.

**Feta**

A pre-wound turban of gold silk worn by Bohra men instead of a topi on special occasions.

**Fiqh**

Islamic jurisprudence, the science of law.

**Firman**

‘Royal directive’. For Bohras, a directive from the Dai.

**Fitra**

‘Islamic tax’. Among Bohras, paid together with *Sila* during Ramadan.

**Hadith**

A saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.

**Hafiz**

One who knows the Quran by heart.

**Haj**

Pilgrimage to Mecca undertaken during the month of *zyl-hajj*.

**Haqiqat**


**Hukm**

‘Official command’. In Bohra usage, a directive from the Dai.

**Imam**

‘Spiritual leader’. In Sunni usage, the term is generally applied to the prayer leader at the local mosque. In Shia usage it can have this meaning, but is more significantly applied to one of the infallible intermediaries between God and man. *Ithna Ashari* recognize twelve imams before the period of occultation, while Bohras recognize twenty-one before *satr*.

**Iman**

‘Faith’.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ismaili</td>
<td>One of the two major surviving branches of Shia Islam. Bohras, like other Ismailis, get their name from their acceptance of Ismail ibn Jafar as the appointed spiritual successor (‘Imam’) to Jafar as-Sadiq, wherein they differ from the Twelvers, who accept Musa al-Kazim, younger brother of Ismaill, as the true Imam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ithna Ashari</td>
<td>The predominant Shia denomination. Also called Twelver.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jamaat</td>
<td>Assembly. In Bohra usage, a local Bohra community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaatkhana</td>
<td>The building that serves as the social and cultural (as opposed to spiritual) center for a local Bohra community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kal masum</td>
<td>The spiritual state of the Bohra Dai-al-mutlaq. The difference between kal masum and masum (immaculate and infallible, the spiritual state of an Imam) is subtle, but important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khidmat</td>
<td>‘Service’. For Bohras, serving as part of the clerical hierarchy, or volunteering at community events and occasions. Khidmat can also mean financial service in the form of generous contributions to the Dawat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khojah</td>
<td>Indian Nazari Ismaili who recognize the Aga Khan as the living Imam. The Khojahs, like the Bohras, are a community of Gujarati banias concentrated in Mumbai and metropolitan centers around the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurta</td>
<td>A white cotton shirt, reaching down to the knees. For Bohras, an essential part of the male Quam-e-Libas (‘community dress’) instituted by Syedna Mohammad Buhanuddin in the early 1980s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakh</td>
<td>An Indian mathematical unit equaling 100,000.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madrasa</td>
<td>Islamic school providing higher education. The transnational Bohra network of Burhani Madrasas combines Islamic and Western subjects in the same curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majlis</td>
<td>‘Council’. In Bohra terminology, a religion ceremony less formal than a waaz.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maktab</td>
<td>A rudimentary Islamic school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masjid</td>
<td>Mosque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masum</td>
<td>‘Infallible’ and ‘immaculate’. In Bohra doctrine the Imam is masum, while the Dai is kal masum (‘like’ masum).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maulana/Moula</td>
<td>An honorific title given to Muslim clerics. In the Bohra community, the title is reserved for the Dai-al-mutlaq.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazoon</td>
<td>The second-highest cleric in the Bohra hierarchy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milad</td>
<td>Birth date of Prophet Mohammad, an Imam, or (for the Bohras) a Dai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misaq</td>
<td>Oath of allegiance to God and the Dai-al-mutlaq. Under taken by all observant Bohras upon reaching puberty as a prime rite of passage. The oath is repeated annually during the month of zyl-Haj.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miyasaheb</td>
<td>Honor given to a Bohra Sheikh who has earned his title through devotion rather than financial contributions.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mohalla</strong></td>
<td>In Bohra usage, a neighborhood or administrative unit for Dawat organization.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Muharram</strong></td>
<td>The first month of the Islamic year.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mukasir</strong></td>
<td>The third-ranking cleric in the Bohra Dawat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mullah</strong></td>
<td>In Bohra usage, the title is given to any man authorized to lead prayers. The title of Mullah is lower than that of Shaikh or Amil, and is awarded to graduates of the Al-Jamea-tus-Saifiyah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mumineen</strong></td>
<td>‘Faithful’. In General Islamic usage, a Muslim. In Bohra usage, the term is reserved for members of the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Musafirkhana</strong></td>
<td>‘Pilgrims lodge’ maintained near a Bohra shrine.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mustali</strong></td>
<td>One of the two surviving branches of the Ismailis. Bohras represent the only significant group of Mustali Ismailis in the modern world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nas</strong></td>
<td>‘Transfer of Traditions’. For Bohras, the designation of a Dai-al-mutlaq by his predecessor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nizari</strong></td>
<td>One of the two major branches of Ismailis. The Nizaris are today represented by Khojahs and other followers of the Aga Khan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pagri</strong></td>
<td>‘Turban’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purdah</strong></td>
<td>For Bohra women, purdah (‘seclusion’) is considerably less restrictive than for the woman of many other communities. It primarily consists of avoiding physical contact with or revealing hair and body contours to men other than one’s husband or blood relatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Qarzan Hasanah</strong></td>
<td>Trust established for granting of zero-interest loans. Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin has made this system of Islamic finance important component of the Bohra identity mix.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Qasr-e-Ali</strong></td>
<td>The ‘Royal Family’ of the Bohra community.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Qaum</strong></td>
<td>‘Community’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Qiblah</strong></td>
<td>Direction of Muslim prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quran</strong></td>
<td>The revealed scripture of Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Raza</strong></td>
<td>‘Permission’. In the Bohra community, mumineen often ask the raza of the Dai for any major decisions or actions to be undertaken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rida</strong></td>
<td>‘Veil’. Bohra woman wear a rida that covers the hair, neck and chest, but not the face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rupee</strong></td>
<td>Indian unit of currency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Salat</strong></td>
<td>Prayer, offered five times daily (Arabic equivalent of the Urdu/Persian/Turkish word ‘namaz’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shadi</strong></td>
<td>For Hindus, marriage. For Bohras the social (as opposed to religious) aspect of a wedding celebration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shahzada/Shahzedi</strong></td>
<td>Prince/Princess. Title given to the sons and daughter of a Bohra Dai.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>-------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaikh</td>
<td>‘Elder’. A title given by the Dai-al-mutlaq to individuals who have provided loyal Khidmat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufi</td>
<td>The mystical strain of Islam. A Sufi master is known as a Shaikh in Arabic or Pir in Persian, and leads an established order (‘tariqa’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surti</td>
<td>Resident of Gujarati city of Surat, or descendant of a Surat native. Among the Bohras, a de facto aristocratic class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syedna</td>
<td>Honorific title by which the Bohra Dai-al-mutlaq is commonly known.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahara</td>
<td>‘Cleanliness’, ‘purity’. For Ismailis, one of the seven pillars of the faith. Like all pillars of the faith, it can be understood in zahir (‘apparent’) or batin (‘esoteric’) terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taqqiya</td>
<td>‘Dissimulation’. A right (even an obligation) for Shias when faced with religious oppression. Practiced by the Bohras throughout much of their history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayyibi</td>
<td>The sole surviving school of Mustali Ismailis. Named on the 21st Imam Tayyib. In theological terms, Bohras are Tayyibi Mustali Ismaili Shia Muslims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulema</td>
<td>Religious scholars, men learned in ilm (‘spiritual knowledge’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ummah</td>
<td>Community, especially the community of all mumineen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urs</td>
<td>‘Death anniversary’. For Bohras, particularly the death anniversary of a Dai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waaz</td>
<td>Formal gathering in which the Dai delivers a sermon from a ceremonial throne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallaya</td>
<td>Devotion to the family of the Prophet. One of the seven pillars of Shia Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wali</td>
<td>Legatee or stand-in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zahir</td>
<td>Exoteric aspects of faith, as laid in the apparent meaning of the Quran and Sharia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER

2. ‘IN THE COLONIAL PUBLIC SPHERE’: SYEDNA TAHER SAIFUDDIN AND THE EARLY REFORMISTS

2.1 Bohras protesting in Bombay against the imposition of the Wakf Act. Source: ‘Procession of Dawoodi Bohras in Bombay’, *Times of India*, August 8, 1931. 56

3. ‘IN DEFENSE OF COMMUNITY’: SYEDNA TAHER SAIFUDDIN AND THE REASSERTION OF AUTHORITY

3.1 Accompanied by Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, Governor of Bombay Roger Lumley viewing the Zari, 1940. Source: ‘Canopy of Silver and Gold: Sir R. Lumley Sees Fine Work of Art’, *Times of India*, 15/11/1940. 63


Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

‘Who are these Dawoodi Bohras?’

He then talked of Heaven and said the surest way to go thither was by conciliating the friendship of the Mullaji or the Bora’s high priest. But in one thing Adamji bin Didamji differs very materially from every other Gujarati – he has really no taste for politics. He is callous as to the political management of the country. He has infinite faith in the Government, next only in intensity to his faith in the Mullaji. The strongest political agitation in Adamji bin Didamji’s country would fail to strike a responsive chord in his heart. He is a lover of peace. He will put himself to any amount of inconvenience; he will sacrifice anything to secure peace. Peace to Adamji is a priceless blessing; and knowing that a discussion of political questions has a disturbing tendency, he will always refrain from politics. He neither hates nor loves politics; it is a question of stolid imperturbable indifference.1

Citing an attitude of ‘indifference’ to politics, the writer and intellectual, B. M. Malabari, sketched a picture of his ‘Bohra’ friend Adamji bin Didamji in 1884. Malabari, also a social reformer, could not have been more correct. Although it would take another century for scholars of Shia Islam to coin the term ‘apolitical quietism’ as a means of describing the Dawoodi Bohra community’s attitude towards political participation, as this thesis highlights, Malabari was also witness to a crucial historical moment as the community was about to enter the throes of change and ‘modernisation’ at a pace never seen before. Presenting numerous hurdles, the 20th century would test the community and its leadership, to not just transform, but also re-organise and establish a unique identity mix that is at once ‘Islamic’ and unique to the denomination.

Although figures vary, today, the majority of Bohras reside within the Indian subcontinent, where it may be noted that the Shia Muslim community is broadly divided into two major groups: the *Ithna Asharis* or Twelver Shias and the smaller Ismaili sects. According to Jonah Blank, writing in the late 1990s, “the Daudi Bohras have about 470 major communities spread out over forty nations across the world” with both *Dawat* and dissident sources, placing the worldwide population at one million.2 In terms of greater global aggregates, a report in the *Khaleej Times*, a Dubai newspaper, notes that there are about 30,000 Bohras residing across the Gulf.3 And about 50,000 Bohras spread across North America and Europe.4 The largest concentration is in Western India, followed by Pakistan.

As was the case for the majority of mercantile communities in India, the coming of colonial rule presented a number of complications for the Dawoodi Bohras. From the

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3 In Bombay, a city that helped make the Bohras and gave them their present-day dynamics, there are large *mohallas* like Bhindi Bazaar and its adjoining vicinity along Mohemadali Road where many Bohras have their homes, shops, schools, mosques and community halls. There is also a significant concentration of about 5,000 Bohras in Sri Lanka, a case we return to in a later chapter. In Southeast Asia, there is a *jamaat* of about 1,000 in Singapore and Malaysia respectively, with numbers in Indonesia sketchy but one official put it at about 500, with large concentrations in Bali and Jakarta. The next largest concentrations outside of South Asia and North America are in East Africa, especially in Kenya, Tanzania and Madagascar. However, since the 1950s and especially after the 1970s, an increasing number of Bohras have left East Africa for North America and Europe. Much of the movement has also involved younger members of the community completing their studies in Britain, Canada and USA and then staying on. See Desh Gupta, ‘South Asians in East Africa: Achievement and discrimination’, *South Asia*, 21, 1 (1998), pp. 103–136.

4 In an interview conducted by Aminah Mohammed Arif in the mid-1990s with Shehzada Moin Mohiuddin Bhaisaheb, who was himself a resident of Pennsylvania, cited the figure of 4,000 Bohras living in the United States. As with the Nizaris, many of the Bohra families living in the US today migrated from East Africa after the 1970s, with a steady stream of Bohras choosing to migrate from South Asia for economic and professional reasons after the 1990s. However, according to an informal interview conducted with the local *Amil* (‘cleric’) of Los Angeles in 2006, he cited as many as 3,000 Bohras living in California alone, with Houston boasting a *jamaat* of about 1,000. In the transnational context, it is important to note that religious ceremonies are usually conducted in the *markaz* or a community centre, which is converted into a space for worship given the lack of a formal Bohra *masjid*. In the USA, there are multiple sites where temporary *markazes* are established during Muharram, for instance. In terms of *masjids* in North America, Detroit was the city that saw the establishment of the first Bohra *masjid*, with Chicago, Houston, Dallas and San Francisco following suit after 2000. See Aminah Mohammad-Arif, ‘A Masala Identity: Young South Asian Muslims in the US’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 20, 2 (2000), pp. 67–87.
mid-19th century onward, the introduction of ‘civil society’ institutions by the British meant that communities such as the Bohras were in a state of limbo; they were assured that the British would uphold their cardinal rule of non-interference with ‘native matters’, but at the same time the colonial state also wished to exercise a form of colonial hegemony and oversight. Commenting on the relation between the colonial state and the category of community, Gyan Prakash observes how “colonial modernity came into existence as a form of belated enlightenment, separated from the time of Europe and addressed to those who lived in ‘other times’.” As such, “community”, as an epistemological category, “represents the time and space of this other [read: colonized] modernity”. Similar to governmental structures that independent India would inherit in 1947, the ‘community’ as a social grouping would be required to negotiate this in-between position between the successive colonial and post-colonial regimes’ as each government set about administering a civil-social arena.

The aim of this thesis is to identify how the site of ‘community’ served as the intersection for the development of lesser documented social spaces in late colonial and early independent India. By problematising the concept of ‘civil society’ with the narration of a ‘community-driven’ experience, this study hopes to identify how other modes and meanings of modernity arose from the experiences of the colonial and post-colonial nation-state. Broadly, the aim is not to pit the colonial and post-colonial as two distinct epochs, but to explore the demands of civil society and the nature of the institutional structures the ‘Bohra community’ negotiated from the period 1915 to 1985. However, before we proceed with the narrative, it may be pertinent to unravel

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the category of the ‘Dawoodi Bohra’ itself, how it constantly shifted and took on newer forms in the existing literature, its earliest traces and the complexities involved in writing a contemporary history of the community.

**The Dawoodi Bohras: A Historiographical Survey**

Apart from one significant anthropological study in the 1990s, the Dawoodi Bohras seem to have largely escaped historical enquiry. As such, the impetus for this thesis emerges from the seminal work done by scholars who have studied mercantile communities operating within the Indian Ocean from the 15th century onwards. ⁶ Emphasising internal community networks as a primary site for promoting entrepreneurial creativity, mercantile histories have formed the bedrock of much of the modern literature that is available on the Bohras. ⁷ Having said that, this thesis also associates with recent works in Islamic and post-colonial studies, which extend the above understanding further by emphasising the heavily underestimated role

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'religious networks' have played in enabling smaller groups such as the Bohras to negotiate the challenges of the colonial and post-colonial state.

In *The Short History of the Ismailis*, Farhad Daftary notes that as a Shia group, the Ismailis arose from deep obscurity in the latter half of the 9th century to found the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa in 909. From there, they conquered Egypt in 969 and established the city of Cairo. By 1094 the Ismaili movement had split and the Nizari faction survived mainly thereafter in what is modern day Iran. The Nizaris subsequently came to be labelled by their enemies as the ‘Assassins’. Egypt

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9 Their modern and contemporary counterparts are commonly referred to as the Khojas or Aga-Khanis.

10 The debate between Bernard Lewis and Farhad Daftary has raged on, especially with regard to the former’s portrayal of the Isma'ilis as ‘assassins’ and more fundamentally over the heavily problematic assertion that the Ismaili Shias ‘may well be the first terrorists’. See Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A
remained under another branch, the Mustali Ismailis (the medieval counterpart of the Dawoodi Bohras), until it eventually fell to the non-Shia Ayyubids in the 12th century, and what was then left of the community came to be confined to Yemen.

In terms of linkages with India, Ismaili Dais (‘emissaries’) had been active in Gujarat since 1067. However, it was upon the death of the 23rd Dai-al-mutlaq (‘apex cleric of the community’), Muhammad al-Hasan al-Walid, in 1539 that the leadership of the community passed on to Syedna Yusuf bin Sulayman, an Indian from Sidhpur, Gujarat.11 As the subsequent Dai-al-mutlaqs were appointed from the Indian subcontinent, the headquarters of the community eventually shifted to Ahmedabad in 1567. Thereafter, as the Mustali numbers continued to decline in Yemen, they came to find increasing importance in India. By the 19th century under the patronage of the East India Company, the community began to spread into East Africa, Ceylon and Malaya.12

As recently as the 1960s, the political actions of some East African leaders and the resulting racial and political turmoil, which they engendered, led to the

*Radical Sect in Islam* (New York: Octagon Books, 1980), pp. 129–130. Daftary countered many of these claims by arguing that the Ismailis practised not so much terrorism but a kind of highly efficient guerrilla warfare against their first and most powerful enemies, the Abbasids and the Saljuks, both on the battlefield and, in a more clandestine manner, through espionage, infiltration, and finally, assassination. “It was in connection with the self-sacrificing behaviour of the Nizari *fidai*is”, writes Daftary, “who killed prominent opponents of their community in particular localities, that the main myths of the Nizaris, the Assassin Legends, were developed during the Middle Ages. The Nizaris were not the inventors of the policy of assassinating religio-political adversaries in Muslim society; nor were they the last group to resort to such a policy; but they did assign a major political role to the policy of assassination.” See Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Ismailis* (London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1994), pp. 34–6.

11 According to surviving and publicly available sources, Jonah Blank constructs the beginning of the Ismaili movement in Gujarat by noting that missionary activity was initiated by Imam al-Mustansir around 450H/1067AD. According to legend, a Dai named Ahmad was responsible for the first Dawat contact, but struggled to make much progress owing to difficulties in language. As a result, Ahmad brought back two Gujarati orphans (Abdullah and Nuruddin) with him to Cairo and returned them to Gujarat after extensive training in Ismaili doctrines. Blank, whose study has been ‘verified’ by the Bohra community, then goes on to note that “Bohra myth credits Abdullah with planting the last ing roots of the faith in Indian soil”. Abdullah’s earliest converts were an elderly couple name Kaka Akela and Kaki Akeli to whom he showed the power of god by miraculously filling a well with water in the midst of a drought. The term ‘Kaka’ in Bohra kinship terminology refers to the paternal uncle and ‘Kaki’ is the wife of the uncle. ‘Akela’ and ‘Akeli’ may refer to ‘alone, only, sole’. Water, of course, is a common Islamic metaphor for spiritual knowledge. See Blank, op. cit., pp. 36 – 40.

uprooting of a large segment of the Bohra community. These East African Bohras migrated mostly to Canada, the United States and England, with the support of the British Foreign and Colonial Office.

In terms of the descriptive label ‘Bohra’, while a number of competing explanations exist about the exact etymology of the term, it generally refers to those Mustali Ismailis who descended ethnically from converted Indian Hindus.\(^{13}\) As highlighted above, the predecessors of the contemporary global Dawoodi Bohra \textit{jamaat} (‘community’) emerged in Yemen and then spread to the Indian subcontinent from the second Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Ibrahim al-Hamidi (d. 1162), to the 52\textsuperscript{nd} and current Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin.\(^{14}\) As a result, the composite category of ‘Mustali Ismaili Dawoodi Bohra’ may be the most appropriate in terms of capturing

\[^{13}\] The lesser acknowledged but possible etymology of the term ‘Bohra’ may be based on the travelogues of Sulaiman Basri and Abu Zaid Sirani who visited India in the middle of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century. Shibani Roy, a scholar who studied the Bohras in the 1970s, notes that the term may have been derived from the Arabic word ‘Bharrah’, referring to the name of a trade in Arabia and in support of which one still finds families amongst Surti Muslims who trace their lineage back to Southern Arabia. Still later the word split into two—‘Boh-rah’—signifying a person who is ‘determined’. Bharrah may have also signified ‘far-sighted’. ‘Bhurreh’, asserts Roy, may also mean caravans of camels and with the Bohras associated with trade they may have derived their name from these words. Citing the Arab traveller Al-Masudi in the 9\textsuperscript{th} century, Roy notes that Al-Masudi did note that in parts of ‘Chembur’ (near Broach in western India) there were Muslim settlers from Baghdad besides the 10,000 or so Basira Muslims, further adding that Basira Muslims were those who identified themselves as those born in India. On the other hand, ‘Be-sara’ literally meaning ‘two-heads’ may have signified persons born out of two different stocks, i.e., Arab and Hind, whereas Quamus writes that ‘Biasara’ as a community of Sindh were mainly hired for war by non-Muslim communities and their chief was referred to as ‘Besari’. It is plausible that the term ‘Bohra’ is basically used to refer to traders who had been frequenting Sindh from the 6\textsuperscript{th} century. Travellers like Sulaiman, Basri and Abu Zaid Sirani do note the presence of such large number of traders from Arabia residing in Sindh. Another historian Sharar suggests that all the Bohras were initially residents of Sindh but after the entry of Mahmud Gaznavi, they may have begun shifting to Gujarat. No matter what the precise etymology of the term may be, the term ‘Bohra’ itself throws light upon the origins and, more importantly, the migratory character of the community. See Shibani Roy, \textit{The Dawoodi Bohras} (Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1984) pp. 15–17.

the creed of the community. However, in order to maintain coherence, the shorter term ‘Dawoodi Bohra’ or ‘Bohra’ is used throughout this thesis.

It needs to be noted that the term ‘Bohra’ is not exclusive to the ‘Dawoodi Bohras’, although the latter do remain larger in terms of numbers and presence within the existing secondary and primary archives. The community experienced various schisms, mainly over succession, which resulted in it being split at various points.\(^{15}\) The biggest schism took place in the early 17\(^{th}\) century over succession rights between Sulayman bin Hasan and Dawood Burhan al-Din.\(^{16}\) Concentrated predominantly in Yemen, the former came to be known as ‘Sulaimanis’, with the latter concentrated mainly in Gujarat identifying themselves as ‘Dawoodis’.\(^{17}\) Furthermore, in their long history in India, the Dawoodi Bohras often faced situations of persecution, the most prominent being of the 32\(^{nd}\) Dai, Syedna Kutbuddin al-Shaheed; the title of ‘Shaheed’ or ‘martyr’ was bestowed on him after he was executed in a Sunni court under Aurangzeb’s rule for ‘heresy’ in 1646.\(^{18}\)

While the thesis seeks to contextualise the experience of the community during the late colonial and post-colonial eras, what perhaps needs mention at this stage is that, as a Muslim minority scattered in many countries and having experienced repression almost uninterruptedly from the 13\(^{th}\) century, the Bohras have learnt to adapt to their environment, at times resorting to extensive and extended ‘dissimulating’ practices or *taqqiya*, disguising themselves as Sufis, Twelver Shias, Sunnis and even Hindus.


\(^{16}\) Lokhandwalla, *The Bohras: a Muslim Community of Gujarat*, p. 120


In terms of the community’s medieval and early modern history, as Farhad Daftary notes, that the Bohras survived at all and emerged in the past two centuries as a ‘progressive’ community with a distinct identity “attests to the resiliency of their traditions and their adaptability as a community under their spiritual leadership”.

Many scholars relate the ‘experience’ of adaptability to the community’s creative application of *taqqiya* (‘the concealment of true identity or superficial adoption of an exterior guise’) whenever it faced repression. Whilst the Khojas have attracted more attention from scholars in comparison to the Bohras in this regard, the creative adoption of *taqqiya* is a theme that remains central in unpacking how the Bohras successfully responded to the various agendas of ‘reform’ during the 20th century as well. Since the 13th century, *taqqiya* has represented a complex form of dissimulation and acculturation, allowing adaptations to occur within the religious, social, cultural and political realities after the fall of the Fatimid Caliphate and subsequently on the Indian sub-continent. An awareness of the concept of *taqqiya* remains crucial in understanding how the Bohras evolved and continue to reproduce a

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22 My understanding of syncretism is very much influenced by Edouard Glissant’s theories of relation. For Glissant, cultures are not nomadic entities or bounded spaces tracing national borders. According to his definition of ‘creolization’, within contact zones the creolization of culture occurs not because pure cultural entities have come into contact with each other, but because cultures are always already syncretic. See Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1997). Also see Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) and Marie Louis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 6–7.
23 For a concise introduction to the Fatimid Caliphate, see Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).
sense of ‘Bohra-ness’, which is in a general sense ‘Islamic’ but also ‘modern’ and deeply embedded within the Indian context.\(^{24}\)

In terms of the modern Bohra community, narrating the experience of the Dawoodi Bohras during the 19\(^{th}\) century is complicated by a lack of reliable sources. The best available sources, albeit scattered, are studies by historians who have plotted trade networks operating across the Indian Ocean especially after the arrival of European colonial interests. Christine Dobbin, for instance, locates the Khojas in the colonial enterprise of ‘opening’ up East Africa to economic development. She argues that the Khojas succeeded in East Africa as traders and merchants primarily because they had learnt to adapt to ‘extreme’ conditions (alluding to centuries of ‘persecution’), which the region of Kutch had presented since their arrival on the Indian subcontinent around the 15\(^{th}\) century. Noting the Khojas as the most ‘complex’\(^ {25}\), Dobbin goes on to note that the community, under their spiritual leader or Imam, with layers of various institutional mechanisms such as jamaatkhana (‘community centres’) developed a “unique administrative solidarity”.\(^ {26}\) Dobbin also notes that, before the arrival of European powers, the Khojas had already been involved in trade with the Sultan of Oman and had begun to migrate (although in smaller numbers) to Zanzibar.

With the expansion of British trading interests, however, migration increased and the

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\(^{26}\) See Dobbin, ‘From Gujarat to Zanzibar’, p. 111.
success of the Khojas and “other Gujarati merchants” (a category left undefined by Dobbin, probably referring to the Bohras) were looked upon indulgently by the East India Company because their success validated the British policy in civilising and developing the East African interiors.

Notwithstanding Dobbin’s inability to locate the Bohras in her historical account of the spread of Ismailis to East Africa, Hatim Amiji, a scholar at the University of Massachusetts, writing in 1975, presents interesting insights into the workings of the Bohra community in East Africa. Using community and colonial records, supplemented by oral interviews, as the basis for reconstructing the movement of about 15,000 Bohras from the regions of Kutch and Katiawar, Amiji locates the first wave of migration to Zanzibar around the mid-18th century. Acknowledging the lack of sources and the inability to verify the ‘authenticity’ of existing ones, Amiji also cautiously traces the first Dawoodi Bohra settlement in Madagascar around 1750. By the mid-19th century, as the British and Germans entered Zanzibar, the Bohras came to be treated as British subjects. This enhanced security enabled them to become ‘permanent settlers’, as they began to bring their wives and children and continued to live for extended periods in the urban centres of East Africa. Among the so-called ‘pioneer settlers’ were Nurbahi Budhai-bhai, Ebrahimji Walijee and Pirbhai Jivanjee, who were notably very successful Bohras, trading heavily with American and

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European merchants. By the end of the 19th century, Amiji notes, the Bohras numbered more than 400 in the city of Mombasa alone.

Working mostly with colonial sources, a recurring predicament that scholars have cited in tracing the Bohras during the 18th and 19th centuries is that early colonial records only make passing references to the community, which is further made more complex by the community being referenced under differing categories. The 1832 document *Qanun-I-Islam* barely mentions the Bohras, only to confuse them later with the Khojas. At one point they are referred to as ‘Momna’ and moments later as ‘Mumin’ who are declared to be ‘orthodox Shia Musalmans’, who were “originally Hindus of Gujarat, converted by the Ismailiya missionaries, but those resident in Ahmadabad sometime use Hindu names, call in a Brahman as well as a Qazi to perform the marriage rites, and their women, after a death in the family, wail and beat their breasts like Hindus.” Whilst the reference to ‘Momna’ may be a conflation with another offshoot sect of the Khojas, the word ‘Mumin’ (‘faithful’) allows us to discern that the reference was indeed being made to the Bohras, since it is still a term used in the contemporary vernacular of the community.

By the early 20th century the literature registers a marked shift. Agendas of reform within the community demanding ‘modernisation’ generated an interesting yet problematic set of archival traces, which enables one to cautiously plot the historical relations of the community during the early years of the British Raj. Having said that,

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nearly all publications on the Bohras in the past one hundred years have relied almost exclusively on one single source, *The Gulzare Daudi for the Bohras of India*, authored by Mian Bhai Mullah Abdul Hussain, a Bohra ‘dissident’, writing in the early 20th century. Such a reliance on one single source and the Bohra clergy’s conscious policy of maintaining ‘silence’ on issues of dissension has meant that whenever the Dawoodi Bohras are discussed, as late as the 1990s, be it in magazine features, newspaper articles, inter-faith dialogues or even academic conferences, the narratives tend to almost invariably be coloured by dissident voices and literatures.

In this regard, Asghar Ali Engineer’s numerous studies and writings on the community have also maintained a near-monopoly of available historical readings on the community until the 1990s. In his 1989 study, *The Muslim Communities of Gujarat: An Exploratory Study of Bohras, Khojas, and Memons*, Engineer ethnographically plots the three Gujarati mercantile communities to understand the various factors that enable or inhibit the minority Muslim communities from participating in the Indian political realm. As a Reformist within the community, Engineer notes that the Bohras and Khojas have a “tightly controlling centre”, whereas the Memons are “democratically functioning”. In terms of interactions with other communities, Engineer notes that Bohra and Khoja leaders do not encourage “interaction with other communities”. Based on fieldwork and interviews, Engineer

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32 Whilst Engineer has written frequently in newspapers and magazines about reform-related issues, a couple of his key writings include: Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Bohras* (Ghaziabad: Vikas Publications, 1980) and Asghar Ali Engineer, *Bohras and their Struggle for Reforms* (Mumbai: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1986).
suggests that the Bohras look upon other Muslims as “inferior” and “violent”. However, the High Priest (referring to the current Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin) maintains close ties with Sunni establishments “for his own interests”.35

Although Engineer’s experience and struggle for reforms are the focus of a later chapter, what remains pertinent is that, despite the apparent polemics of the Reformist arguments, his studies have facilitated insights into the fluid historical linkages between community/capital and also enabled the Bohras to be represented in larger pan-Indian discussions on secularism and minority political participation. The difficulty in critiquing the Reformist literatures in circulation today is that whilst they have sought to muster the tenets of ‘civil society’, demanding recognition from the ‘secular’ Indian state, it has come at the expense of engaging the subaltern voices of the majority of Bohras who have remained ‘loyal’ to the current Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin. For instance, at a 2007 academic conference held in Singapore, Engineer represented the Bohra community as follows:

The ordinary Bohras are described as mu’minin and they are supposed to be slaves (‘abd). The earlier da’is never called their followers as ‘abdi (slave). Now highly loaded terms are used for the da’i who is treated almost like a god on earth. Another term used is Huzura’la (in his august presence). Thus a deliberate attempt has been made by the present da’i to cultivate a culture of slavery and giving high priest a status, which even the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) never claimed. A glance at the website www.mu’iin.com is enough to establish this.

Not dedicating the mosque to the da’i is considered soulless and offering prayer in it will not be acceptable to Allah, as if Allah needs da’i’s permission to accept prayer.36

34 However, it is pertinent to note that most of the fieldwork respondents for Engineer’s study are from the ‘progressive Bohra’ or ‘reformist Bohra’ community. Engineer, The Muslim Communities of Gujarat, pp. 14–15.
36 Asghar Ali Engineer, ‘The Bohras in South and Southeast Asia’ (paper presented at the conference Recentering Islam: Islamic Transmission and Interaction between South and Southeast Asia, held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, June 5-6, 2007, Singapore).
While we will return to Engineer’s polemics in a later chapter, with the debates for Reform becoming prominent in the 1970s and 80s, the Bohras began grabbing the attention of secular scholars and historians. One of the earliest studies to appear was Theodore P. Wright’s 1975 article, which deals with the struggles between the Dawat and the Reformists in the context of what Wright terms ‘competitive modernization’. Wright concluded that the Reformists’ lobby remained marginalised because it was worthwhile, in socioeconomic terms, for members of the community to be in harmony with Dawat than against it. P.N. Chopra’s 1982 study also attempted to briefly locate the Bohras in the larger context of Indian Muslim groups and identity formation. Farhad Daftary too has provided a brief discussion on the Bohras in The Short History of the Ismailis.

37 While scholars have frequently referred to the Gulzare Daudi, the other major documentary source, which both the Dawat and Reformist writers do regard as generally authoritative, is the Mausm-e Bahr written originally in Gujarati using Arabic script and since published in numerous Gujarati editions that remains the single most important work on Bohra history. Completed in 1882 and authored by Muhammad Ali ibn Jiwabhai, an official under the 47th Dai, Syedna Abdul Qadir Najmuddin, the first two volumes document the Prophet and the Imams, ending with the Imamat of Tayyib in 526H. The third volume contains the history of the Bohras in India. The end-point of the second volume is significant because after the occultation or ‘satr’ of the 21st Imam Tayyib, the Bohras have followed the line of Dai-al-mutlaqs as representative of the Imam, which continues till date. As one source declares, the “satr of Imam Tayyib took place for many reasons such as the discernment of the true (believers) from the false, the raising of the people of belief and knowledge and giving to them of exclusive bounties.” In his satr, the Dawat of the Imam is instituted through the Dai-al-mutlaq, Mazoon and Muqasir. “The dictates of the Imam are constantly reaching the Dai-l-Satr by way of which he carries out the affairs of the Dawat and, as we witness daily, reveals the glories of the Imam himself.” See Fazaailo Misril Fatemiyyah, manuscript, Mustafa Shaikh Dawood (trans.) (Bombay: Awliya-al Kiraam Archive, 1997).

38 Theodore P. Wright, ‘Competitive Modernization within the Daudi Bohra Sect of Muslims and its Significance for Indian Political Development’ in Helen Ulrich (ed.) Competition and Modernization in South Asia (Delhi: Abhinav, 1975).


40 The earliest study that describes the Bohras is John Norman Hollister’s The Shia of India (London: Luzac, 1953). Satish Mishra’s survey of Gujarati Muslims includes useful chapters on the Bohras and the Khojas. See Satish Chandra Mishra, The Muslim Communities of Gujarat (Baroda: Asia Publishing House, 1964). For general studies on Shias in India, see David Pinault, The Shites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) and David Pinault, Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001). The only issue with Pinault’s studies is that he focuses mostly on the Twelvers in Lucknow and Darjeeling, with little mention of the smaller Ismaili sects.
Shibani Roy’s *The Dawoodi Bohras: An Anthropological Perspective* published in 1984, however, is different. Based on fieldwork conducted at a time when the Reformist movement had reached intense levels in terms of publicity and press coverage, most of which portrayed the Dai-al-mutlaq and the Dawat-e-Hadiya (‘the rightly guiding mission’) in a negative light, Roy’s anthropological study highlights the debates within the community during the 1970s. Foregrounded by an extensive introductory chapter, which plots the history of the Dawat in India and its Imams and Dai-al-mutlaqs from the 10th century Fatimid era, the book concludes with the 1979 Conference of Fatimid Knowledge, which was organised by Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin with the aim of initiating greater cohesion within the community.

Roy’s study is remarkable in terms of its context. It acts almost as a journalistic record of events that unfolded in Udaipur, where a group of young members of the community revolted against the authority of the local *Amil* (‘appointed representative of the Dai-al-mutlaq’). Written in response to the Reformist allegations at the time, the crucial source that Roy’s study allows access to is the document which lays down the 1979 Five Point Directives of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, guiding his followers “in the face of various odds and hurdles by the followers with the changing social events of Bombay and Rajasthan”. For Roy, the directives were seen as a “pragmatic approach to oversee the religious and social welfare of the followers in the different lands amidst variety and social difference”.  

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The 1979 Five Point Directives were as follows – first, being faithful to the religion; second, character building and education; third, industrialisation and entrepreneurship; fourth, service to humanity and duties for this world; and fifth, the other world. The Directives sought to reassert the orthodox Bohra approach to life as balanced between religious service and everyday affairs of modern citizenhood. Roy notes that “education to the youth and children has been considered of primary importance by which not only the community but the nation would benefit from too”. Roy concluded her study with a statement that neatly captures the ‘identity mix’ the community has adopted from the 1980s: “in every directive the Syedna keeps in view the benefit to the nation. This nationalistic spirit is retained in the other point wherein he encourages industrialization in face of educated youths opting for white collared jobs.”

The feminist-scholar Rehana Ghadially has also challenged the Reformists’, and Engineer’s assertions in particular, about the ‘plight’ of Bohra women and Dawat’s ‘oppressive’ structures. Ghadially’s earliest article discusses the politics of reform that gripped the Bohra community during the 1970s and it then extracts a gendered reading in an attempt to discern what sort of impact this had on the practice of veiling and the adorning of the purdah or rida amongst the women of the community since its introduction in 1979. She notes that “even though there was a ‘silent uproar’, no overt protests broke out”. A later 1996 article documents the campaign for ‘women’s emancipation’ within the community by concluding that the Bohra women were able to assert their voice in community affairs during the 1930s, by linking themselves

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42 Ibid., p. 45.
43 Ibid., p. 41.
with Gandhi’s freedom struggle. Ghadially’s other two papers discuss female Bohra specificities: the first looks at the experience of ziyarat (‘pilgrimage’) across various Durgahs in Gujarat, forming an interesting dynamic in terms of differently narrating female religiosity. The most recent publication in 2005 looks at women’s observances in the calendrical rites of the Bohras, where Ghadially approaches the Bohra woman as an experiential category, and how such observances form part of the Bohra ethic of “living religiously”.45

While Roy’s and Ghadially’s studies provide important glimpses into the ‘subaltern metaphors’ of the community and their interactions with the post-colonial state, the most detailed anthropological study to date is Mullahs on the Mainframe by the Harvard-trained anthropologist Jonah Blank. Given the dearth of literature on the Bohras, Blank’s carefully documented ethnography has become a critical resource in shedding light on the contemporary identity mix of the community.46

In terms of content, Blank describes rituals of a Dawoodi Bohra’s life from birth to infancy to rituals of adulthood such as marriage, divorce and death. Along with life rituals, calendar year ceremonies such as Muharram, Ramadan, Zyl-Hajj, and Bakri Eid are also recorded, based on participant-observation, interviews with Dawat


46 Blank, Mullahs on the Mainframe, p.1.
officials and supplemented by survey responses. One of the most interesting aspects of his fieldwork is the discussion on *Qasr-e Ali* (‘the noble household’) of the Da’i-al-mutlaq.47 The chief criticism the Reformists have levelled is that the *Qasr-e Ali* holds too much power and its privileges are too highly concentrated among the blood relatives of the Dai-al-mutlaq. However, upon spending some days with the *Qasr-e Alis*, apart from the luxury of globetrotting (i.e., accompanying the Dai-al-mutlaq when he visits the faithful in different regions of the world), Blank notes that their lifestyle is very much ‘mediocre’ and descriptions provided by reformists such as Engineer of *Qasr-e Ali* ‘wealth and wastage’ need to be held suspect.

Focusing mostly on the post-1980s intricacies of the community, Blank notes that the Bohras have fused the modern and traditional in no place better than in the realm of education. Despite their merchant tradition and emphasis on business-oriented occupations, the community registered higher levels of literacy when compared to other Shia and Sunni denominations. Blank associates this with the transnational network of Burhani schools established by the Dawat since the 1960s whose mandate has been to teach science and religion alongside each other. The ‘jewel in the crown’ is however noted to be the *Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiya*, the 19th century Islamic academy in Surat with its more recently established satellite campus in Karachi, which provides its student with a full range of both secular and Islamic subjects. Blank’s contention is that while in some Muslim societies such as Turkey or pre-revolutionary Iran, secular education led to the downgrading of the role of Islam and religion in the general worldview of its people, in the case of the Bohras the opposite remains true. “The acquisition of western-secular knowledge”, notes Blank, “is encouraged in order to

47 Ibid., p. 135.
further reinforce tradition”. As such, ‘tradition’ and ‘community’ emerge forcefully from the narratives of modernity and the traditional-modern dichotomy as incompatible and hostile to each other is re-cast as anything but a problematic construct.

Blank also discusses how the Dawat maintains its ‘spiritual and political hegemony’ over a community that is dispersed transnationally. Several techniques are noted; from the spiritual end of the spectrum there is the position of kal ma’sum (‘being like mas’um’) that the Dai-al-mutlaq occupies. This is a position consolidated by references to Fatimid theology and discourse. In the governance of everyday life, Blank notes how the core aspects of Bohra dress and economics have also been used as a mode of maintaining spiritual hegemony. In terms of bodily pronouncements, the maintenance of beard and dress have been crucial in establishing an ‘Islamic’, yet distinctly ‘Bohra’, identity since the late 1980s. Interestingly, it is the use of modern technology, Blank discovered in his fieldwork, which has helped in improving the level of orthopraxy among the members. In an era beset by the hypermobility of bodies and knowledge, with air travel becoming faster and cheaper over the past few decades and the Dawat’s willingness to adopt technologies from facsimile and electronic mail to SMS (especially since the ‘Islamization’ programme was launched in the 1970s), the Dai-al-mutlaq has been able to re-establish close access to the devotees that had been the hallmark of the Bohras in previous centuries when the community was geographically less dispersed. For Blank, this re-invigoration of orthopraxy has enabled the Bohras to adapt to changing contexts and adopt modern technologies for their benefit:

48 Ibid., p. 80.
49 Ibid., p. 159.
50 Ibid., p. 174.
Moreover, it [the Bohra apex-clergy] has done so not by rejecting modern or Western ideas and technologies, but by embracing them: the Bohras have used modernity as a tool to reinvigorate their core traditions. The case study of the Bohras should serve as a powerful refutation to those who would essentialise Islamic revivalism, or even (to use a more ideologically laden term) Islamic fundamentalism.51

Undoubtedly, *Mullahs on the Mainframe* forms a crucial reference point for the present study as it succeeded in not only filling a crucial gap in the literature but also engaged with the ‘orthodox’ idiom, in terms of presenting an alternative narrative of ‘global’ Islam which seems to be contemporaneously consumed by images of *burqa*-clad Iranian women or bazooka-harnessing Afghans. However, Blank’s study is also not an entirely unproblematic celebration. Presented as a broad anthropological survey, it fails to adequately historicise a number of key moments from the period 1915 to 1985 that enabled the Bohras to attain the unique identity mix which he observed and documented in the 1990s. Although he does provide a significant discussion to the ‘Reform movement’, the study fails to access and adequately historicise the inner working of the community’s structure during the different Reformist waves over the 20th century.

In terms of being able to engage the gaps in the literature, the current thesis seeks to historicise the emergence of the various ‘agendas’ of Reform that competed to define the ‘modern Bohra community’ in colonial and post-colonial India. As a result, when the few available secondary sources on the Bohras are mobilised, they are at times read as historical texts, at once malleable and indicative of the particular contexts of their writing and emergence. This is also applicable to the various Reformist literatures highlighted earlier, which acted to insert the Bohras into ongoing debates about ‘modernisation’ during the colonial and post-colonial era, and how politically

51 Ibid., p. 1.
vulnerable groups such as the Bohras sought to refashion their relationship with the state as an arena which consisted of social groups and not just individuals, whose relations are further mediated by power.52

‘Apolitical Quietism’ in the Dawoodi Bohra Tradition

In his lengthy study on the Dawoodi Bohras, Jonah Blank concluded with the observation, “The Dawoodi Bohras, a rather vulnerable minority throughout their existence, have always managed to adapt to the world around them without losing their souls. Modernity, for them, is nothing new.” In the few other scholarly studies discussed in the previous section, a similar sentiment is voiced. The community has been repeatedly described as a group that negotiated and continues to respond to the mandates of modernity with utmost urgency and creativity. In all, amidst recent searches for ‘moderate’ Islams, the Dawoodi Bohras have been represented as a relatively positive case study of an Islamic group that has not fallen prey to the vicissitudes of ‘political violence’. The dominant attribution to these ‘successes’ is to what Blank terms the ‘apolitical quietism’ of the Dawoodi Bohra clergy.53

The strict avoidance of political activity by members of the community seems to be in line with much of broader Shia customs of secrecy and quietism, i.e., the practice of taqqiya or a doctrine permitting (even encouraging) a believer to disguise his faith in the face of oppression. Drawing on community pronouncements where the Dawat has always urged its followers to be loyal to whichever state they reside in, Blank notes

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that the Bohras, very much like the Parsis and the Khojas, have managed to blend into every context that they found themselves in.\textsuperscript{54} The almost dialectical and/or integrated approach to life between *deen* and *duniya* seems to have given the Bohras a fine balance between negotiating their ‘worldly’ and ‘spiritual’ commitments.\textsuperscript{55}

Whilst the term ‘apolitical quietism’ could be held as problematic, the existing literature suggests that two important Shia doctrines exist centrally to the community’s negotiation of the shifting context on the subcontinent since the arrival of the first missionaries in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century at Kathiawar from Yemen. First, that true political/temporal rule will only result with the return of the Imam; during the period of seclusion, all *mumineen* or initiated Dawoodi Bohras would avoid ‘overt’ political conflict and refrain from any agitations which could risk the existence of the community. Second, the crucial concept of *taqqiya* or dissimulation permits the community to accept the dictates of the temporal authority of the time, based on the prevailing context, while maintaining their own beliefs in private. The practice of *taqqiya* has received immense attention from scholars studying the Ismailis (Khojas and Bohras) given that both communities have historically experienced persecution not only by Sunni rulers, but also by the *Ithna Asharis* and, as the developments of the 20th century will highlight, by forces perched within the community as well.

\textsuperscript{54} This category of productively adapting to changing/evolving landscapes may be complicated further if one conceptualises the Bohra ‘outlook’ on indigenisation as a colonial/post-colonial form of ‘mimicry’. ‘Mimicry’, the Bohra community’s attempt to un-underdevelop itself, on the one hand brings to light the ethical gap between the normative/normalising vision of developmentalism and ‘modernity’ in general, but on the other hand, brings to light the distorted nature of the colonial/post-colonial (mis)imitation of the post-Enlightenment model. In other words, mimicry is also the sly weapon of an anti-colonial civility; it is an ambivalent mixture of complicity and disobedience. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 30.

\textsuperscript{55} For instance in a recent visit by the Bohra Dai-al-mutlaq to London, he was welcomed by a couple of Members of the British Parliament who hailed the Bohras as “peace-loving citizens of the United Kingdom”. See *The Financial Times*, ‘MP’s pledge to Muslim leader’, 8/6/2007.
What has fascinated the sceptic/scholar, especially in the post-Partition period, is the supposed ‘silence’ Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin maintained as the reformist challenge reached a feverish pitch. As such, it is the intent of this study to argue that such a ‘silence’ may be understood as yet another creative adoption of taqqiya and, if indeed the Bohras chose to latch onto and embrace the orthopraxic reforms that Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin initiated in 1979 to maintain the Dawoodi Bohra ‘culture and identity’, they were following a long historical and ideological tradition which may be traced backed to the Fatimids in Cairo but more recently to the predecessor and father of the current incumbent, Syedna Taher Saifuddin (d. 1965).

Much of the study is dedicated to describing varied events that may be grouped together as the Reformist challenge of the 20th century, starting from the 1920s when the colonial government initiated civil laws to the post-colonial period when understandings of secularism influenced how the Bohras related to and figured within the Indian public sphere.56 Echoing Partha Chatterjee’s comments about the community, “which ideally should have been banished from the kingdom of capital, continues to lead a subterranean, potentially subversive, life within it because it refuses to go away.”57

The re-reading of the community as a site for subversion is undertaken by presenting historically specific narratives based on what the Dai-al-mutlaq and other Dawat officials were announcing to the community internally. Relying on community

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publications and other sources, the study endeavours to present something of an ‘Islamic reality’, seeking to not only contribute to an important yet immensely understudied group of Indian Muslims, but also indicate how conceptions of ‘devotion’ to the Dai-al-mutlaq provide a useful entry-point into extending the understanding of Muslim history on the subcontinent.

Methodology and Sources

The nature of my research necessitated the use of a variety of considerably dispersed sources. A significant part of the study is based on research materials, which include community publications in the form of newsletters, pamphlets, tracts and commemorative books on the history and organisation of Dawoodi Bohras in Bombay. Archival records, especially from the *Times of India*, *The Illustrated Weekly*, *Eve’s Weekly* and the popular newspaper *Blitz*, provided useful information on the historical background of the different debates between the reformists and the Dawat, therefore, forming a crucial reference point for the study. In plotting the post-1970s experience, the various reports and tracts published by Reformists such as Noman Contractor and Asghar Ali Engineer have been treated as primary sources, allowing access to their polemics and discourses. It is also through secondary sources, namely, the work of Shibani Roy and Jonah Blank, that I gained access to some ethnographic information to set the context for my study.

Much of the theoretical basis of the current study is loosely figured on what Partha Chatterjee describes as the “suppressed narrative of the community”.58 Chatterjee reads this from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, which attempts to theorise the realisation

58 Ibid., p. 236.
of the subject’s ‘will’ in ethical life scenarios. Noting that the ‘community’ as a historical concept may be of urgent theoretical and practical relevance, Chatterjee grounds the definition of ‘community’ (in this case of the Bohras, a ‘spiritual community’) as an institution grounded in ‘love’, as a space which exists distinct from ‘civil society’, where members are first of all designated as individuals coming together based on market relations and civil law. By allowing the subjectivities of ‘love’ to emerge as a historically charged category and the free surrender of individual wills, not mediated by civil law contracts, Chatterjee (like Hegel), opens up that epistemological gap for the expression and interrogation of the narrative of the community—a narrative which simultaneously resists and embraces the language of contracts and contingency spoken in civil society and the disciplinary state.

Chatterjee is right in highlighting the ‘community’ as a concept of theoretical and practical relevance. However, he does not fully develop the levels at which the community ends up mimicking the modern state. This is particularly important in the case of the Dawoodi Bohras, where the capital-community opposition is often blurred, and to accept capital’s construction of the community as its archaic or traditional other, as Chatterjee does, would be to treat the community as existing outside the domains of modernity and the disciplinary state. In many ways, considering the existing literature (with the exception of Blank’s and Ghadially’s studies on the Bohras), the colonial and Reformist literatures on the community easily slip into the dichotomy of modernity vs. tradition, which easily goes back to when the colonial censuses at first, and Reformists literatures later, spoke of the Dawoodi Bohras and its clergy as ‘unchanging’ and ‘ill-equipped’ to confront the mandates of modernity. Such a view allowed the colonial state and the Reformists to represent their views as
non-intrusive, as bulwarks of modernity surrounded by an archaic community and traditional clergy.

As the thesis explores the history of the community in colonial and post-colonial India, the tradition-modern binary is held suspect. In the period under study, the Bohras have been understood as a community which has seen itself as a part of India’s coming to terms with modernity, as a force of difference, which critiqued, inhabited and at times even strategically distanced itself from the political developments of the nation-state. This approach is grounded in understanding the public forms of community which affected the Bohras, as well as the reformists during the colonial and postcolonial eras. For instance, Francis Robinson has argued that the advent of print resulted in the democratization of religious knowledge, but also privileged reformist Islam, while discrediting organized movements. Yet, the type of sources and documents this study unpacks seem to suggest that the situation was much more complex. The Bohra response to the colonial experience, in fact, involved the appropriation of new communications media, starting with print, railways and, in present times, the internet. These successive generations of media have been used to respond to the ideological challenges, not only from the reformists, but also from the secular modernists and Orientalists. Contained within the narrative of ‘reform’, which is the mainstay of this thesis, these adaptations contribute to new forms of community that reconfigure the spiritual practices that link the Bohras to their past.

While there have been ongoing debates about the most appropriate terminologies to be used in the sociology of religion, the term ‘community’ has been preferred over the
use of other terms such as ‘sect’ or ‘cult’ to describe the Dawoodi Bohras. In the
classic definition of Stark and Bainbridge, a ‘sect’ is defined as a “deviant religious
organization with traditional beliefs and practices”.\textsuperscript{59} By contrast a ‘cult’ is defined as
a “deviant religious organization with novel beliefs and practices”. According to these
definitions, both terms place the described group outside the mainstream of large-
scale religious organisations. The Dawoodi Bohras have consciously avoided using
such terminology. In everyday practice the term \textit{jamaat} is used to describe themselves
and the wider community. In the rare 1990 study, where access was granted to an
anthropologist to understand the inner workings, the term ‘community’ was
consistently used to describe the subjects of his research. In the current thesis too, the
choice of the term ‘community’ is considered most appropriate as it is the nearest
linguistic equivalent to the term \textit{jamaat}, which the Dawoodi Bohras use consistently,
while avoiding the pitfalls usually associated with the terms ‘sect’ and ‘cult’.

As a result, the study remains sensitive to how the Dawoodi Bohra religious power
structure operates, i.e., taking their guidance from a single centralised clergy with a
strictly hierarchical organisation. At the top of this apex structure is the Dai-al-
mutlaq, whose absolute primacy in all matters of faith is not questioned even by the
small group of Reformists we will continue to encounter in the course of the study.
The Dai-al-mutlaq’s centralised control also extends beyond the spiritual realm into
temporal matters of the believer’s life, constituting a sort of a ‘moral community’\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} R. Stark and W.S. Bainbridge, \textit{The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation}
\textsuperscript{60} Formulations and the literature on notions of the ‘moral community’ are plentiful, even though the
question of what ‘morality’ is and how it may be defined is a deeply contested terrain in political
philosophy. For Frederic Nietzsche, the act of constructing for oneself the notion of what constitutes
the permissible and the forbidden in terms of his/her relationship to the greater community “…is to
imagine ‘the enemy’ as conceived by a man of ressentiment—and here precisely is his deed, his
creation: he has conceived the evil enemy, ‘the evil one’—and indeed as the fundamental concept from
At various moments of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, it is the strict and effective governance of the believer’s life matters beyond the spiritual realm that became the cause of dispute with the Reformists.

The matrix in which the Dawoodi Bohra apex clergy and the Reformists were lodged is in some ways best derived from Michel Foucault when he considers the ‘modern state’ as an intensely sophisticated structure in which individuals could be integrated under one primary condition: “that this individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns”.\textsuperscript{61} Foucault labels this structure as possessing a salvation-oriented or ‘pastoral power’. For him it is “oblative, individualizing, coextensive and continuous with life. It is linked with a production of truth — the truth of the individual himself”.\textsuperscript{62} As such, for the Dawoodi Bohras, as the apex clergy went about crafting the ‘moral community’, it was not merely a type of power, which commanded and subjugated. It was and continues to be prepared to sacrifice itself for the life and salvation of the flock. It is a type of power that does not just look after the entire community but each individual during his/her entire life. As such, as the current study attempts to recount the various agendas of ‘reform’ it is also understood to be presenting a complex relationship not just between the state and the individual, but also in terms of how the religious structures and the spiritual authorities of the Dawoodi Bohras challenged the historical constitution of modernity in India from within. This could not be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s minds; without exploring their souls; without making them reveal their

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\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
innermost secrets. It implies knowledge of the conscience and the ability to direct it. 63

The biggest challenge the current study faces is how to represent certain religious knowledge from an ‘objective’ standpoint for two forms of audiences. First, the Dawoodi Bohra community has been ‘abused’ as an anthropological and historical category in the dominant literature (with some exceptions). With various postulations about the Dai-al-mutlaq's ‘excesses’ being centred and paraded by the Reformists in the print media, the current study remains sympathetic towards presenting a balanced narrative and suggesting to the reader the true believers that the Bohras are. For sceptical audiences, a term used to classify historians and anthropologists, whose interests are less aligned with the reality of the beliefs and more towards how ‘certainty’ is maintained within the community in the face of opposition, change, and contradiction, one form of resolution the study seeks to present is to allow the narratives of the Dai and the community to speak for themselves, whilst at the same time focusing on the moralities that underpin the narratives and the actions they have generated or inspired from the period 1915 to 1985.

In anticipation, it needs to be acknowledged that any historical study is inherently contradictory and whilst this study attempts at generating an experiential collage, which may be acceptable to the devout community and to the sceptic/scholar, it is all framed and narrated by balancing on a tight-rope. The interstices and margins may just be the only epistemological spaces that this study can at best seek to lay claim to. As such, the variety of archival materials used in the study concerning the relationship

63 Ibid.
between the late colonial state in India and the Dai-al-mutlaqs hopes to make a humble contribution to the scant secondary literature that exists on the Dawoodi Bohras. Whilst the engaged archives are not complete, with much of the literature on the community still inaccessible to scholars, the hope is to nonetheless provide an insight into the inner workings of a small Shia community’s remarkable journey along the arduous road towards modernisation, transformation and alignment with the modern state. This is a journey that appears to have not only been made by preserving the key tenets of ‘faith’ and ‘community’, but also by strengthening the internal bonds while trying to achieve socio-economic success as a strongly committed, cohesive and networked group in a globalised world.

**Structure of the Thesis**

Located as a critical enquiry into the historical contingencies which have shaped Bohra self-identity in late-colonial and post-colonial India, this thesis focuses on internal debates within the community about agendas of ‘reform’ during the tenure of two High Priests of the community, namely, Syedna Taher Saifuddin (1915–1965) and his successor Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin (1965–present). As such, divided into two major sections, the thesis looks at the ideas and works of those individuals and groups who attempted to critique the authority of the High Priests over spiritual and temporal matters of the community from the early 20th century onwards.

In overall terms, the thesis problematises issues of theological authority embodied in the institution of the High Priest and engages with questions of jurisdiction over family and civil law matters and control over community resources and institutions. Unravelling the developments, it is suggested that the Bohra engagement with the modern period ought not to be read as a simple re-telling or return to a ‘glorious past’. 
The period under study was distinctive in terms of its own dynamics. As such the thesis approaches the idea of ‘reform’ by taking as its point of departure the historiography developed by the subjects themselves. In the discourse which came to be formed during this period, the two Dai-al-mutlaqs attempted to explain their own ‘history’ during the period of British colonial dominance and during the postcolonial period from the vantage point of their own office as the High Priest. It is through examining these discourses, interactions and pronouncements that one gains insights into the history of the Bohras through the twentieth century.

Chapter 2 focuses on the period, c. 1915–1965, during which the Reformists used law suits under newly introduced legislation by the colonial state to put pressure on Syedna Taher Saifuddin to recognise the need to ‘modernise’ the community. Contextualised within the colonial public sphere and various legal battles ranging from the popular Chandabhai Gulla Case to the politics surrounding Bohra resistance to the implementation of the Mussalman Wakf Act of 1923, the chapter locates how the High Priest responded to such challenges with the selective re-adaptation of Fatimid beliefs to legitimise his position. The discussion also highlights how Syedna Taher Saifuddin increasingly harnessed modern technologies such as print, rail and air

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travel and modern organisational systems to expound his ideas to the Faithful in the public sphere.

Chapter 3 maintains the timeline of the previous chapter but focuses on the inner workings of the community by relying heavily on community publications and pamphlets from the time. Portraying historical change as a crisis of the Self and the various strategies for re-fashioning a new Dawoodi Bohra self from the period 1915–1965, the chapter historicises the numerous community initiatives by noting how the fashioning of the new Self could not occur without redefining the Bohra community as a whole, for at issue was the status of the Dai-al-mutlaq, which had come under attack by the Reformists as a ‘backward’ institution. Therefore, the chapter highlights how Syedna Taher Saifuddin successfully responded to such challenges, embodying the ideas of knowledge and traditions and simultaneously invoking Fatimid solidarity and modern belonging, by leading the Dawoodi Bohras, who had been until then represented as a ‘traditional collectivity’, into a group that demanded the modern rights of ‘a people’.

While the previous chapter historicises Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin’s ascension to the role of Dai-al-mutlaq, Chapter 4 contextualises his tenure after 1965. Taking advantage of the post-colonial ‘secular’ state, the Reformists harnessed print media and civil society institutions in an attempt to undermine the authority of the Dai. Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin responded by embracing secularism, eschewing Islamic extremism and reasserting the ideals of self-reliance, which had been a hallmark of the community’s existence in India since the arrival of the earliest Fatimid missionaries in the 11th century at Sindh and Gujarat. Laying the context for the landmark 1979 Conference of Fatimi Knowledge (al-Multaqa al-Fatimi al-Ilmi),
which Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin convened to symbolise measures that aimed at achieving greater cohesion within the community, the chapter discusses the different moments when Reform was debated in the print media and how the Dai-al-mutlaq succeeded in reasserting bonds of culture, traditions and the past embodied in community institutions.

In the conclusion, the thesis acknowledges the community’s contemporary identity mix and how dedication to the High Priest operates transnationally. The use of modern electronic technologies by the Dai in consolidating and creating a ‘unique’ contemporary identity for the community in the post-1980s era is interrogated, especially as the community became increasingly transnational. In this section, the thesis examines two significant strategies used to generate a sense of solidarity across transnational spaces centred on ‘dedication’ to the current 52nd Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin: first, the significant revival of medieval Fatimid architectural motifs in recent mosque and mausoleum building initiatives on the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere based on medieval Fatimid blueprints said to exist at the Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah libraries in Surat, and second, the particularities of the convergence of thousands of Dawoodi Bohras from all parts of the world to listen to the Bayaans or sermons of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin during the annual Muharram commemorations, for which Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2008 has been selected as a case study.
Chapter 2

‘IN THE COLONIAL PUBLIC SPHERE’:
SYEDNA TAHER SAIFUDDIN AND THE EARLY REFORMISTS

This chapter focuses on the period c. 1915–1965, during which the Reformists used lawsuits under newly introduced legislation by the colonial state to put pressure on Syedna Taher Saifuddin to recognise the need to ‘modernise’ the community. Contextualised within the colonial public sphere and various legal battles ranging from the popular Chandabhai Gulla Case to the politics surrounding Bohra resistance to the implementation of the Mussalman Wakf Act of 1923, the chapter locates how the High Priest responded to such challenges with a selective re-adaptation of Fatimid beliefs to legitimise his position. The discussion also highlights how Syedna Taher Saifuddin increasingly harnessed modern technologies such as print, rail and air travel as well as modern organisational systems to expound his ideas to the Faithful in the public sphere.

Fatimid Solidarity and Modern Belonging

The strategic concept of ‘apolitical quietism’ and its adaptations since the 15th century have been evoked by many scholars who have studied the Ismailis. The Dawoodi Bohra understanding of the term can be gleaned from the writings of Syedi Yusuf Najmuddin, the former rector of Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah University. In a 1984 document titled 75 Momentous Years in Retrospect, Syedi Najmuddin notes that it was the 18th Imam, Al-Mustansir Billah (1035–1094 AD), who began preparations for the oncoming seclusion period, which became a reality by the time the 21st Imam, Al-Tayyib, left Cairo around 526 A.H. In order to restrict jurisdiction, the territories of
Yemen, Sindh and Hind had already been clubbed together by the 18th Imam, Al-Mustansir, into one single administrative unit. Followers within the fold were placed under restricted roles, bound not by territory but by a common bond of religious discipline. For Syedi Yusuf Najmuddin, the Fatimi faith is premised on the fact that the Imamat would continue from the 21st Imam in his progeny, from father to son, and “that today an Imam from that august line exists” and that the Dai-al-mutlaq is his vicegerent. Syedi Najmuddin adds that the eventual decision was made by the 24th Dai-al-mutlaq, who was also named Syedna Yusuf Najmuddin, to transfer the Fatimi Dawat from Yemen in 1539 to the shores of India. Such an undertaking involved an extended period of seventy-five years because it meant transferring “religious lore, a vast manuscript library, language, literature and traditions”.

One of the most significant aspects carried forth from the experiences of the Fatimi Dawat in Yemen was a strict avoidance of political activity. Such a strategy enabled those belonging to ‘the fold’ to maintain all the benefits that had existed under the Fatimid realm in Cairo. At the same time the elimination of overt ‘political conflicts’ allowed those within the fold to function in accordance with their religious beliefs and avoid political strife usually linked to the establishment of rule over territory and the government of physical geographic spaces. Armed with such a strategy of ‘quietism’, a strict code of behaviour in other aspects of the followers’ life also came to be enforced. This ensured what Syedi Najmuddin called the ‘continuous contentment’ or enjoyment of ‘similar bounties’ they had hitherto enjoyed during the Fatimid era without the associated difficulties of maintaining and governing territories.  

Returning to his main focus, i.e., the experience of the community between the period 1910 and 1985, Syedi Najmuddin notes that when the 51st Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Taher Saifuddin, took over the reins of the Dawat in 1915, activities ‘inimical’ to the Dawat had been festering for over a century. Syedi Najmuddin reads this as an attempt to weaken the grip over ‘the vast treasures’, which were the defining heritage of the Fatimids. Noting how previous Dai-al-mutlaqs had paid little attention or not done enough to silence those who had engaged in the ‘wrongful’ and ‘indiscriminate’ interpretation of the scriptures, Syedna Taher Saifuddin took upon himself the entire orbit of the ‘vast teaching mechanism’. Not only did Syedna Taher Saifuddin take on those who remained sceptical of the Dawat’s ability to cope with the mandates of an emerging modern consciousness across India but he also began to reclaim the intellectual heritage of the Dawoodi Bohra faith. This was done by forming halqas (‘public gathering in the form of a circle’) and teaching every conceivable manuscript in the Fatimid libraries from cover to cover. In the narrative which follows, the attempt is to posit that the early Reformist challenge of the 20th century was not just about accountability over the Dawat’s intellectual and temporal resources, but was

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66 Halqas are basically ‘study circles’ emphasizing religious knowledge. The formation of halqas date back to the early days of Islam in Arabia, they are conducted primarily for adults and focus more specifically on the teachings of the Quran and scriptures depending on the group and the figure leading the session. In South Asia, the formation of halqas is also associated with various Sufi branches, especially the Naqshabandiya and Chisti orders. See Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chisti Order in South Asia and Beyond, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and Ali Riaz, ‘Madrassah Education in Pre-colonial and Colonial South Asia’, Journal of Asian and African Studies, 46, 1 (2010), pp. 69-86. He halqa also has a relevance to theatre. Khalid Amine, a scholar who studies Moroccan theatre, notes that an Al-halqa is a public gathering in the form of a circle around a person or a number of persons (hlayqi/hlayqia) in a public space (be it a marketplace, a medina gate, or a newly devised downtown square). It is a space of popular culture that is open to all people from different walks of life. “Al-halqa hovers between high culture and low mass culture, sacred and profane, literacy and orality. Its repertoire combines fantastic, mythical, and historical narratives from Thousand and One Nights and Sirat bani: hilal, as well as stories from the holy Quran and the Sunna of the prophet Mohammed (PBUH) along with local witty narrative and performative forms.” Quoting the playwright/writer El-Meskini Sghir, “an’al-halqa is the didactic and entertaining space of the general public from different walks of life[...] halqas are characterized by the representation of the traditional repertoire based on fantastic stories and myths that attract passers-by who form a circle around actors, acrobats, musicians, or around story-tellers.” See Khalid Amine, ‘Crossing Borders: Al-halqa performance in Morocco From the Open Space to the Theatre Building’, The Drama Review, 45, 2 (2001), pp. 55–69.
about the community’s struggle to maintain its independence and its self-image and identity which were closely linked to the Dai-al-mutlaq against an increasingly interventionist colonial state. The contractual basis between leader and followers was being threatened. Perhaps the most apt metaphor to describe Syedna Taher Saifuddin is that of the untiring leader amidst the Reformist challenge. He convened almost twenty-five halqas each day and taught from early morning till midnight, alongside further elaborations every Thursday, Friday and a waaz (‘sermon’) every Sunday.67

**Sir Adamji Peerbhai: ‘The Difficult Philanthropist’**

The earliest stirrings for reforms within the community and the rise of what may be considered a modern reformist consciousness may be located in the vacuum created by the internal power struggle over succession between the 49th and 50th Dai-al-mutlaqs and the subsequent struggle between the family of Sir Adamji Peerbhai and the Dawat from the 1880s onwards. As the internal dispute over succession lingered, leading to a severe decline in Dawat resources in the early 20th century, Adamji Peerbhai filled the vacuum.68 A self-made industrialist, Peerbhai had profited from the contracts given out by the British Army in India during the First World War. Born in

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67 Syedi Najmuddin, *75 Momentous Years in Retrospect*, p. 6.
68 Dawat sources do acknowledge that Dawat wealth had reduced significantly but remain silent on the precise reasons for the decline. In two brief hagiographies translated from the *Tohfato L'alil Akhbaaril Hudaat* which document the decline in wealth during the reign of the 49th Dai, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, and the 50th Dai, Syedna Abdullah Badruddin, the author notes that of the 15 years that Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin reigned, “the first five years […] were of considerable difficulty in which all the Dawat’s debts were settled”. In the case of the 50th Dai, Syedna Abdullah Badruddin, who passed away in 1915 A.D. after nine years on the Gadi (‘helm of Dawat’), the hagiography notes how “he was particularly consumed in the cause of fulfilling the debts of Dawat. Molana was often out in this regard, even mealtimes would be missed for the sake of this endeavour.” ‘Syedna Abdullah Badruddin (RA), 50th Dai-al-mutlaq’ is a translation from the *Tohfato L'alil Akhbaaril Hudaat* (Mumbai: Duat Mutaqeen Archive, undated). In an attempt at settling the debts, Syedna Abdullah Badruddin also continued developing the ‘Dawoodi Fund’, which had been established by the 48th Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Abdulhusain Husamuddin (d. 1891), and also established the Faiz-e-Hussaini Trust which was initially established in Karachi in 1888 and after the Partition of India was formed in Mumbai. The Trust continues until today, providing members of the community with active support when they travel for their Haj or ziyarat. The Trust looks after requirements such as ticketing, visas, accommodation, sabak, guidance for arkaan, and safar. See ‘New Borah High Priest: A Personal Sketch’, *Times of India*, 7/4/1906.
1845 at Dhoraji in Kathiawar, Adamji Peerbhai rose to prominence in the early 1870s after receiving the government contract for army camp equipment, breaking the monopoly of the Parsi firm, Futteqhar and Jubbulpore.\(^{69}\) In 1878 he carried out a large contract for Maltese carts, earning him a position among the big industrialists of Bombay.\(^{70}\) By 1897, Peerbhai had become an influential figure within the Bombay Bohra community and had established *madrasas*, schools and hospitals to uplift the community.

Although Adamji Peerbhai never openly challenged the authority of the Dai-al-mutlaq until his death in 1913, tensions had existed for a number of years. Yet these tensions were resolved to some degree around 1897 when Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin (the 49th Dai-al-mutlaq) conferred upon the industrialist the title of *Rafiuddin* (‘praiseworthy’) at a public ceremony, which was held to celebrate Peerbhai’s ascension to the role of Sheriff of Bombay (1897–1898).\(^{71}\) Nonetheless, indicative of the tension between allegiance to ‘community’ and the callings of a ‘civil society’, domineered by the presence of the colonial state and modern civility, the simmering tensions were apparent when at the 1897 ceremony, Adamji Peerbhai’s son, Mohamadally, spoke on his father’s behalf:

> The Reverend Syedna Maulana Burhanuddin Saheb and the Gentleman of the Bohra Community – I thank you most cordially on behalf of my father for your very kind words…in some of the address you speak of my father’s popularity as the cause of contentment of this high civic honour, but allow me to say, it was not his popularity but your popularity, the popularity of our Bohra community, that brought my father

\(^{69}\) Apart from a short mention by Theodore P. Wright in his article on the Bohras, there is no secondary literature that documents the life and times of Adamji Peerbhai. See Wright, op. cit., p. 174. However, for a detailed study on the great businessmen of Gujarat in the 17\(^{th}\), 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries, which includes the Parsis, see Makrand Mehta, *Indian Merchants and Entrepreneurs in Historical Perspective: With a Special Reference to Shroffs of Gujarat: 17th to 19th Centuries* (Delhi: Academic Foundation, 1991); Dwijendra Tripathi, ‘Indian Entrepreneurship in Historical Perspective, A Re-evaluation’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6, 22 (1971); and Tripathi, *Business Communities of India*, pp. 23–76.

\(^{70}\) ‘A Bombay Philanthropist: Mr. Adamji Peerbhoy’s Charities’, *Times of India*, 12/3/1903.

\(^{71}\) ‘To Mr. Adamji’, *Times of India*, 31/12/1897; ‘Guzerat In Famine Time’, *Times of India*, 7/9/1899. Also see Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, p. 236.
Speaking on behalf of the then 49th Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, one Sheikh, Adam Yusufbhai, had declared just earlier to Adamji Peerbhai:

Your philanthropy and public benevolences cannot be overlooked. The sanatorium that you have set up at Chorni Road, at the expense of several lakhs of rupees, is a standing monument of your love for the happiness of our community. By the establishment of Madrasas and schools in Bombay as well as in Kathiawar, with necessary arrangements for providing boarding and lodging, free of cost, to all the boys of our community, you have given a real impetus to education amongst them. By establishing comfortable inns and resting houses at Mecca, Medina and Kerbala, you have rendered invaluable assistance to the numerous devotees who visit these sacred places. Last, but not least, is the timely and effective assistance you rendered last year in 1877 to your famine stricken brethren in Kathiawar and Yemen.

Despite attempts by community elders at co-opting Peerbhai, tensions between the philanthropist and the 50th Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Abdullah Badruddin, only gathered momentum. Soon both parties began competing fiercely on ‘modernising’ the community and establishing charitable causes. In response to Peerbhai, the Syedna Badruddin convened a meeting of several Bohra merchants and traders from Bombay.

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72 'Entertainment to Mr. Admaji Peerbhoi J.P.', *Times of India*, 31/12/1897.
73 Ibid.
74 Within the ‘cosmopolitan’ landscape of colonial Bombay, the community history marked another significant shifting point as it became embroiled in sectarian violence. Since 1904, the Bohras in Bombay, especially around Bhindi Bazaar, had been having regular clashes with members of the Sunni community during Muharram with the trigger event seeming trivial at best. The Sunni community in 1904 had insisted on its right to beat drums as the *tabot* procession passed the Dawoodi Bohra mosque on Doctor Street, leading to disturbances and fatal clashes. In 1909, the Bohras, it is claimed, had insisted on playing music within the mosque, which is said to have caused some concern among the Sunni community. Since 1904, however, the colonial government had made special police arrangements in the quarter during Muharram with both communities expected to remain in their pre-designated quarters. See ‘The Mohurrum Festival’, *Times of India*, 28/3/1904; ‘Origin Of The Row’, *The Times of India* 14/2/1908; ‘The Mohurrum Riot’, *The Times of India*, 15/2/1908. On how Muharrum commemorations registered a shift in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Bombay, see Jim Masselos, ‘Change and Custom in the Format of the Bombay Mohurrum During the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’, *South Asia*, 5, 2 (1982). For broader discussions, see Jim Masselos, ‘Appropriating Urban Space: Social Constructs of Bombay during the Raj’, *South Asia*, 14, 1 (1991); Jim Masselos, *The City in Action: Bombay Struggles for Power* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007) and most importantly Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the Western Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Green’s tremendous study brings together the history of colonial Bombay, the Indian Ocean and Islam during the experience of Empire. Most importantly, Green places Islam at the centre of Bombay’s colonial modernity, potentiated through its status as a leading port city and its heterogeneous population.
to raise subscriptions for an orphanage for girls in 1910. A resolution was passed at this gathering emphasising that the Bohra community would “heartily participate in the objects of the fund and were ready and willing to contribute to it”. Affluent members of the community were even encouraged to donate to ‘other Moslem projects’ too, as long as they declared themselves as ‘Bohras’ on the list of donors.

In an attempt at reaching out to the community, Syedna Abdullah Badruddin boarded trains and travelled to various parts of the subcontinent, rarely resting in one place for too long. A notice from 1911 read:

His Highness Sardar Sayedna Abdulla Badruddin, High Priest of the Bohra Community after a long tour of Ujjain, Indore, Karachi, Delhi, Agra, etc. and visiting the Governor-General of Indore, the Commissioner of Sind and other officials started from Jaipur by the Punjab express and halted on Wednesday night at Ankleshwar where at the request of the Jamaat next morning he went to the masjid for prayers. He later started by special train and arrived at Surat after eight. The railway platform was crowded by Bohras, a band played, rockets were fired. The roads were decorated with bunting and arches en route.

Wherever the Dai-al-mutlaq went, the followers were encouraged to turn up in large numbers, seeking deedar (‘sight’) and blessings. Syedna Badruddin also began to build and restore a number of mosques, madrasas and musafirkhanas across the subcontinent. Where possible, affluent merchants and traders were asked for donations. Meanwhile, in terms of the overall outlook towards the State, the Bohras remained loyal to the Raj. They actively participated in the various prayer ceremonies organised by most religious communities around the subcontinent for the safety of British troops and victory for the Empire as WW1 raged on. With his efforts, the

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75 ‘Orphanage For Girls’, Times of India, 10/8/1910.
76 ‘Moslem Orphanage, Opened by Lady Clarke’ The Times of India, 20/12/1910; for a reception that was held in honour of the Governor General, one community member declared his donation as follows: ‘Dawoodi Bohra Community through ‘A Friend’. See ‘The Reception Fund’, Times of India, 22/11/1921.
77 ‘Railway Intelligence’, Times of India, 6/5/1911.
78 ‘Rebuilding the Masjid at Begampura, Surat at a cost of Rs. 40,000’, Times of India, 19/1/1912; ‘Opening The New Sidhpur Musafirkhana’, The Times of India, 17/2/1914.
79 ‘Outlook In India, Trade With The Enemy’, Times of India, 11/8/1914; ‘The Righteous War, A Day Of Intercession, India’s Prayers For Victory’, Times of India, 5/8/1915; ‘Ahmedabad War Fete’, Times
50th Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Abdullah Badruddin, had in his short tenure of nine years (1906–1915), nonetheless established a number of models that his two successors would adopt, albeit subjected to their own personal characteristics and shifting contexts.

An Initial ‘Intrusion’: The Chandabhai Gulla Case

With the passing of Adamji Peerbhai in 1913, the major challenge emerged around 1915. The event also coincided with the ascension of Syedna Taher Saifuddin and the ensuing sectarian violence that consumed Bhopal.80 Fleeing Bohras sought shelter in Ujjain, and both the Dawat and Peerbhai's sons struggled to out-manoeuvre each other in the relief efforts. When the displaced began returning to Bhopal, in 1917 the Dai-al-mutlaq purchased several parcels of real estate, including the current head office properties in downtown Mumbai that make up the Badri Mahal.81 Citing the contentious issue over who administers Dawat resources, the sons of Peerbhai filed a lawsuit against Syedna Taher Saifuddin, claiming that the properties had been acquired from the gullas (‘collections boxes’) of the Seth Chandabhai durgah located in Bombay Fort. The plaintiffs demanded that the daily collections at the Chandabhai durgah be declared public charities, whilst Syedna Taher Saifuddin contended that neither the mosque, nor the gulla nor the offerings were charities. The major argument lodged by the defence was the oath of Misaq and long-standing Bohra tradition premised on Ismaili jurisprudence gave the Dai-al-mutlaq unlimited control over all aspects, both secular and temporal, of the followers’ lives as long as the Imam-uz-

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81 ‘Calls for charges to be dropped (Bombay)’, The Times of India, 10/10/1917 and ‘A Public Meeting of the Dawoodi Bohras (Surat)’, Times of India, 16/10/1917.
Zamaan remained in seclusion. In the version of the *Misaq* that was presented as part of the hearing at the High Court of Bombay in 1920 by Syedna Taher Saifuddin, the English rendition noted that “you should help with your life and property and you should obey the Imam of the time or his Dai sincerely”.

After a lengthy trial, which lasted for several months in 1920, Justice Marten, the presiding Judge, passed a decree declaring the Chandabhai *gullas* as charities. However, Syedna Taher Saifuddin lodged an immediate appeal with the aid of his barristers. The wording of the appeal became that ‘historical’ moment during which the emergent tension between the spiritual and temporal authority the Dai-al-mutlaq and what may be referred to as the slippery notion of ‘community’ in the colonial context would come to be defined vis-à-vis the steady intrusions of colonial civil law into the religious institutions of India. Syedna Taher Saifuddin contended that Justice Marten should not have even allowed the suit into the courts. He said it was not the right of the colonial courts to decide the best interests of the Chandabhai charities or to grant the “prayers of the plaintiffs or to pass any decree”. It was further asserted that the Advocate General who appeared on behalf of the plaintiffs had been deceived by ‘the promoters of the suit’ by wrongful information and the suppression of the ‘real facts’ and this was mainly a result of the ‘ignorance’ of the position of the Dai-al-mutlaq and Ismaili jurisprudence within the colonial judicial system.

That the learned judge ought to have held that the Dawoodi Bohra religion is what the defendants’ witnesses deposed to and what is evidenced by the Meshak and the religious texts of authority of the Dawoodi Bohrahs and that the said religion

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83 ‘The Original Side, Sardar Sayedna Saifuddin Taher (appellant) vs. advocate general of Bombay (respondent)’, *Times of India*, 24/12/1921.

precluded the idea of the third defendant as Dai-al-Mutlak being accountable to anyone except the Imam in Seclusion.

The text continues:

That the Learned judge’s decree declaring the Dai-al-Mutlak an ordinary trustee violates one of the cardinal tenets of the Dawoodi Bohra religion which holds that the Dai-ul-Mutlak holds the [Chandabhai] property as a representative of the Imam in Seclusion and as a representative of God himself and that no one except the Dai-al-Mutlak can by any possibility be the manager of the mosque, tomb and gulla funds.85

The appeal presented thirty-three well-crafted points resisting the intrusion of the colonial state in community matters. What is most pertinent is the deep contradiction in the universalising tendencies of ‘civil law’ as an extension of the civilising mission.

The Chandabhai Gulla case and the initial 1921 Bombay High Court decision declaring the gullas as public charities also alludes to the bonds of community as they stood in colonial India. As opposed to civil society, which theoretically at least treats its subjects as sovereign individuals whose relations are mediated through the market and laws, the Dawoodi Bohra community, and Syedna Taher Saifuddin in particular, were invoking primordial bonds of religion and culture.

This is significant where colonial governmentality was attempting to accommodate ‘tradition’ into its narrative. It could view the realm of the community only as its Other, condemned as an ‘ordinary trustee’ at best, that could not have a legitimate existence within its domain. As Partha Chatterjee voices, “Community, which ideally should have been banished from the kingdom of capital, continues to lead a subterranean, potentially subversive, life within it because it refuses to go away.”86

For this, an official Dawat document quotes the Advocate General, Sir Thomas Strangman, who appeared on behalf of the plaintiffs in 1921:

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85 Ibid.

86 Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments, p. 236.
Looking back to the proceedings, I think what impresses me most, even more than the extravagance of the claims, was the personality of Mullaji, a frail looking figure possessed nevertheless of an iron will, great determination, and organized capacity. At the time he assumed office the administration must have been extremely slack. Yet he managed in very few years not only to pull the administration together but also to obtain a hold upon his followers greater perhaps than that of any of his predecessors.87

The Chandabhaji Gulla case was eventually settled when the Bombay High Court issued a fresh decree with ‘some modifications’ to the initial decision passed by Justice Marten in 1920. The Chief Justice ordered that two sets of receptacles be placed at the durgah, with plaques clearly advising donors that the offerings for one of the boxes would be entirely at the disposal of Syedna Taher Saifuddin.88 The decree also clarified that such an injunction in no way decided whether any other gulla funds or general Dawat funds are charitable funds or not. In what seemed to have been a resolution to the dispute, the Chief Justice remarked that in the future there be as little litigation as possible in these matters, and any future litigation should be undertaken only after a thorough consideration of the facts by the Advocate General.89

‘Angry Men’: The Anjuman-i-Dawoodi and Young Men’s Bohra Association

The Chief Justice’s remarks, however, were proved wrong and with a number of litigation suits looming by 1924, the community’s fears about increasing marginalisation prompted a Bohra to query Mahatma Gandhi on where the community would figure within the ambit of swaraj. The writer expressed anxiety

87 Fusion of Two Golden Eras, author, n.a. (Mumbai: Dawat-e-Hadiyah, Department of Statistics and Information, Pamphlet, 1998), p. 1. Whilst this document suggests that Thomas Strangman made the comment in 1918, this is highly improbable since the Chandabhaji Gulla case was only settled by the Bombay High Court in 1921.
88 For a balanced discussion see Blank, Mullahs on the Mainframe, p. 237; for the Reformist version see Nathwani, Dawoodi Bohra Commission, pp. 11–13 and Contractor, The Dawoodi Bohras, pp. 6–7.
89 From 1921 onwards, in an attempt to ‘reclaim’ lost devotional space, the Bohra community celebrated the annual urus in memory of Chandabhai in a grand fashion with about 10,000 devotees converging each year. See ‘Chandabhai Seth, Bohras Observe Death Anniversary’, Times of India, 8/8/1936; ‘On Chandabahi’, Times of India, 20/8/1935; ‘Dawoodi Bohras gather at Chandabahi’, Times of India, 29/7/1937.
about the future safety of the small community, especially against ‘fanatical Sunnis’ and requested the community be specifically named in the mystic formula of ‘Hindu-Musalmān-Sikh-Christian-Parsi-Jain unity’. The writer held that such a mention in the *mantram* would assuage the community’s fears, adding, “our people believe that they are happy under the present regime and their religion is not assailed. Similarly our community should feel secure when Swaraj is gained.”90 Apart from publishing the contents of the letter in the *Navajivan*, Mahatma Gandhi did not provide any clear response.91

Amidst a growing climate of clamour for the application of civil laws to the administration of Dawat resources and legislation for the Mussalman Wakf Act being discussed in the Legislature, Syedna Taher Saifuddin began to consider a series of orthopraxic reforms in 1924. The initial step was taken by a group of about fifty members, who declared themselves to be the *Anjuman-i-Dawoodi*. Sympathetic to the Dai-al-mutlaq, the group began to encourage male members of the community to maintain beards. They claimed that local *Amils* had been informed that no marriage ceremony could take place if the groom was beardless. At the time, the common practice had been for some Bohra men to maintain short beards, while most wore

91 Although the Bohras remained silent on the politics of the Khilafat Movement, the timing of such an appeal to Mahatma Gandhi may have accrued from pan-Indian developments unfolding at the time. The Khilafat Movement was reaching a stage of collapse by 1924 and the appeal, it may be held, was made with a growing sense of unease that the Bohras, along with other smaller communities, may have felt. While Mahatma Gandhi never openly commented on the Bohras, his regard for the smaller religious and merchant communities of Bombay and Western India in general remained tolerant. This is best captured by the respect he showed for the Parsi community in 1921, despite their non-participation in the non-cooperation movement: “I know that you are following with considerable interest the present non-co-operation movement: “I know that you are following with considerable interest the present non-co-operation movement. You may know, too, that all thoughtful non-co-operators are anxiously waiting to see what part you are going to play in the process of purification through which the whole country is passing. I, personally, have every reason to have full faith in your doing the right thing when the moment for making the final choice comes to you.” See ‘Address to the Parsis’, *Young India*, 23/3/1921. While the Bohras adopted a quietist stance during the period, Aga Khan III (d. 1956), the spiritual leader of the Khoja Ismailis, participated wholly in the Khilafat Movement and, as Van Grondelle notes, “did not hesitate to speak for Islam as a whole, or indeed did not hesitate to judge what was acceptable to Islam”. See Van Grondelle, *The Ismailis in the Colonial Era*, pp. 38–40.
moustaches and kept them clipped. The Anjuman-i-Dawoodi declared publicly that
the practice of a complete shave is an “innovation which has no religious basis” and
“striving to oust the Prince of Wales fashion, the orthodox are attacking what they
consider a dangerous custom”. 92 Appeals were made to Syedna Taher Saifuddin to
issue a “list of heretics from time to time” so that the community could be acquainted
with the accused and disapprove of any ‘wrongful’ actions that may be taken in the
name of ‘Daudi brothers’. 93

Along with calls to maintain beards came the movement against the wearing of black
caps by male members of the community. 94 It was declared that “black was the colour
of Bani Abbas”, the figure held responsible for usurping the power of Fatimid Imams
in fifteenth-century Cairo. The Dawoodi Bohra community, which was seen as the
inheritor of the Fatimid traditions, would not adorn black as a ‘mark of displeasure
against such a mortal offence’. This declaration provoked an immediate response
from the Reformists: “If the black colour is really satanic, why should you wear a
black coat or black socks, or black shoes? Why do you single out a black cap for
punishment?” In an initial indication of how important the care of the Bohra body
would be in the coming decades, the query elicited a response from the Anjuman-i-
Dawoodi: “That is because you put the cap on the head which is the most prominent
part of the body”. 95

As the work of the Anjuman-i-Dawoodi began to gather headlines and public

92 ‘Noncooperation as a Cure for the Beardless’, Times of India, 21/4/1925.
94 For broader contextual discussions in terms of Islamic revival in India, see: Francis Robinson, The
`Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001); Francis
Robinson, ‘Religious Change and the Self in Muslim South Asia since 1800’, South Asia, 20, 1 (1997); and
University Press, 1982).
95 ‘Down with the Black Cap’, Times of India, 1/5/1925.
attention, a group of Reformists from the Bombay Bohra community sent a delegation to Syedna Taher Saifuddin in 1925 contending that the edicts issued were not practical, and that the practice of not wearing a beard would be difficult to do away with. At the time, it was maintained that the Dawat was not carrying on this campaign, but the renegade group Anjuman-i-Dawoodi was responsible, including an assault on Ebrahim Adamji Peerbhai in 1922 in the wake of the Chandabhai Gulla case ruling.96

In the context of growing tension between the Dawat and the Reformists led by Amiruddin Tyebji, 1925 witnessed the establishment of the Young Men’s Bohra Association (YMBA) under the patronage of the latter.97 The objective of the new grouping was “to maintain and advance social and other rights and privileges of its members, to devise means and methods by which education among Bohras may be popularised and encouraged and to provide recreation for its members.”98 At the association’s first annual general meeting in 1926, Amiruddin Tyebji spoke at length

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97 His sons then continued the early reformist challenge that had been posed by Sir Adamji Peerbhai, when they took the Dawat to court when a group of students and trustees were prevented from visiting the *durgah* of Syedi Hakimuddin in Burhanpur. In this regard Richard Eaton’s study on the shrine of Baba Farid becomes increasingly relevant. It documents a legal dispute after the religious head of the shrine, Said Muhammad, died in 1934 leaving his son as successor, whose succession was disputed by a group of other descendants of Baba Farid. In the course of the trial, the lawyers solicited devotees’ testimonies from Sahiwal, Bahawalpur and Lyallpur, a “remarkable sampling of shrine’s local constituency” and attempted to understand how Islam as sustained and mediated by this shrine was popularly perceived in one locality. The case became interesting when the Anglo-Indian civil court even accepted or at the least debated over whether Said Muhammad had received a dream from Baba Farid about his son’s succession. The theoretical difficulties for the government profession were apparent, and whether such a judgement meant the violation of non-interference in religious matters. In the litigation, the basic issue that came up was whether the shrine was understood as a local institution (governed by its own customs) or an Islamic institution (governed by Sharia). Likewise, in the case of the Dawoodi Bohras, the court cases over *durgahs* has presented an interesting playground for the Reformists, but also enabled a particular literature and rationality to emerge amidst British Imperialism with Islamic reform and Muslim separatism on the rise in 1930s India. See Richard Eaton, ‘*Court of Man, Court of God: Local Perceptions of the Shrine of Baba Farid, Pakpattan, Punjab*’ in *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 225–248. Also see Francis Robinson, ‘*Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia*’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2-3 (2008), pp. 259-281.
admitting that although the YMBA had managed to get less overall support and members than originally envisaged, their “real strength lay in the honesty and earnestness of their purpose to educate their brethren.”\textsuperscript{99} It was further declared that the YMBA would not be deterred by threats because they “were living under the benign British rule and enjoyed freedom of speech, thought and action, and as they knew under the great proclamation of the late Queen Victoria the Good they had the full liberty of following customs according to their own dictates of conscience”.\textsuperscript{100} Tyebji went on to criticise the ceremonies performed on the occasion of deaths and marriages as ‘wasteful’ and urged that these customs be revised in the “light of economy and such of them as were found to be extravagant and unnecessary should be eliminated”. Despite having only 18 members, the YMBA continued to focus on the educational upliftment of the community over the next few years.\textsuperscript{101}

The controversy over maintaining beards came to an end in March 1930 when Syedna Taher Saifuddin expressed his intention to “put out of the fold those who had violated the laws of the Shariat”. Matters had also been exacerbated when some members, including those from the YMBA, had their \textit{Nikah} ceremonies performed a year earlier without the permission of the Dai-al-mutlaq. Syedna Taher Saifuddin had refused to perform the \textit{Nikah} because the accused were in violation of the mandates of the community by refusing to maintain beards and had not heeded his calls in 1929 to return to the fold.\textsuperscript{102} The decision for excommunication seems to have also been

\textsuperscript{99} ‘Reform Movement among Bohras, Young Men at Work’, \textit{Times of India}, 21/6/1926.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{102} The notification to return to the fold was posted by the attorneys of Syedna Taher Saifuddin. It read: “Under instructions from our client His Holiness Sardar Syedna Taher Saifuddin Saheb, the Dai-al-mutlaq and Mullaji Saheb of the Dawoodi Bohra community, we hereby bring to the notice of those concerned who may not be aware of it that such persons as belong to or live with families of the seceders from the Dawoodi Bohra community do not believe in our client as the Dai-al-mutlaq it is
based on pressure exerted by orthodox members, when it was declared at a meeting of about 6,000 Bohras at the Badri Mahal requesting Syedna Taher Saifuddin to take the “necessary steps” against “a few reformers who were not only acting against the precepts of their religion, but were bringing the community into ridicule in public by their articles in the Bombay Samachar and Times of India.”

As the YMBA attempted to salvage the situation, even sending a deputation of about fourteen members to meet Syedna Taher Saifuddin, it was made clear that the decision was final.

Although the YMBA never questioned the spiritual authority of the Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Taher Saifuddin, by the 1930s it had become embroiled in the Wakf Act controversy by publicly demanding that the Act remain applicable to the Dawoodi Bohras. Whilst the Wakf debate is the focus of the following section, what remains pertinent is that in response to a resolution by Gullamhussein Matcheswala, a Bombay Legislative Council MLC sympathetic towards Bohra appeals for the exemption, the YMBA declared that they “thereby vindicated the inalienable right of every Indian Muslim, whether he be a Dawoodi Bohra or otherwise, to have proper accounts of the Wakf rendered”. The YMBA added that “it looks forward and relies upon these members of the Bombay Legislative Council, on the floor of the Council Hall as well as elsewhere, to do justice to their cause in the same dispassionate and fair manner on a future occasion, should any such necessity rise again.”

In August 1933, however, most of its members resigned and the secretary, Amiruddin Tyebji, reported having submitted to those members a ‘claim for damages’ citing that the resignation letters

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103 ‘Bohras Refuse to Wear Beard, Head Priest’s Ban’, Times of India, 12/3/1930.
104 ‘Young Men’s Bohra Association Pass a Resolution’, Times of India, 14/9/1933.
were wholly unjustified and the letters of resignation were “all in one particular form, and they are believed to have been inspired by the anti-reformist section of Bohras”.

The ‘Politics’ of the Mussalman Wakf Act, 1923

The passing of the Mussalman Wakf Act in 1923 presented a new set of complications to the Dawat and the Dai-al-mutlaq’s attempt at consolidating the community. There was increased lobbying by reformists, including the YMBA, for its application. Syedna Taher Saifuddin appealed to the Governor-General, Sir Leslie Wilson, for an exemption from the operation of the Act. In June 1925, the appeal for exemption was approved and the community organised a large gathering at the Sir Cowasji Jehangir Hall in Bombay to express its appreciation for the government. Attended by community elders and the Bombay elite, the keynote speaker, Salehbhai Karimji Barodawala, who was a member of the Bombay Municipal Council and Bombay Legislative Council, made three points: First, similar gatherings ought to be organised across the country and unanimous resolutions be passed that the Bohras be exempted. Second, any application of the Act would amount to an interference with the religion of the community. Third, that Barodawala was not alone in his support for the community and his opinions was ‘strongly backed’ by Sir Thomas Strangman, the

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107 As one report declared, “The Standing Committee of Dawoodi Bohra Education Conference have resolved that the local Governments of such provinces that have not hitherto put into force the Moslem Wakf Act 1923 be moved to put the said Act into force in their respective provinces, and further, to apply the Act to all the sects of Moslems in general and to the Dawoodi Bohra Community in particular.” See ‘Resolution’, *Times of India*, 12/2/1925.
109 The community mobilised and across the various *jumaats* spread over India, Resolutions were passed. See ‘A Thanks Meeting: Poona Bohras Gratitude for the Government.’ *Times of India*, 9/7/1925.
late Advocate-General, the Bombay Bar Association, the Honourable Judges of the Bombay High Court, the Judicial Commissioner in Sindh and by various “famous judicial authorities in the other Provinces of India”.110

The major argument presented by community spokespersons was that any application of the Wakf Act would impinge on the Dawoodi Bohra faith.111 At the same meeting, Mohammadally Allabux, who described himself as the Secretary of the Bohra community, thanked the Government of Bombay, but stated that the exemption had only been granted until 1929.112 Presenting the Resolution, Allabux asserted that the Wakf Act was contravening the proclamation of the colonial government that there would be no interference in religious matters. With growing sentiment that the government was ignoring the community, he concluded by noting that the application of the Wakf Act “will be subversive of the tenets of the religion of the community”.

However, looking closely at the Resolution, another reason is discernible:

This meeting observes with very great regret and apprehension that the exemption of this Community has been granted for a period of three years only pending further orders. This meeting understands that the reason, why absolute exemption was not granted, was that the Government believed that there was a division of opinion on the subject in the Community. This meeting emphatically declares that there is no such division of opinion on the subject in this Community, which unanimously demands exemption on religious grounds. It further declares that, if a contrary opinion is held by a few persons, posing as educated members of the Community [read YMBA], such opinion is contrary to the religious beliefs of the Community and in violation of

111 The imposition of the Wakf Act was complex for the Bohras. As Nile Green notes, prior to 1915 the religious economy of Bombay was one where “distinctive and often mutually competitive Islams were produced or refined and in some cases exported from there to the far regions of the West Indian Ocean.” After 1915, with Mohammad Ali Jinnah becoming the leader of the Muslim League, the new imperatives of nationalism and the search for a unified Indian Muslim ‘community’ symbolised by Jinnah pulled Bombay’s Muslims in directions which were more heavily focused on consolidating the Muslims of Bombay into a national or transnational visions of a single ‘community’. See Green, Bombay Islam, op. cit., 2011. In terms of colonial authority and the administration of different communities of Bombay, see: Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (eds.), Bombay: Mosaic of Culture (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Prashant Kidambi, The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890–1920 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Jim Masselos, The City in Action: Bombay Struggles for Power (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).
112 ‘Bohras Support to Britain, Expression of Loyalty’, Times of India, 17/10/1939.
Thus the community asserted its right to non-intervention from the colonial state and demanded the right to govern its own resources. In November 1929, as the three-year exemption period approached its end, a deputation consisting of 260 Dawoodi Bohras representing the community from various parts of India approached the Hon. Moulvi Rafiuddin Ahmad, Minister of Education, at the Secretariat in Bombay to urge a permanent exemption. In the course of a long statement made by the deputation, it urged Rafiuddin Ahmad not to be swayed by a small group of ‘seceders’ who had approached him in October 1929 demanding the application of the Act. The deputation sought to address the lingering claim cited by the government in 1925, which had noted a permanent exemption was impractical since opinion within the community was split. The number of those demanding the application of the Wakf Act, the deputation added, was said to have dwindled since 1925 and “their total number all over the country does not exceed 200 persons; whereas the number of those who acknowledge the Dai-al-mutlaq [as the rightful governor of the community and its resources] is nearly three lakhs whom the deputation now waiting upon has the honour to represent”. The petitioners claimed that the plea for exemption was based entirely on religious grounds:

Wakf property is property dedicated to God. Its control and management is, therefore, properly vested in His representative from the time of the Holy Prophet. The religious belief of our community is that all Wakfs are vested in the Mullaji Saheb as the representative of the Imam, and should be managed by him alone.

The figure of 200 seceders appears to have been a stretch as the Reformists countered with a lengthy petition of 3,200 signatures in support of the application of the

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115 Ibid.
Wakf. Nonetheless, it may be asserted that Syedna Taher Saifuddin’s popularity within the community was increasing tremendously. Between 1926 and 1929 Syedna Taher Saifuddin immersed himself entirely in the educational upliftment of the community along with the initiation of numerous mosque-building initiatives across India. It was officially declared that the Dawoodi Bohra community possessed Wakf properties of the value of 20 crore, yielding annual revenues of 15 lakh rupees with 348 mosques and 16 gullas across India. Syedna Taher Saifuddin now began to muster the resources for the betterment of the community in a very systematic and organised manner.

Despite all these attempts, on July 27, 1931 the exemption the community had enjoyed from the Wakf Act expired. There now occurred the largest public mobilisation that the community initiated in the early 20th century. From August 1931, traders around Bombay began to observe hartals and undertook processions, which usually started from Bhindi Bazaar and ended at the Badri Mahal on Hornby Road, as a sign of peaceful protest and expression of loyalty to Syedna Taher Saifuddin. On August 7, 1931 the community appointed a committee with S.K. Barodawala as President and Mahomed Allabux as one of the members at an event which brought hundreds of Dawoodi Bohras together at Ghurratul-Masjid or the Azam Mosque in Dhaboo Street, Bombay. Loudspeakers were installed both inside and outside the

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116 In the lengthy counter-appeal, the Reformists noted: “We 3,200 Dawoodi Bohras … respectfully bring to Your Excellency’s notice that we have nothing to do with these 260 Dawoodi Bohras and also with the prayers embodied in the memorial, and we emphatically disown them and their actions for all purposes in connection with the momentous burning question now before the Government.” See ‘Mussalman Wakf Act, Memorial for Application to Dawoodi Bohras’, Times of India, 19/12/1929 and ‘Dawoodi Bohras, Plea For Application Of Wakf Act To Trust Funds’, Times of India, 11/11/1929.


mosque premises and shouts of ‘Allaho Akbar’ greeted the passing of each resolution. Speaking at the gathering, S.K. Barodawala alleged that Rafiuddin Ahmad as Minister of Education had misused his powers and demanded that Governor Sir Ernest Heston intervene and grant a permanent exemption.\textsuperscript{119} The \textit{hartals} across India forced the government to table a motion at the Bombay Legislative Council in October 1931, demanding a debate and resolution to the ‘widespread dissatisfaction’.\textsuperscript{120} After close consideration, the Bombay Legislative Council, with Rafiuddin Ahmad as reporting Minister, refused to submit to the public outcry and insisted that the Wakf Act would continue to apply to the Dawoodi Bohra community.\textsuperscript{121} The community, however, refused to submit to the Bombay Legislative Council decision and continued to launch \textit{hartals} across the subcontinent.\textsuperscript{122} Such was the extent of mobilisation that the community even managed to have the matter raised at the House of Commons by December 1931, but with little success.\textsuperscript{123}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{120} ‘Adjournment Motion, Bohras and the Wakf Act’, \textit{Times of India}, 3/10/1931.
\item \textsuperscript{121} ‘Wakf Act To Apply To Dawoodi Bohra Community’, \textit{Times of India}, 7/10/1931.
\item \textsuperscript{123} ‘Allegations against Dawoodi Bohras, Question in Commons’, \textit{Times of India}, 3/12/1931.
\end{itemize}
The community’s grievances were eventually debated at the Bombay Legislative Council in October 1932 when its members discussed the findings of the Bombay City Mussalman Wakf Inquiry Committee, which had published its report in June 1931. Whilst the debate was intense, most of the Sunni MLAs opposed any exemption from the Act, stating that it might destabilise the very basis for constituting a Central Wakf Board. Amongst those advocating exemption, MLC Gullamhussein Matcheswala noted that Section 13 of the Act, which allowed any local government to exempt any community or group from its operation, was incorporated specifically for the Dawoodi Bohras by the Central Legislature. Matcheswala added that the Central
Provinces Government had exempted the Dawoodi Bohras from the application of the Act and, as a result, the community’s demand should be paid attention to.124

With the frequency of protests and hartals increasing, the community managed to bring about one final resolution in August 1933 with the help of three Shia MLCs, recommending the community’s exemption from the Act. Whilst the resolution failed to gain enough support from the Bombay Legislative Council, it launched a public debate on the very nature of the Wakf Act and its applicability to groups who demanded exemption.125 As a result, the community passed its own Resolution, withdrawing support for those Sunni MLCs who did not support the resolution moved by Matcheswala in 1933. In a letter to the editor of the Times of India, Mohammadally Allabux, a key spokesman of the community at the time, quoted Nawab Shah Rookh Yar Jung, a Shia MLC who had supported the resolution:

I submit we must consider the personal position and the spiritual status of His Holiness the Mullaji Saheb and the real Meaning of the Dai-ul-Mutlak, which is missionary absolute; he has got the highest and fullest powers over his followers. Now, Sir, for us laymen to dispute his authority, over his religious followers would be inadvisable.126

Allabux’s letter provoked a response from a member of the Bombay Legislative Council identifying himself only as ‘Sindh MLC’. The writer clarified that all council members were against any interference in religious beliefs and none of them sought to

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125 ‘The Wakf Act, Position of the Bohras Considered’, Times of India, 18/8/1933. Also see ‘Bohras Claim Rejected, Govt. to be guided by Council’s Vote’, Times of India, 18/8/1933.

126 ‘Dawoodi Bohras and Wakf Act, Mr. Mahomedally Allabux’s reply to Sunni MLC’, Times of India, 25/9/1933.
question the position of the Dai-al-mutlaq as the spiritual leader of the community. It was further maintained that the resolution did not manage to garner support because most members felt that the Wakf Act did not, in any manner, interfere with the religious beliefs of the Dawoodi Bohras and nor did it affect the position of the Dai-al-mutlaq. As a result the Wakf debate came to be locked between the community's assertion of independence and the State’s persistent ‘ignorance’ of the internal logic of devotion to the Dai-al-mutlaq. Allabux, in a final response to ‘a Sindh MLC’, captured it best:

I must point out that there is a good deal of confusion in the views of your correspondent and he does not seem to be aware that one fundamental religious belief of the Dawoodi Bohras is that they believe in His Holiness the Mullaji Saheb as the representative of the Imam and vested with all the powers of the Imam in the absence of the Imam. The object of the Wakf Act is clearly to interfere with the powers of His Holiness the Mullaji Saheb as representative of the Imam and is clearly therefore a manifest interference with the religious beliefs of the Dawoodi Bohras. Of course the religious beliefs of other Muslims are different from those of the Dawoodi Bohras in this respect and therefore the Wakf Act may not be an interference so far as their religious beliefs are concerned. Therefore the challenge thrown by your correspondent does not need any further reply except as stated above.

**Summing Up**

The pressures of modern subjecthood loomed on the shores of the Dawoodi Bohra community and the debate about the rights of the community unfolded on the colonial landscape: the evoked collectivity was bound by culture, traditions and most importantly the primacy of the Dai-al-mutlaq in all matters. The collective was not bound by economic and legal contracts—these remained secondary—leading to an odd realisation that the Dawoodi Bohras wanted to be governed by another set of institutions and practices than those of civil society. The ‘other’ institutional framework becomes apparent in the following sections, which document the ‘inner’ workings of the community and its operations developed by Syedna Taher Saifuddin.

127 ‘Dawoodi Bohras and Wakf Act, No Interference in Muslim Religion, A Sind MLC’s reply to Mr. Mahomedally Allabux’, *Times of India*, 3/10/1933.
128 ‘Dawoodi Bohras and Wakf Act, Mr. Mahomedally Allabux’s reply to Sind MLC’, *Times of India*, 10/10/1933.
An important caveat is also required that the ‘outer’ debates encountered in previous sections should not be seen as separate. Both realms informed each other, but have been separated to allow the newer strategies and responses to emerge more coherently.
Chapter 3

‘IN DEFENSE OF COMMUNITY’:
SYEDNA TAHER SAIFUDDIN AND THE REASSERTION OF AUTHORITY

The following chapter maintains a timeline similar to the preceding chapter but focuses on the ‘inner’ workings of the community by relying on community publications and pamphlets from the period 1915–1965. Portraying historical change as a crisis of the Self, and the various strategies of re-fashioning a ‘new’ Dawoodi Bohra identity, the chapter historicises numerous community initiatives undertaken by Syedna Taher Saifuddin. The fashioning of the new Self could not occur without redefining the Bohra community as a whole, for at issue was the status of the Dai-al-mutlaq, which had come under attack by the Reformists as a ‘backward’ institution. Therefore, the chapter highlights how Syedna Taher Saifuddin successfully responded to such challenges, embodying the ideas of knowledge and traditions and simultaneously invoking Fatimid solidarity and modern belonging, leading the Dawoodi Bohras, who had been until then represented as a ‘traditional collectivity’, into a group that demanded the modern rights of ‘a people’.

The ‘Archetypal’ Prodigy

By 1925, with the Hakimiyah Durgah case at Burhanpur, amongst other cases, pending and under a climate of growing Reformist clamour, Syedna Taher Saifuddin commenced what Syedi Najmuddin refers to as the ‘great educational uplift of the Bohra community’ which was also made to coincide with the Misaq or oath of allegiance of his son and heir apparent, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin. The ceremony took place in 1930 in Surat, which was the official seat of the Dawat at the time, and Syedna Taher Saifuddin personally administered the Misaq and elevated his
son to the rank of Moomin Baligh (‘responsible follower’) of the Dawat. Surat, it may be posited, was a natural choice for it was also the site of Al-Dars al-Safiyah, the Islamic seminary established in 1814 under the 43rd Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin. By 1930, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin would be elevated to the rank of Haddiyah (‘guide to righteousness’) after the completion of his training. Syedna Taher Saifuddin declared a list and description of books on Fatimid philosophy that the young Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin is said to have been taught as part of this training:

It is Allah's special bounty unto me that I have been attending the training of my son personally despite the enormous burden of work which keeps me very preoccupied. This year in a congregation of Momeneen, I have raised my son Mohammed Burhanuddin to the high rank of 'Haddiyah' and I administered unto him the homily. O, young man, show your chivalry in the service of the progeny of the Prophet. May Allah keep you in His care. Be a good Heir to a good Predecessor. And remember that the followers of the faith are my children. In that way they are your brothers. Give them your pure affection. That is the demand of your faith.

With the appointment of an ‘exemplary’ and apparent successor, Syedna Taher Saifuddin embarked upon ziyarat of Karbala and Najaf in Iraq in 1934, not just with the aim of visiting the graves of Imam Hussain and Imam Ali but also to engage, as Syedi Najmuddin notes, with the Shia Ulema and other Islamic scholars of Iraq in an attempt at clearing several ‘misgivings’ which were prevalent in the Fatimi Dawat.

Although the exact exchanges between the Fatimi and Iraqi counterparts remain of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have remained of circumspect speculation, it is plausible to suggest that the exchange may have

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129 As the former seat of the Dawat until it was shifted to Mumbai in the 20th century, the city of Surat is of tremendous importance to the Bohras. As the city to which most of the Qasr-e Alis trace their ancestry, Surat also has a particular importance for the Bohra elite. Zaini Bungalow, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin’s official residence in the city, is also located here along with a number of quarters for the teachers at the Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah Academy. In terms of commerce and the role of Bohra merchants in helping shape the mercantile landscapes of the city, see Lakshmi Subramanian, ‘Surat during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century: What Kind of Social Order?’, Modern Asian Studies, 21, 4 (1987), pp. 679–710 and Ashin Das Gupta, ‘The Merchants of Surat, c. 1700–50’ in Edmund Leach and S.N. Mukherjee (eds.), Elites in South Asia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) pp. 201–22.

130 Syedi Najmuddin, 75 Momentous Years in Retrospect, p. 7.

131 Ibid., p. 10.
revolved around the anti-Ismaili propaganda campaign, which had been launched in the immediate aftermath of the Fatimid Caliphate. With explicit endorsement by the Abbasid Caliphate, the Sunni establishment had launched a movement to declare the Ismailis as *mulahida* (‘heretics’ or ‘deviators’) from the true religious path.\(^{132}\) While the *Alid* genealogy of the Fatimid Imams was denied, the polemicists concocted various doctrinal bases in ‘accounting’ for the ‘sinister’ and ‘immoral’ objectives, and ‘libertine practices’ of the Ismailis. The Sunni authors refused to distinguish between the different Shia schools of thought and branded them all ‘heterodoxies’ and ‘heresies’. In the course of the 10\(^{th}\) century AD, the polemicists and participating heresiographers effectively had created the ‘black legend’, documenting sordid tales which over time came to be accepted as accurate descriptions of Ismaili beliefs and motives. The defamatory components of the anti-Ismaili campaign continued to fire the imagination of countless generations of writers from medieval times.\(^{133}\)

To counter such discourses, Syedna Taher Saifuddin obtained the necessary consent from the government of Iraq, at the time under King Faisal II, Iraq's last monarchical ruler, to fabricate in India a silver and gold mausoleum for the *Mashad* of Imam Hussain and Imam Ali which was then presented to the two sacred shrines. The first *zari* or trellis was constructed in 1937, executed under the guidance of Syedna Taher Saifuddin for the mausoleum of Imam Hussain in Karbala. Several hundred artisans from all parts of India aided in the making of the *zari* which was composed of solid silver with borders of gold in which are inscribed verses from the Quran.\(^{134}\)


\(^{133}\) Many of the essential components of the anti-Ismaili ‘black-legend’ campaigns are traced back to one heresiographer in particular, Ibn Rizam, who lived in Baghdad around the 10\(^{th}\) century AD. His major treatise against the Ismailis was written with the aid of contemporary informants belonging to the anti-Qaramati circles of Iraq. For a detailed discussion of Ibn Rizam and the myth of the Ismaili ‘black-legend’, see Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*, pp. 10–20.

\(^{134}\) ‘Bohras Gift for Kerbala, Valuable Trellis’, *Times of India*, 16/1/1937.
claimed that 199,752 tolas of silver and 250 tolas of gold were used in its making. Whilst the zari was manufactured in Bombay, it was exhibited in Karachi en route to Karbala, and it was noted that “large crowds have been going to see it!”\textsuperscript{135}

\textbf{Figure 3.1.} Accompanied by Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, Governor of Bombay Roger Lumley viewing the Zari, 1940. \textit{Source:} ‘Canopy of Silver and Gold: Sir R. Lumley Sees Fine Work of Art’, \textit{Times of India}, 15/11/1940.

The zari for Imam Ali was even more elaborate and was completed in 1940. Composed of a canopy of gold and silver, again executed under the direct guidance of Syedna Taher Saifuddin at a cost of Rs. 10,00,000, it was also inspected by the Governor of Bombay, Roger Lumley. Again nearly 150 skilled craftpersons had worked daily for four years to complete the zari, which is a miniature building of

\textsuperscript{135} ‘Fencing for Tomb at Kerbala, Stops over in Karachi’, \textit{Times of India}, 16/2/1937.
typically Saracenic and Fatimid motifs. Twenty feet in length and fourteen feet high, the \textit{zari} is said to have used up 450,000 \textit{tolas} of silver and 5,000 \textit{tolas} of gold. The inlay is composed of Quranic inscriptions.\footnote{‘Canopy of Silver and Gold: Sir R. Lumley Sees Fine Work of Art’, \textit{Times of India}, 15/11/1940. Although dealt with at strategic points in the current thesis, a detailed study is required of Syedna Taher Saifuddin’s role in the restoration of various Fatimid-era mosque complexes in Egypt, Syria and Yemen, declaring a symbolic and spiritual gesture to any sceptics that he was indeed the bearer and protector of the Fatimid legacy.} This is a function his successor Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin would continue on a massive scale, both as a community-building exercise and as a strategy which would underpin the ‘exceptionalism’ the Dawoodi Bohras fought hard to preserve during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

As the various litigation suits raged on, Syedna Taher Saifuddin continued to consolidate the community internally. A key feature that distinguished him from his predecessors was the much more physically close relationship he shared with his followers. Attempting to be more accessible to his followers, he utilised unprecedented organisational patterns, including weekly communications via \textit{waaz} (‘sermons’) delivered in whichever town or city he visited, encouraging the community to focus on spiritual practices mirrored through the education of his own son and heir apparent, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin.\footnote{Arthur Buehler, ‘Currents of Sufism in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Indo-Pakistan: An Overview’, \textit{The Muslim World}, 87, 3–4 (1997), p. 299-314.} All these organisational devices and ‘new’ practices that were predicated on Fatimid traditions of learning concentrated authority in the Dai-al-mutlaq to an unprecedented degree.\footnote{Syedna Taher Saifuddin, accompanied by Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, visited the Bombay \textit{Times of India} office in 1941. The press notice read, “His Holiness was keenly interested in the work of the editorial department and the working of the creed transmitting messages from Reuter’s Offices. The Mullaji Saheb was also shown around the business offices.” See ‘Mullaji Saheb’, \textit{Times of India}, 27/6/1941.} It was held that once the followers began developing love of the Dai-al-mutlaq, a bond or affection developed, which then led to closeness with God.
As a result, numerous initiatives were launched. In 1926, the Dai-al-mutlaq attended a prize distribution at the Anjuman Industrial School in Madras with A.Y.G. Campbell, Chief Secretary to the Government as presiding chairperson. At this event Syedna Taher Saifuddin was adopting organisational strategies to consolidate the community, and was even emulating a modern bureaucratic structure [emphasis mine]:

After the prizes were given away to the pupils by His Holiness, Mr. Shaikh Alibhai, Education Secretary of His Holiness, delivered a speech in the course of which he said that it gave his Holiness immense pleasure to take part in that function. He congratulated the office bearers and members of the Anjuman Industrial School on the excellent work they were carrying out in the field of industrial education. On conclusion the secretary announced a cash donation of Rs. 1,500 on behalf of his Holiness to the Institution. Messrs. H.M. Sharafali and Abdulhussain Jiwaji, two followers of His Holiness, also promised to pay Rs. 500 each. His Holiness in addition promised to pay an annual donation of Rs. 100 for prizes. Rs. 500 as an annual grant has also been announced.

His Holiness before coming to the Anjuman Industrial School visited the Muslim Orphanage at the Wallahja Road, where after an inspection, he announced a donation of Rs. 1,000 for the construction of new buildings when the foundation ceremony would be performed.

His Holiness is leaving Madras for Colombo tonight by special train and will likely stay there for about a month. On his return to Bombay, he is likely to visit Hyderabad Deccan.139

Alongside such declarations came the commitment to enhance access to education amidst the Dawoodi Bohra communities, which lay dispersed all across the subcontinent. Syedna Taher Saifuddin boarded trains and went to his followers, seldom staying in one place for too long. Travelling around India undoubtedly yielded him a consolidation of his following and an easier method of reconciling the different needs of the Dawoodi Bohras living in various parts.140

At every centre Syedna Taher Saifuddin visited, he established an educational unit almost overnight. Syedi Najmuddin notes that nearly 350 educational units were established through such arduous travel, enabling a certain standardisation of the

139 ‘Anjuman Industrial School at Madras’, Times of India, 15/11/1926
140 ‘A Sanatorium for Bohras’, Times of India, 26/7/1921.
curriculum being taught to the young. This also allowed the Dai-al-mutlaq to pay personal attention to his followers who had come under major strain from the reformist currents within the community. Amidst such a flurry of travel, consolidation and the challenges of litigation, on 27th Rajab 1352 H (1933 AD) Syedna Taher Saifuddin raised his son Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin to the rank of al-Mazoon (‘permitted to rule’) and performed the Nas (‘transfer of traditions’), effectively designating him as the successor to the Fatimi Dawat.\textsuperscript{141} According to Syedi Najmuddin's memoirs, the 27\textsuperscript{th} of Rajab was chosen with particular consideration, for it coincided with the auspicious day when Prophet Mohammad (S.A.) was awakened to the call of Allah in conveying Allah's message to mankind. At a waaz (‘sermon’), once again in Surat, Syedna Taher Saifuddin proclaimed:

My son having the name Mohammed and title Burhanuddin, similar to that of my illustrious father -- Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin (the 49th Dai) has, indeed, acquired a noble character and very holy roots. With 'Bismillah el-Rahman el-Rahim' I started his education, endowing him with the best in our culture, taught him good manners and enriched him with the landmarks of Islamic philosophy, chapter by chapter, books after books [sic]. He has strived with me having reached the position from where I took him to the final phase of the 'treasures of knowledge' reposed in us by the Fatimi Imams. All this I did while the demands on my time were heavy facing the enemies whom the Dawah had to encounter. I am happy that I have now brought him to the stage, when by Allah's Grace, he will become like me.

He continued:

This Luminous son is a perfect man, a man of knowledge and action, a noble shaikh, having collected numerous merits and above all, having angelic characteristics and attributes. By Allah's Grace, he becomes today the ‘Treasure of Deen’, the ‘Reliance for believers’, the ‘Pride of Mazoons’. After me, my son will shine out as Dai in the horizon of Dawah calling towards Allah by His will.\textsuperscript{142}

1934 also became a landmark moment in modern Dawoodi Bohra history with the result of the Hakimiyah Durgah at Burhanpur case being judged in favour of the

\textsuperscript{141} ‘New “Mazoom” of Dawoodi Bohras, High Priest’s Son Investiture Ceremony at Surat’, \textit{Times of India}, 20/11/1933; also see Syedi Najmuddin, \textit{75 Momentous Years in Retrospect}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{142} Syedi Najmuddin, \textit{75 Momentous Years in Retrospect}, pp. 8–9.
Dawat by the High Court of Judicature at Nagpur.\(^{143}\) For the Dawat, this was a marked event for the judgement acknowledged the validity of the *Nas* (‘transfer of traditions’) of the 46\(^{th}\) Dai, Syedna Mohammad Badruddin (d. 1840), upon the 47\(^{th}\) Dai, Syedna Abdul Qadir Najmuddin (d. 1885).\(^{144}\) This undermined the century-long Reformist allegation that the *Nas* had been unlawful and that the Dawat had become the preserve of one particular family that had begun to abuse the financial and spiritual realm of the community. More crucially, in terms of understanding the development of the dedication of the community for Syedna Taher Saifuddin, the High Court result was rationalised internally as being the result of the commitment of the heir-apparent, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, in memorising the entire Quran.

Quoting from a written, yet unreferenced document possibly authored by Syedna Taher Saifuddin, Syedi Najmuddin notes:

> Ever since I have appointed my son to be my successor, Allah has gathered for me the bounties of this world and the Hereafter. Because shortly after that I was

\(^{143}\) In what has come to be referred to as the Burhanpur Durgah Case of 1925, the Bombay High Court upheld the rights of Syedna Taher Saifuddin in a landmark 1934 ruling. Since the early 20\(^{th}\) century, under the 50\(^{th}\) Dai, Syedna Abdullah Badruddin, the Dawat and Reformists had been contesting each others’ rights over certain Wakf properties in Burhanpur which consisted of three mausoleums of Bohra saints, two mosques, graveyards and rest houses. By 1917, relations had soured to such an extent between the two parties that the Reformists were excommunicated in the same year and barred from entering the Mausoleum of Syedi Hakimuddin. The Reformists sued, claiming that they had been illegally denied entry into the Mausoleum and also asserted that they did not wish to secede by remaining in the community, but at the same time defy the authority of the Dai-al-mutlaq whilst freely retaining all rights and privileges of worship and the use of properties belonging to the community. The presiding Judicial Commissioner F. H. Staples, however, saw this as oxymoronic, passing the ruling as follows: “If he [Syedna Taher Saifuddin] is the Chief Priest, then it would seem to follow that he has certain powers, including the powers of management of all the trusts of Wakf property belonging to the community, as also the power to excommunicate persons who flout his authority or disobey him”. Staples continued, “I, therefore, hold that the High Priest had full power to excommunicate them. I am of the opinion that the decision of the lower court is wrong and that the reliefs claimed by the plaintiff respondents should be refused. I, therefore, set aside the decree of the lower court, and instead pass a decree dismissing the suit with costs.” Quoted from ‘Rights of Bohras’ High Priest Upheld, Burhanpur Durgah Case Appeal’, *Times of India*, 29/10/1934.

\(^{144}\) According to a hagiography published by the community, the years of Syedna Abdul Qadir Najmuddin are remembered as follows: “Syedna Najmuddin was 27 years of age when he became Dai al-Mutlaq. During the 47 years of his reign, dissenters rose and grew perilously in power. Syedna (RA), keeping patience, demonstrated that he was the Dai of Amir ul Mumineen (AS), who had sheathed his sword and endured the long-suffering after the death of Rasulullah (SA) for the sake of Islam. Syedna was once asked by his son, ‘Until when will you endure these trials?’ Syedna answered, ‘The fifth Dai after me [Syedna Taher Saifuddin] will resolve all trials.’ The victories of Syedna Taher Saifuddin were thus foretold.” See http://www.misbah.info/10th_misbah/topics/urs/urs.htm
It becomes pertinent to reflect on what circumstances endowed a living Dai-al-mutlaq with his charisma and what motivated men and women of the Dawoodi Bohra community to join the supposed ‘revolutionary’ order amidst a larger climate of anti-colonial nationalism on the Indian subcontinent. Processes of proto-globalisation, religious incorporation, saintly veneration, and subaltern subjectivity must be understood within their social and historical context and complexity. Much of the ‘cult of the personality’ came to be formed around a receptive cultural environment, a heightening of conventional expectations, bodily practices, narratives of unique individuality, and most importantly the ability to mobilise technologies in the service of the intercessionary power of the Dai-al-mutlaq in the name of the followers and the community at large. Modernity, it seems, had enabled a particular sacred geography to emerge, which constantly shifted with the movement of the Dai-al-mutlaq, underpinned by a voluntary mobilisation on a vastly national (and perhaps, international) scale.

Communion with the Bohras in Yemen

1961 presented yet another marked event in the Dawoodi Bohra modern experience. Yemen, from where the seat of the Fatimi Dawat had been transferred almost four centuries earlier, was under the rule of Yahya Muhammad Hamidaddin or Imam Yahya. According to Yusuf Najmuddin, the “followers of the Fatimi faith there had

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145 Syedi Najmuddin, 75 Momentous Years in Retrospect, p. 9.
146 Through the 1960s, Yemen was trapped in overlapping wars. In the North a fight between those loyal to Imam Yahya and those fighting for a republic became a battle by proxy between Saudi Arabia and Egypt; in the South a fight against the British led to conflict amongst different groups. Whilst the
suffered great hardships for over seventy-five years”. The Bohras residing in Yemen had been prevented from maintaining any significant contact with the “centre of the Dawat which was now situated in India”. Several Bohra leaders had been imprisoned and the Zaydi regime had demolished the mausoleum of Syedna Hatim, the 3rd Dai-al-mutlaq in Hutaib, Yemen. Given that little communication existed between the Yemeni and Indian counterparts due to the Zaydi regime shunning foreign contact, the Yemeni followers had been placed by the Dawat under the guardianship of a person who Syedi Najmuddin identifies only as Naib (‘deputy’ or ‘representative’).

By 1937, it came to the attention of Syedna Taher Saifuddin that the ‘Naib’ had given the Bai’ah (‘pledge of allegiance’) to the Imam Yahya. With the future of the Yemeni Bohra community in jeopardy, Syedna Taher Saifuddin heavily reprimanded the ‘Naib’ in 1937 on the occasion of performing Haj in Mecca. However, given the climate of persecution, not much could be done until 1961 when Syedna Taher Saifuddin decided to allow his son and heir-apparent, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, to travel to Yemen in the hope of performing pilgrimage of the different mausoleums of Fatimi Dais and also meeting the Yemeni Bohra jamaat. The Yemeni authorities refused initial requests for visas, and yet Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin is said to have braved a landing in Aden and reached Raheda, a border crossing into Yemen. After a temporary halting of the caravan, Syedi Najmuddin describes how the border guards had prior instructions to ‘welcome a prince from India’.

Bohras do not find mention in any historical studies done on modern Yemen, the general context in the early 1960s may have provided a temporary window for Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin’s visit to be undertaken. See Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 89–95.
What became apparent was that Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, under the steady
gaze of the Zaidi Imam Yahya (it is claimed that ‘a special car and a Yemeni security
officer remained in constant attendance’), was able to complete the 25-day visit
amidst great jubilation amongst the community the world over. It had been almost
four centuries since the centre of Dawat had been transferred and as long since a Dai-
al-mutlaq (in this case, the Mazoon) from India had visited the Yemeni Bohra jamaat.
As Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin made his way back to Surat with stop-overs in
Karachi and Delhi, a major celebration had been planned in Mumbai. At a public
gathering, Syedna Taher Saifuddin declared the titled of Mansur-al-Yemen (‘the one
who was given all succour by Allah, in Yemen’).\(^\text{147}\)

The assumed aura of mystery, power and authority, believed to be intrinsic to the
current Dai-al-mutlaq of the time, Syedna Taher Saifuddin, and his-heir apparent,
seemed to have been made out as preordained and given at birth, which in reality was
acquired by the Dai-al-mutlaq gradually through a process of constant personal testing
and publicly allegorised community histories, heritage and revival.\(^\text{148}\) The years
between 1930 to about 1965 marked a gradual process that may be claimed to be both
culturally predictable but extremely difficult to achieve. The Dai-al-mutlaq became at

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\(^{147}\) Syedi Najmuddin, *75 Momentous Years in Retrospect*, p. 10.

\(^{148}\) In 1940, for instance, nationwide celebrations were launched to commemorate 25 years since
Syedna Taher Saifuddin had ascended to the role of Dai-al-mutlaq. Apart from opening the Saifee High
School for Boys in Bombay and donating a *zari* for the tomb of Imam Ali, the community mobilised
in large numbers to celebrate the occasion. Whilst congratulatory messages poured in from various
dignitaries across India, the Reformists led by Amiruddin Tyebji lodged a new defamation suit against
Syedna Taher Saifuddin. Tyebji alleged that Syedna Taher Saifuddin refused to solemnise his marriage
because he had refused to maintain a beard. Once again, Bombay became a crucial site for the
community to show their loyalty to their Dai-al-mutlaq amidst such challenges. One newspaper report
observed, “Several floral arches were erected on the roads and buildings were decked with flags and
bunting. In a car, artistically decorated with flowers, the Mullaji Saheb with the heir-apparent, was
taken in procession through Bohra localities to the Bohra Mosque at Doctor Street. Feats of physical
culture and *lathi* plays were performed at various places during the progress of the procession. At
convenient stages offerings of coconuts, sweets and silk were made by devotees to the Mullaji Saheb,
who returned them. Women of the community, clad in festive garments, thronged all the available
space in buildings situated on the route of the procession.” ‘Bohra High Priest's Silver Jubilee, Bombay
Celebrations’, *Times of India*, 8/1/1940.
once of this world and beyond it; the effects of power so compelling for the community, which had been mobilised through different systems amidst the clamours of the Reformists, enabled Syedna Taher Saifuddin to reach into the hearts of the followers, transcending literal understandings of physical space, obstacles and geographical distance.\(^{149}\)

Once again, the ‘remarkable’ visit to Yemen of 1961 was marked by a significant victory in the judicial field amidst the larger context of legal challenges the Dawat was facing at the time. In the 1950s, Home Minister Morarji Desai steered the Prevention of Excommunication Act through the Bombay Legislative Assembly, describing excommunication “as a monstrous thing for any government to tolerate”.\(^{150}\) Although the Act did not explicitly target the Dawoodi Bohras, according to Jonah Blank “there was no other denomination for whom excommunication was a salient issue in the 1950s, and the Bohras were the only group to challenge the act in

149 It is documented in many a community pamphlet that Syedna Taher Saifuddin travelled a lot in trains. He always maintained his back towards the engine, and in front of Syedna Taher Saifuddin sat Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin. For one writer who documents the occurrence, “this deed of Syedna Taher Saifuddin proved that thy has turned his back to the pace of life. Although thy is present in the same era, travelling within the pace of life. And facing towards a vessel, which is the best of the vessels, to pass on the Barakaat and the Blessings. Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin sitting in front of his Bawaji Saheb Syedna Taher Saifuddin as a vessel is well aware that the Maula in front of him is the ocean of Ilm E Ale Mohammed and is passing on that Ilm in this vessel.” See Aliasger Saifuddin Rasheed, Sheik al Doat al Mutlaqueen: Syedna Taher Saifuddin (R.A.) (Mumbai: Dawat-e-Hadiyah, Department of Statistics and Information, undated), p. 2.

150 It was Morarji Desai who coined the concept of ‘a government within a government’ (a term which would become the mainstay of the Reformists in the 1970s) when he declared at the Bombay Assembly, “the Mullaji Saheb told me, he was the ‘spiritual and temporal head’ of the Bohra community. What does that mean? Does it not mean that there is a state within a state?” ‘Powers of the Mullaji Saheb Described as “Monstrous”, Home Minister's Criticism in Bombay Assembly’, Times of India, 2/4/1949. The anti-Excommunication bill was passed in the Bombay Assembly on April 6, 1949; see ‘No More Tyranny by Religious Head, Anti-Excommunication Bill Passed by Assembly, Government to Ban Advertisements of Charms and Magic Cures’, Bombay Chronicle, 7/4/1949. Whilst Moraji Desai’s memoirs do not mention his stance on the Bill, his statements were made in the debates leading up to the Indian Constitution in late 1949. Overall, Desai notes, “Ample provisions have been made in the [1949] Constitution for building a socialistic state of society and for the protection of fundamental rights.” In terms of what he describes as ‘Prohibitions’, Desai noted, “There is clear directive in the Constitution concerning the introduction of prohibition... This is the only way the present uncertain position can be altered.” See Moraji Desai, The Story of My Life, Vol. 1 (Delhi: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 261–270.
court.”151 The Act, which was upheld by the Bombay High Court in 1951, was overturned in 1961 on the grounds that it was “in clear violation of the rights of the Dawoodi Bohra community under Article 26(b) of the Constitution.”152 As Syedi Najmuddin records the event, the plea by the Dawoodi Bohra community was upheld on the very day that Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin returned from his Yemen visit to Delhi via Karachi. Upon landing at Delhi, “the [Parsi] lawyer from Bombay, who had gone there [Delhi] to plead on behalf of the Dawat, was observed at the departure lounge.153 In fact, he was there to catch the evening flight to Bombay. He shouted from where he was and gave the good news of the great victory of the Dawat in the Supreme Court.”154 The ‘remarkable’ visit of 1961 had become an overwhelming and almost divinely ordained moment of victory and consolidation for the Dawat and its followers.155

The Treasured Academy: Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah

As the ‘love’ for the Dai-al-mutlaq began to be inculcated to greater extents, Syedna Taher Saifuddin launched yet another innovation in ritually re-inscripting the 19th century Islamic seminary el-Dars-el-Saifi in Surat. As a spiritual and intellectual space, he went about re-defining its centrality in terms of its function, which had

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151 Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, p. 239.
153 Ever since the Chandabhai Gulla Case of 1921, the Dawat has relied heavily on Parsi lawyers, generally from the prominent Mumbai firm Mulla & Mulla. See Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, p. 246.
154 Syedi Najmuddin, *75 Momentous Years in Retrospect*, p. 12.
155 As the events unfolded, what became apparent within the Dawoodi Bohra psyche reminds one of Max Weber's postulations of ‘charisma’ as a source of revitalisation and ‘freedom’ from routine social constrains. The events described above, as against Weber's understandings, however, stressed the dialectic between temporal authority and spiritual power, an antithesis between conventional and rigid understandings of centre and periphery. Such dichotomous distinctions lay criticised and taken to task in the unique experience of the Dawoodi Bohras by asserting that these supposedly opposing forms of social relations actually co-exist in dialectical tension within the same community.
traditionally been the training of scholars and extending the community's intellectual wealth, but also in making religious knowledge accessible to all members of the community. With a new building programme, which was launched in the 1950s, the seminary along with the adjoining mosque was expanded to include Fatimid architectural motifs. Syedna Taher Saifuddin also renamed the academy Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah. Furthermore, the curriculum underwent major changes – with fresh attention towards the revival of Fatimid art and architecture and the overall study of Fatimid heritage being at its forefront. Likewise, according to Syedi Najmuddin, this ‘revival’ was in line with the Fatimid philosophy of blending the old and the eternal with the new and beneficial. Subjects of the modern sciences were taught alongside English language and literature, clustered under a larger philosophical umbrella, which was now called ‘Sunnat Thaletha’ (‘The Third Tradition’).

The biggest innovation came in terms of how the academy's Intihanus Sanavi (‘Annual Examinations’) came to be held from 1951 onwards. Each year, during the month of Shaban the examinations would begin with the spiritual gathering of the Zikra. After the announcement of the specific dates, the Dai-al-mutlaq would arrive in Surat and personally conduct the examinations of the students. The new examination style was distinct from what had been practiced earlier at Al-Dars-Al-Saifi and by other Islamic seminaries of the period. The student, known as Taleh e-ilm, seated in front of the Dai-al-mutlaq, facing the Qibla would answer questions posed to him or her. Advanced students were tested in public gatherings with various academics, community elders and believers present, thus allowing the community to confirm the credentials of their future religious guides under the watchful gaze of Syedna.

156 Syedi Najmuddin, 75 Momentous Years in Retrospect, p. 13.
157 See Metcalf, Islamic Revival in British India and Francis Robinson, The Ulama of Farangi Mahall.
Saifuddin. As Aliasger Rasheed, a student at Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah in the 1960s recalls:

Being the vicegerent of the Imam uz Zaman (S.A.), he [Syedna Taher Saifuddin] was the source of Ilm-e-ale-Mohammad (S.A.), and had inherited the Ilm [Knowledge], Taqwa [Fear of Allah], Taharat [Purity] from the previous Doat Mutlaqueen (A.S.).

The Doat Kiraam, had given the prophecy that the Zuhoor of Imam Uz Zaman (S.A) would take place in the glorious period of Syedna Taher Saifuddin (R.A). Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin (R.A) had established Dars Al Saifee for the purpose of zuhoor of Imam Uz Zaman (S.A).

The Doat Kiraam after Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin (R.A) persisting the ritual, quenched the thirst of thousands of Mumineen by spreading the Ilm of Ale Mohammed (S.A) through Dars Al Saifee. Ultimately there came a time when 51st Dai, Syedna Taher Saifuddin (R.A) arrived with all his glories. He with his keen sight and his distinctive Islamic method of education imparted the Ilm of Ale Mohammed (S.A) according to the pace of modern era.158

Dwelling further on the development of Zikra in the early 1950s and the changes Syedna Taher Saifuddin initiated at Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah, Syedi Najmuddin, who was the rector at the time, notes how the Dai-al-mutlaq's attempts were also in response to ‘freeing’ the academy from the ‘self-styled Ulemas’ who had taken control of the curriculum and its administration. Both the Dawat and Reformist narratives document this shift in a similar fashion, albeit adopting different tones. For instance, the dissident writer Mian Bhai Abdul Husain, writing in 1919, notes how the 43rd Dai, Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin (d. 1817), had established the Academy in 1814 modelled as a Fatimid lodge by borrowing the analogy of the Egyptian Fatimid lodge from the time of the Imams. Initially, taking advantage of the religious freedom and prosperity the community experienced under British rule, the academy was built on a large scale which supported about five hundred Dawoodi Bohra students from all parts of India and Yemen at a yearly cost of about forty thousand rupees.159 However, the colonial chronicler, James Campbell, notes that by 1897 the Academy had been reduced significantly in scale and was assumed to have been maintained at a yearly


159 Abdul Husain, *Gulzare Daudi*, p. 50.
cost of about ten thousand rupees supporting about one hundred students.\textsuperscript{160} The decline went further, with the Academy being reduced to a maktab (‘school’) by 1919, which Abdul Husain claims, provided little more than primary-level education.\textsuperscript{161}

Considering that Abdul Husain was fighting for reforms within the community, his claims need to be approached with some caution. The major reason for the decline, according to Abdul Husain, was that the Academy had moved away from its founder's initial spirit of “spreading higher sectarian education on an extensive scale and encouraging an open competitive system”.\textsuperscript{162} The democratic principle of selecting priests based on merit had been abandoned by the ‘priest classes’, which Abdul Husain clarifies as representing the local Amils, their subordinate Mullahs or Pesh Imams.\textsuperscript{163} Abdul Husain’s narrative becomes polemical when he accuses the previous Dai-al-mutlaqs of appropriating all the higher degrees of priesthood for their own family members “without much regard for the literary and ecclesiastical qualifications of the incumbents”.\textsuperscript{164} Whilst the claim may have some historical basis, Abdul Husain

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote[160]{James Campbell also notes that the site of Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah in Surat was not only a preserve for the enhancement of intellectual wealth of the community, albeit in a limited sense by the late 19th century, but also for helping the less fortunate amongst the community. Citing P.C. Mazoomdar's 1883 document titled \textit{The Oriental Christ}, and although upon examining Mazoomdar texts it makes no such mention, Campbell notes, “besides on education, the head Mulla spends large sums of money in feeding and clothing strange and destitute Daudis, and in helping the poor among his people to meet the expenses of marriage and other costly ceremonies”. James M. Campbell, \textit{Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Vol. 9, pt. 2: ‘Gujarat Population: Musalmans and Parsis’} (Mumbai: Government Central Press, 1899), p. 32. It is highly plausible that Campbell's impression of the Dai-al-mutlaq “feeding and clothing strange and destitute Daudis” stems from a 19th century drought which had swept the region of Kathiawar for 12 years causing thousands of Dawoodi Bohras to converge upon Surat and seek refuge under Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin, the 42nd Dai-al-mutlaq, who, according an official Dawat publication, “ensured with great sacrifices, that each believer was well cared for until the end of the drought”. See \textit{The Unique event of Fatemi History}, author n.a. (Mumbai: Dawat-e-Hadiyah, Department of Information and Statistics, 1997), p. 2.}
\footnote[161]{Abdul Husain, \textit{Gulzare Daudi}, p. 52.}
\footnote[162]{Ibid., p. 50.}
\footnote[163]{Ibid., p. 52.}
\footnote[164]{Ibid., pp. 52–3.}
\end{footnotes}
remains optimistic about Syedna Taher Saifuddin, the Dai-al-mutlaq at the time of writing:

However, I have full confidence that before the Government interference becomes necessary and the matters come to the extreme, His Holiness, the present Syedna, who has the reputation of being the great advocate of learning, as well as of being considerate and highly educated, will mend matters and check the subordinate priests. I am glad to note here that according to Shaikh Fazullahbhai B.A. His Holiness has already started an educational policy based on modern principles which promises to bear good fruits.  

What remains fascinating in the different literatures on the Dawoodi Bohras that have emerged in the 20th century, both by Reformists such as Asghar Ali Engineer and even secular scholars such as Jonah Blank, is that they barely attempt to historicise how the ‘early Reformists’ presented a particular ‘adoration’ and respect for the Dai-al-mutlaq. Their opposition was meant in the service of the Dai-al-mutlaq, albeit couched within the modernist spirit of the late 18th and early 19th century colonial state. Although well beyond the scope of an MA thesis, it must be noted that a closer study of the early Dawoodi Bohra Reformists is highly warranted. It may even be claimed, with utmost caution, that the early Reform movement defies the more contemporary pigeonhole definitions of those who came to be termed as ‘Progressives’ or ‘Reformists’ of the late 20th century, especially since the mid-1970s.

The early 20th century Reformists such as Abdul Husain need to be understood in their own ‘Islamic terms’. However different their strategies, the early movement shares closer affinities with the Dawat than their later counterparts such as Noman Contractor and Asghar Ali Engineer in meaning, structure and perhaps even intent. To this, we need to refer back to Syedi Najmuddin's memoirs of what happened in 1965, merely days after the passing of Syedna Taher Saifuddin. As public outpourings of

165 Ibid., p. 65.
166 Metcalf, “Introduction: The Pattern of Islamic Reform” in Islamic Revival in British India, p. 3.
grief continued, with various dignitaries making different claims, the Vice-Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, Nawab Ali Yawar Jung, declared in an official eulogy:

Since assuming the spiritual leadership of his community [in 1915], His Holiness attempted to introduce modernization on the basis of constructive work and accomplished success to a remarkable degree. He pursued a programme of reconstruction and development. Removal of illiteracy, provision of facilities for education, introduction of technical bias in schools, training for worthwhile occupations, crafts and trades, accent on a life of sweat, self-reliance and devoted service to fellowmen, medical aid and relief, stimulus to cooperative enterprise and the steady diversion of talent and resource to industry were some of the major aspects of the developmental work he had been carrying on.167

Amidst the different commemorations, the Dawoodi Bohra community was making way for Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin to ascend to the role of the 52nd Dai-al-mutlaq and although the transition went smoothly, with most followers responding to the renewed call for allegiance to the new incumbent, Syedi Najmuddin notes that the Reformist camp was experiencing a renewed upsurge in activity. The biggest challenge emerged from the ranks of Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah itself, where a few high-ranking Ustads (teachers) were incriminated for being sympathisers of the Reformist agenda. The Dawat's official claim was that such inimical activity had been going on for over forty years, and as Syedi Najmuddin notes, “under the guise of scholars, teachers and even obedient followers, [they had] carried out an unobtrusive and subversive campaign”.168 Under intense pressure from the community at large and clever politicking described by Syedi Najmuddin as a “serene and sagacious approach” on the part of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, the accused were forced to publicly admit their guilt and were brought to task. As far as the Dawat was concerned, “the cancer was excised and a new course set for the onward progress of a renowned and historic academy”.169 Reverting to Abdul Husain's claims about the degeneration of the Surat academy, especially around the 1920s, it is plausible to

167 As quoted in Syedi Najmuddin, 75 Momentous Years in Retrospect, p. 16.
168 Ibid., p. 17.
169 Ibid.
claim that both Syedna Taher Saifuddin and his heir-apparent, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, may have been aware of and even ‘tolerated’ the presence of Reformist sentiments within the academy's hierarchy for much longer than officially declared.

Syedi Najmuddin's claim, which was mentioned earlier, of ‘freeing’ the Academy from the ‘clutches of the self-styled Ulema’ and the creation of the unique event of Zikra in 1951, where the Dai-al-mutlaq would personally examine students, may then be understood as not simply a response to the early Reformists who had been lamenting the loss of a great and historical Academy and the need for the introduction of ‘secular’ subjects into the curriculum. Rather it may also be read as a calculated strategy on the part of both the 51st and 52nd Dai-al-mutlaqs to gradually regain control of the treasured Academy over which their authority had waned, particularly under their predecessors as a result of the intensive bombardment of litigation suits brought against the Dawat and the resulting decline in the official wealth since the 1920s.

**Spiritual Assembly of Zikra: Fatimid Blueprints, Indian Contexts**

After 1965, with the passing of Syedna Taher Saifuddin and with his successor Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin’s grasp on the Academy secured, the Zikra came to be redefined to not only mark the commencement of annual examinations, but also a yearly congregation which would aspire to recount and celebrate the innumerable blessings and achievements of Syedna Taher Saifuddin. In preparation for this event on a grand and unseen scale, the 52nd incumbent launched a major reconstruction project of the 19th century Surat mosque and adjoining buildings of the Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah in 1988 which had been initially constructed by the 42nd incumbent, Syedna
Abdeali Saifuddin, in 1814 and then later developed by the 51st Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Taher Saifuddin, in the mid-20th century. According to an official Dawat-e-Hadiyah publication, the older structure was to be completely replaced and areas around the vicinity were to be purchased to enable the size of the mosque to expand to become as large as it was when first built. The major challenge was in making its design appropriate to the times, but also simultaneously preserving and representing the original artefacts. Once again, the design was to eschew the symbolisms of what the Dawat historians and commentators have termed the ‘Burhani era’ which is a period commencing from 1965 in which Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin has been at the helm of the Dawat and led various building and restoration activities on the subcontinent and beyond.¹⁷⁰

Drawing on classical Fatimid concepts of architecture, design and the distinctive Kufi script¹⁷¹, the envisioned mosque was to occupy a particularly important position within a larger sacred geography. This would remind the community of its modern achievements, place it within a larger Islamic culture amidst an increasingly sectarian post-colonial Gujarat. Most importantly, in what may be referred to as that ‘idiosyncratic Bohra modern’, the Dawat document notes the builder's intent in fine detail:

The benedictions of the Imams in Cairo and early Duat in Yemen were to be visible in it. The blessings of the illustrious 51st al-Dai al-Mutlaq, Syedna Taher Saifuddin Saheb (AQ) who laid the foundation of this age of unprecedented spiritual and material progress had to be manifest. The remembrance of Imam Husain (SA),

¹⁷⁰ The Unique event of Fatemi History, p. 2.
¹⁷¹ Irene Bierman argues that the Fatimid rulers of Egypt were the first to use writing on buildings and textiles (“the public text”) to present their own distinct ideology to the diverse members of Cairene society. Fatimid doctrines, she argues, were presented in a distinct ‘Fatimid’ form of Kufic script embellished with tendrils, leaves, and flowers. Although Bierman's thesis has been questioned of late, a debate the following chapters will elaborate further, it may be pertinent to note that the Fatimids did develop their own version of the Kufic script to make public statements. See Irene A. Bierman, Writing Signs: The Fatimid Public Text (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
already occupying its natural position in the heart of each believer, a symbol of the spirituality of the age of the 52nd Dai al-Mutlaq also had to find expression in the masjid. With all the history and sacredness it had to embody, the masjid must nevertheless be contemporary in its use of technology, in particular, it must cope with the staggering requirements of Ashara Mubaraka, when hundreds of thousand would gather to hear the Dai of Imam Husain (SA) recount the great sacrifice of the grandson of the Prophet (SAW). Thus the building of temporary extra floors for the event must be effortless, the relaying of the discourses worldwide must be facilitated by a state of the art technology. The cooling system must cope with a completely packed masjid on a hot day. Its utilities and amenities must contend with all requirements of the day and much more in the future.172

The publication documents how the construction of the mosque proceeded, and in 1996, before its official inauguration, thousands of Dawoodi Bohras journeyed to Surat from various parts of the world to spend a few days offering any form of *khidmat* (‘volunteering’) in the service of the mosque and the Dai-al-mutlaq. Many of the female followers spent days reciting the Quran on the mosque premises, while the male followers lifted bricks, moved sand and performed various menial tasks in the spirit of performing *khidmat* for Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin. With the construction nearing completion, the 1st of Shaban, 1417H (December 10, 1996) was chosen by Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin as the date for the *Zikra majlis, iftetah* (‘inauguration’) of the restored mosque and the commencement of the examinations at Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah. As the days drew closer, the document notes, the streets of Devdi Mubarak, the centre which had represented the presence of the Dawat in Surat for almost three centuries, was entirely covered by a ‘green cloth’. The cloth covered the seven mausoleums, the new mosque and the Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah building. It goes on to note that “devotees of any or no building skill alike swept the floor, picked at the carvings and placed one piece or another into its appropriate place. Any work was good enough to participate in the building of this house of Allah and with it claim the right to be promised abode in heaven.”173

172 *The Unique event of Fatemi History*, p. 2.
173 *The Unique event of Fatemi History*, p. 4.
As the opening day approached, the influx of pilgrims increased and the Surat train station is said to have been filled with distinctly dressed Dawoodi Bohra pilgrims. Amidst the usual traffic, vehicles carrying more pilgrims arrived, identified easily by flags which read ‘Ya Hussain’, ‘Long Live Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin’ and ‘To Surat’. Almost 150,000 Dawoodi Bohras descended upon Surat for this historic event. The mosque had by now been completed – the ninety-nine names of Allah written in the Kufic script adorned with gold, further away the names of the Panjetan Paak, the Imams and Duat Mutlaqeen once again in Kufi script, the word ‘Allah’ engraved on the stained glass and the timeless Fatimi Mishkats (‘emblematic chandeliers’); all lent sacredness and reverence to a structure which would later become a blueprint for the building of numerous Dawoodi Bohra mosques in various parts of the world.

Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin arrived amidst much celebration; he opened the ceremonial lock and then looked at the mehrab (‘a niche set into the middle of the qibla wall’) as its veil was lifted."A gasp of awe ran through the masjid”, notes the celebratory tract, “as a larger than life replica of the mehrab of al-Jami al-Juyushi, built by Amir al Juyush, Badr al Jamali in the 11th century stood adorning the front wall, with all the verses and designs covered in gold”. Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin declared:

O' Mumineen, contemplate that Surat is the centre of trade and business; thousands of people around the world come here with the purpose of trade. But you all, O' my Dear children have arrived in Surat with a different purpose and aim. You all have arrived at the gates of Dars Al Saifee and Masjid Al Moazzam, which were established by Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin (R.A) and were reconstructed by Syedna

Taher Saiifuddin (R.A) and now I have renovated both. You have arrived in this Majlis seeking Knowledge and wisdom. Your every step towards this goal assures you of a hasanat and that the angels take you in their confines. Today the angels welcome you all in this Majlis of Zikra. And Mamlook E Ale Mohammed proclaim ‘Marhaban Be Wafdillah’.175

Drawing from the first words (i.e., ‘Marhaban Be Wafdillah’ or ‘Greetings to the virtuous’) the Prophet Mohammad is said to have uttered on seeing thousands of Muslims gathered at Mount Arafat during the farewell Hajj, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin continued:

O’ believers who dwell in my heart, you have left your homes and come here bearing difficulties to witness the ifletah of this Masjid, to see me, to please me -- this act of yours is nothing but love for me.

This Masjid of Syedna Abdeali Saiifuddin Saheb is magnificent. I am indeed very happy to see it. But my greater happiness is on seeing you, Mumineen.

I know you always think of me, but there may be times when this world sways you from doing so. Be assured though, that I have never forgotten you for a day, or for an hour or even for a moment – and I never will.

I am ever concerned about you, that no unhappiness should touch you, that you may never be subject to grief or pain. Why should you then be worried? I Mohammed Burhanuddin, will come to your aid in your hour of need.176

Similar to Barbara Metcalf’s postulation that the Indian Muslim Ulema during the 19th century have been somewhat ignored in the literature because their “activities were relatively inconspicuous”, relegated to the margins and dismissed as “isolated underworld relics of a traditional, unchanging past”, the movement of renewal and religious purification led by Syedna Taher Saiifuddin and then by Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin within the Dawoodi Bohra community during the 20th century presents a peculiar similarity. Using what may be referred to as relatively ‘new’ institutional forms and technological devices, both Dai-al-mutlaqs chose a strategy of turning within, steering clear (except ceremonially) with the framework of the modern state

176 The Unique event of Fatemi History, p. 5.
and exchanges with other communities. Their sole concern was to preserve the religious heritage – the quintessential role of the Dai-al-mutlaq from the post-Fatimid centuries – to consolidate the presence of the Fatimid Dawat on the Indian subcontinent, which was coming to be increasingly dominated by larger Muslim movements such as the Deobandis, Barelwis and even modernist thinkers such as Mohammad Iqbal and later Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

**Summing Up**

The penultimate aim was to propagate instructions on ‘authentic’ religious practice and belief. From the mid-1920s especially, Syedna Taher Saifuddin attempted to and succeeded in presenting his successor as the archetypal prodigy, an ideal Selfhood that each follower ought to aspire towards, as a persona that embodied the living faith of the Fatimi Dawat in India. Like the majlis of the *Zikra*, which was a ‘new’ form of organisation, presenting an innovative technique of communication, the following it generated too was ‘new’. For the Bohras of India, here was a moment where “their emphases within their religion and their consciousness of it were new in their time”, as Barbara Metcalf notes. Such a consciousness of renewal, the need for ‘an internal conversion’, became even more pertinent from the mid-1970s till the mid-1980s as the Reformist challenge to the Dawat and the authority of the Dai-al-mutlaq took on newer forms and became even more intense under the post-colonial Indian state.

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Chapter 4

‘AT THE HEART OF SECULARISM’:
SYEDNA MOHAMMAD BURHANUDDIN AND

While the previous chapter historicised Syeda Mohammad Burhanuddin’s ascension to the role of Dai-al-mutlaq, this chapter contextualises his tenure in the post-1965 period. Taking advantage of the post-colonial ‘secular’ state, the Reformists harnessed print media and civil society institutions in an attempt to undermine the authority of the Dai. Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin responded by embracing secularism, eschewing Islamic extremism and reasserting the ideals of self-reliance, which had been a hallmark of the community’s existence in India since the arrival of the earliest Fatimid missionaries in the 11th century in Sindh and Gujarat. Laying the context for the landmark 1979 Conference of Fatimi Knowledge (al-Multaqa al-Fatimi al-Ilmi), which Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin convened to symbolise measures aimed at achieving greater cohesion within the community, the chapter unpacks the different moments when ‘Reform’ was debated in the print sphere and how the Dai-al-mutlaq succeeded in reasserting bonds of culture, traditions and the past embodied in community institutions.

A Resolution for Change: al-Multaqa al-Fatimi al-Ilmi

The year 1979 has been marked by many scholars as a defining moment in the re-emergence of a particular late-modern Islamic consciousness and particularly an epochal event in the rise of Shia identitarian expressions in South Asia.178 The Iranian

revolution has been understood in much academic literature as an event that demonstrated how it was indeed possible to advance ‘tradition’ as practice and effectively consolidate popular group identification. Moreover, 1979 also brought about a landmark event in the modern experience of the Dawoodi Bohras in the Indian subcontinent. As Syedi Najmuddin notes, it had been incumbent on the Dai-al-mutlaq of each era to provide proper and timely advice to his followers, especially the “Dai of a miniscule denomination [who] had to ensure the practice of a pristine faith free of dilution and pollution.”

On January 1979, at a landmark event titled the Conference of Fatimi Knowledge (al-Multaqa al-Fatimi al-Ilmi), Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin invited Dawoodi Bohras from across the subcontinent and beyond to gather in Surat at the Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah academy amidst the yearly Zikra majlis preparations for the annual examinations at the academy. Most, if not all, literatures which document the Multaqa have chosen to focus on two particular resolutions. First, the Resolution stated that male Bohras should maintain a beard and female Bohras should adorn a rida (burqa) and in the second, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin asked his followers to adhere to the Shariah and abandon even the largest of businesses that were based on interest. Both resolutions and their implications for the community's ‘contemporary appearance’ have been relatively well documented by Jonah Blank and it is futile to recapitulate such findings. The aim here is to unravel the historical context that led to such a landmark event, especially amidst the developments that had been taking place in the reformist camp, especially from the mid-1970s.

179 Syedi Najmuddin, 75 Momentous Years in Retrospect, p. 21.
For Syed Najmuddin, the **Multaqa** was groundbreaking for it encouraged “open debate and discussion” with all the followers who were given the “freedom to ask questions” of the Dai-al-mutlaq.\(^{180}\) Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin is noted to have mentioned in his inaugural address at the **Multaqa**:

> Today, we face scientific and technical advance, the result of man's learning and research. The achievement in reality is the work of the Creator, the Wise and in consonance with the Will of the Almighty, the Omniscient. What should follow and reason requires it, is that man's devotion and humility to the power of Allah and submission to it should be strengthened. But man was beguiled by Satan.

> He denied the Creator and went astray. Profiting from the bounties of Allah and deriving the maximum advantage from the wonders of Creation, man yet renounced the Creator and obedience to Him. Not merely that but more, man matches disobedience with further disobedience and stumbles in error, turning from obedience to Allah to worship of Satan. He taints society with his false and ungrateful ideology and ventures, which mislead and oppress, perpetrating a sin. He threatens the Deen of Allah and its believers. He glorifies in his ignorance by denying to the faithful knowledge of things he himself is ignorant of.\(^{181}\)

Increasingly, in the midst of an Indian subcontinent that was moving away from its professed Nehruvian secularism of the early independence years, the Dai-al-mutlaq, it may be posited as a Clifford Geertz metaphor, was becoming ‘carefully oppositional’.

In the events that the following sections will document, it will become apparent that the Dawoodi Bohra *weltanschaung* was not traditional any more in the sense of being accepted without question. Although such an assertion, as we saw in the previous chapter, may be extended to Syedna Taher Saifuddin too, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin's years were much more complex with the ‘newer’ proliferation of technologies and the burgeoning ‘secularist’ print media. The **Multaqa** was then a self-conscious presentation, formulated against the ravages of a modernity that seemed to be ‘assimilating’ the Dawoodis into the larger imagined ‘Hindu sphere’, much more than the current Dai-al-mutlaq could find comfort in. Jonah Blank makes a somewhat similar observation about the very basic difference between the father

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\(^{180}\) Ibid.  
\(^{181}\) Ibid.
and son. Whereas Syedna Taher Saifuddin exhibited a deep interest in the larger world(s) beyond the Bohra community, with his fascination for modern ideas and Western customs continuing to grow, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin “has never been as interested in secular affairs, as his predecessor had been.”

It was he [Syedna Taher Saifuddin]”, Jonah Blank observes:

…who truly opened up the community to outside influences, exposed it to a variety of changes. According to sources who knew him personally, not only did Taher Saifuddin consider such changes inevitable and necessary, but he found modern ideas personally fascinating. This does not imply that the former da'i was any less devoted to spiritual pursuits. Taher Saifuddin's extraordinary scholarship and piety are not disputed even by those who disagree with his overall outlook. For Taher Saifuddin, both the spiritual and secular realms held a wealth of possibility.

Although both the 51st and 52nd Dai-al-mutlaqs shared a profound religious sensibility, the Multaqa in 1979 and the later developments within the Dawoodi Bohra community need to be understood within a dynamic context, with the current incumbent introducing orthopraxic reforms within a climate where his followers were experiencing enhanced social ties to the larger ideological mainstream of Indian society. The ‘syncretist’ and ‘quietist’ tendencies of the Dawoodi Bohras, which had become elements of a marked strategy for centuries, were now being characteristically reworked within the repertoire of received Ismaili beliefs, indicative of how Islam, like all traditions, is always shifting in emphases, continually reformulating and redefining itself. Indicative of such a subtle shift, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin elaborated in his 1979 sermon:

Know ye, that the acquisition of life in this world of sublimity and baseness, is but death; but, for him who dies in the fold of Deen, is life. So strive to acquire that which gives life over life and eschew that which is death and indeed the death. Heeding what the true sages have said that the world is nothing; have the wisdom to gain something from nothing.

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182 Blank, Mullahs on the Mainframe, p. 185.
183 Ibid.
184 For details on the 1979 directives regarding the dress code and the maintaining of beards, see ibid., pp. 187–190.
185 Syedi Najmuddin, 75 Momentous Years in Retrospect, p. 20.
As votaries of the truth, we must comprehend the wisdom of Imam Al Moiz: If Truth was a path, and if Falsehood was a path, both would claim on equal status, giving to each a basis. And Falsehood, if granted a basis, would knock down Truth. The basis is but for Truth only. Falsehood is nullified, denied the basis.

If indeed any single label was to be forced upon this period of the Dawoodi Bohra identity, especially in the Indian subcontinent, it could be that of ‘rationalising’ in the Weberian sense of making religion self-conscious, inward-looking, systematic and based on abstract, yet scripturally defined, principles. The *Mutlaqa* provided a sense of cultural worth and led to a particular community ethos for the Dawoodi Bohras. Surprisingly, despite the difficult demands that the Dai-al-mutlaq made of his followers, especially of abandoning *Ribah* or taking of interest, it continued to be appealing to people who were part of an increasingly connected social and political world.

Based on *Ta'wil* or the esoteric interpretation of the scripture, the Dai-al-mutlaq began to reassert that beneath the *Zahir* (‘apparent’) aspects of the revealed texts, a deeper and more *Batin* (‘truth’) lies hidden. While any Muslim and even a Dawoodi Bohra could access the apparent meanings of the Quran, only a true Mumin (read: loyal and dedicated Dawoodi Bohra) could aspire to unravel the *Batin*, with the guidance and help of the Imam of the era or his representative, i.e., the Dai-al-mutlaq. The Ismailis, in particular, regard the entire Quran as a text with hidden allegorical interpretations underlying even the most seemingly straightforward of passages.186

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The Udaipur Revolt and Measures of ‘Progress’

Amidst the re-assertion and the call to display the followers’ love for the Dai-al-mutlaq, there was a message for the Reformists’ movement, which was being led by two individuals in particular, Norman Contractor and Asghar Ali Engineer. Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin noted in his sermon:

We also face another group; those who are zealous for Deen but lack intellectual consciousness and apprehension. Their faith stands on a shaky foundation. They reject the wonders of Allah and His Omnipotence and refuse to even think about it. In this frame, they inadvertently aid the foes of Allah's Deen and those who have a vested interest in plotting against it.

Therefore the believer is obliged to tend both these spheres. He must combine the knowledge that ensures fulfillment in this world with the knowledge that guarantees the Hereafter. That knowledge requires a comprehension and consciousness of the rarities of the arts and encompasses learning and wisdom, particularly gnosis of the religious need and of Shari'ah.187

Ismaili gnosis was partly the response of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin to the most recent and perhaps dramatic challenge to the authority of the Dawat during the 1970s in the city of Udaipur. Located in Rajasthan, Udaipur is also known as the City of Lakes and has a very large Bohra population; according to contemporary sources, the local Bohra jamaat numbers from about fifteen to twenty thousand, concentrated mainly in four adjoining neighbourhoods.188 The conflict is said to have emerged in 1970 when municipal elections were held in all four zones where the Bohras were in the majority. In the post-Partition era, the Bohras had been steadfast supporters of the Congress party. In Udaipur, as in other parts of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan, the local Dawat authorities had been urging the community to vote for the Bohra candidates of the Congress and support the candidacy of the Congress party to local office. As the municipal elections for 1970 approached, a left-leaning group of

187 Syedi Najmuddin, 75 Momentous Years in Retrospect, p. 21.
Dawoodi Bohra youth, who later came to refer to themselves as the ‘Bohra Youth Association’, challenged the local Amil's choice of Congress candidates by entering the electoral process on their own and subsequently winning the elections in the four wards. The election of 1970 and the Bohra Youth Association registering a victory is not contested by either the reformists or the Dawat narratives. However, the narrative becomes contentious, perhaps even contested, in documenting the developments that followed the victory.

For Noman Contractor, a key reformist of the time, the dissent in Udaipur was a local issue between the Amil, who was the representative of the Dai-al-mutlaq, and the local youth. The Amil was believed to have been “playing fast and loose with the monies he had received for public purposes”. As Contractor elaborates, “it seems he used to get money from both the sources, i.e. from the leader of the ruling party and from His Holiness”. Instead of deploying the money for the betterment of the local community, the Amil is claimed to have “used a major portion of it for personal ends”. As a result, the local Youth, considering the Amil to be highly corrupt, sought to put forward their own candidates with the hope of circumventing his influence. The Amil, who had been treading a fine line over the supposed influence he had garnered with the Chief Minister who was under the impression that the local Amil had direct access to the Dai-al-mutlaq, is alleged to have exacerbated matters and portrayed the Bohra Youth Association in a negative light after the electoral defeat of the candidates he had nominated. In Contractor's understanding of the

189 Like the early 20th century Reformists such as Adamji Peerbhai, Noman Contractor was a Bombay industrialist who was a leading figure in the Reform movement, from the 1950s till the 1980s. Contractor, with the help of other philanthropists, founded the Kandivali Housing Colony, Mohammed Foundation Trust, Ikhwanus-Safa Trust and the Progressive Printing Press. He even wanted to establish a co-operative bank but it did not materialise in his lifetime.

190 Noman Contractor, The Dawoodi Bohras, p. 15.

191 Ibid.
genesis of the conflict, the Amil's clever politicking led to the victimisation of the Bohra Youth whose otherwise well-intentioned, locally grounded concerns were presented to the Dai-al-mutlaq as “proving harmful to the community”.  

Contractor explains in colloquial detail:

> The defeat of the officially sponsored candidates in the municipal elections gave a severe jolt to A [i.e. the local Amil]. He resorted to several manipulative practices to regain his lost status. He persuaded His Holiness to the view that a section of the Bohras – particularly the young – were restive and may even pose a threat to the authority of His Holiness. He attributed the defeat of the officially sponsored candidates to the machinations of these young Bohras. It seems His Holiness quite uncritically accepted A's version of the developments.

In an attempt at understanding the ground realities better and addressing religious affairs, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, according to Contractor, appointed his brother and then Rector of Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah as his representative in Udaipur. All powers relating to religious and financial matters were delegated to him. This proved detrimental to the aspirations of the Bohra Youth Association and served the interests of the erstwhile local Amil, for, according to Contractor, Syedi Yusuf Najmuddin “was highly prejudiced against the Bohra youth and on more than one occasion gave public expression to it”.

Although Contractor's narrative needs to be read with caution, the Udaipur revolt brought to the forefront a series of debates within the community, ranging from issues surrounding the status of women, the precarious distinction between the realm of spiritual authority and secular presence, the extent to which the Congress and the Janata Dal governments (in power only from 1977 to 1980) were willing to intervene in the internal matters of the community and the subsequent strategies that the Dawat devised and the Reformists used to cope with and present such a challenge.

192 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
194 Ibid.
respectively. Although there are multiple takes on what precisely occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, it has been the Reformist narrative that has received far wider representation in the print media.

Before we turn to a closer inspection of the print campaign that the Reformists launched against the Dai-al-mutlaq, more intensely from the mid-1970s, it may be pertinent to discuss an early anthropological study conducted by Shibani Roy who documented the Udaipur rebellion as it unfolded. Roy's work emerged at a time when the Reformist movement had reached intense levels in terms of publicity and press coverage, which sought to portray the High Priest and the Dawat in a negative light. Writing in the 1980s, she conducted most of her fieldwork in the 1970s. For Roy, the strategy of voting *en masse* for one political party favoured by the Dai-al-mutlaq enabled the Bohras to maintain internal coherence. The case of Udaipur in the 1970s, however, shattered this delicate balance. Political participation and its related access to the political mechanism did not mean being able to vote for anybody that one desired, but voting *en masse* for a purpose which sustains the way of life of a community which was being bombarded by anti-Muslim rhetoric, especially in a post-independence Gujarat, the region with which the Bohras identified the most.195

The earliest entries in print on the Udaipur revolt appear from around 1974. By then, the lines had been drawn between those considered loyal to the Dai-al-mutlaq and those demanding reforms in Udaipur. *Sunday World*, a weekly magazine, noted in April 1974: “a matter of immediate concern is the increasingly militant turn that the argument has taken”.196 The town of Udaipur was by now divided into two groups:

the Bohra Youth Association, which claimed to represent a ‘majority’ of Udaipur Bohras and those who came to be known as ‘Shababis’, the group which remained loyal to the Dai-al-mutlaq.  \(^{197}\) One of the major issues of contention was the *misaq* or oath of allegiance that each Bohra is supposed to take. The ceremony held at the age of puberty, which is obligatory for every follower who wishes to be part of the community, is a covenant between the believer and God, effected through his *Wali*. The Reformists, who declared themselves as individuals “inspired by the democratic institutions” \(^{198}\) of India, found it difficult to reconcile how any individual could, at least according to their understanding of what the *misaq* expected of them, “spend his property and life in the cause of the Dai”. \(^{199}\)

The Reformist movement, amidst the larger political climate that saw the curtailment of human rights under the Indira Gandhi emergency regime, won immense sympathy amongst leftist thinkers and public intellectuals. \(^{200}\) In an interview with *The Hindustan Times*, Asaf A. Fayzee, a prominent scholar on Ismaili jurisprudence, even went to the extent of claiming that “the meesaq is not derived from the Holy Quoran but in a later document. The Meesaq is an ancient document which should be interpreted with the times.” \(^{201}\)

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197 The literal transliteration of the word ‘Shabab’ means ‘youth’ and is an organisation, which is open to all Bohra youth males who have taken the *Misaq* up to the age of 35. *Shababul-ediz-zahabi* was established in 1965 on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Syedna Taher Saifuddin.


200 The period between 1977 and 1979 was also one of the most difficult in terms of the negotiation and nature of ‘secularism’ in India. Indira Gandhi’s Emergency of 1975–1977, and her subsequent ouster at the 1977 polls, had thrown doubt on the pluralist framework, which had been a major paradigm of Indian politics since 1947. While Marxist paradigms had existed as undercurrents till then, they came to the fore in the mid-1970s. See Harry W. Blair, ‘Mrs Gandhi’s Emergency, The Indian Elections of 1977, Pluralism and Marxism: Problems with Paradigms’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 14 (1980), pp. 237–271.

201 ‘Bohra Protestantism and Tradition’, *Sunday World* (4) 16, 21/4/1974. The sole written text of the *Misaq* in the public domain is the document that was presented by Syedna Taher Saifuddin in 1920 during the Chandabhai Gulla case and was published by Mian Bhai Mulla Abdul Husain. See Abdul Husain, *Gulzare Daudi*, pp. 91–100.
Amidst the demands to ‘modernise’ and ‘relieve’ the followers from what was perceived as an out-dated religious rite of passage, it needs to be noted that the *misaq* is probably the only major ritual that remains unique to the Dawoodi Bohras. The Dawat remained silent on the Reformists’ brandishing of the *misaq* as an oppressive article of faith that enabled the Dai-al-mutlaq to declare *baraat* (‘social boycott’) on any of the dissidents. For most of the 1970s, the Reformists at most public gatherings constantly exhibited a particular written version of the *misaq* which Syedna Taher Saifuddin had submitted in court during the Burhanpur Dargah case of 1921. The silence in the English print media was finally broken in 1981 when Syedi Badrul Jamali, a nephew of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, spoke out in an interview with *The Week*:

> First of all people who say this are misinformed and have not read the Koran. They have read a translation, yes...but I can show you the Koran, just now, where it is clearly stated that we have taken the Misaq of Adam, the first of the Prophets. So from where did this idea about persecution of the Bohras come? The Misaq was from the beginning. Misaq is what it is. Okay? Nobody is compelled to give this Misaq. If you want to give it, you give, if you don't, you don't.202

In a sermon delivered at the time, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin articulated a clear and coherent view of the way the world was and the way one ought to live within it – a view, which stood radically different from that of the Reformists, who were, by and large, committed to notions of progress and secular constitutionalism adapted mostly from a selective mix of leftist and liberal postulations. This is not to claim that the Dai-al-mutlaq remained opposed to any measure of ‘progress’ as defined by the bulwarks of the Reformist movement; the claim here was to approach Islam, and the ‘Bohra modern’ more specifically, as spheres which could easily harmonise in

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imagining a more comprehensive *weltanschauung* that dealt with the various ills of modernity and its associated alienations.

‘Progress’ for the Dawoodi Bohras was inherently linked with the realisation of what Syedi Najmuddin referred to as ‘continuity’ with traditions and creed. For a community with a fairly clear set of objectives defined by Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, ‘progress’ was a concept that could only come in the service of that defined worldview. Accepting the complexities involved in seeking a clear definition of the term, Syedi Najmuddin noted that “progress has to be related to the essentials of the outlook, beliefs, or principles, which a particular group of people hold or practice. Strange as it may appear, even deterioration could be continuous, and there could be progress in deterioration”. In part, as a response to the print campaign that the Reformists had launched since the early 1970s and in articulating his view of how the Dawoodi Bohra community could cope with the pressures of modernity, specifically within an ‘Indian’ post-colonial context, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin in his 1979 *Multaqa* sermon noted:

> Misled are those who allege that Islamic Shariah has not inherent within it that which does harmonise with the needs of their times. Thus they hope to establish the imperfection of the Shairah, which we know is the perfect most of all Shairah, the most complete and the noble. The detractors engage in a comparison of the Shairah with man-made social orders that they have attempted to perfect. Theirs is a claim of perfection, the claim of those who themselves are imperfect, transitory and perish even before they can witness the end result of their handiwork. Truly the Shairah is laid down to eliminate human imperfection. Its objective is to usher in betterment, wellbeing and contentment.\(^{204}\)

As the introduction of various orthopraxic reforms continued within the community, Shibani Roy, the anthropologist who had been documenting the Udaipur fiasco, observed that since not all Dawoodi Bohras could gain access to the *Batin* aspects of Ismaili traditions and thought, the community seemed to have been saved from “the

\(^{203}\) Syedi Najmuddin, *75 Momentous Years in Retrospect*, p. 22.

\(^{204}\) Ibid.
Based on interviews she had conducted with various community leaders of the time, Roy located the division between ‘tradition’ and the transfer of knowledge where Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin emphasised the absolute need for an intercessionary saint to interpret and transmit the canon versus so-called ‘modernist/reformists’ such as Asghar Ali Engineer who were not formally trained members of the Ulema, but were from outside the traditional systems of transmission.

Clandestine Femininity: The Yasmin Contractor Case

Aligned to Francis Robinson's observations on the impact of print on debates within the Muslim communities of South Asia since the 1880s, public intellectuals such as Asghar Ali Engineer had begun to increasingly delve with renewed vigour into the resources of both the Ismaili tradition and Western ideas—now made rather freely available by print—in attempting to find answers to contemporary challenges. The very medium of print was then adopted to disseminate their critiques through pamphlets, and partisan newspapers and magazines. In a 1974 article in the Times of India, the Reformists alleged:

As the community mainly comprises small businessmen and petty shopkeepers, the rate of literacy and pursuit of learning, as far as higher education is concerned, has been traditionally fairly low. Consequently, the elite never developed a critical attitude towards the religious leadership and in keeping with the character of a business community, always meekly submitted to whatever fatwas were imposed on it from time to time, whether they were in conformity with the spirit of the basic tenets of Islam or not. During the last couple of decades, however, the tenor of the life in the community has been disturbed mainly on account of two major factors: the accumulation of considerable sum of money by the Bohra religious hierarchy, and the spread of education among a section of the Bohra youth in certain urban centers.

Amidst calls for the newly emergent formation of ‘educated’ Bohra youth to question the ‘traditionalist’ outlook of the priesthood, the women's movement for liberation from patriarchy that came to be conflated with the fast-advancing Dawat religious structures received renewed impetus. Although there had been an intense debate about the role of women and the adornment of purdah within the community during the 1930s and 1940s, the movement had mellowed down with the practice of purdah amongst Dawoodi Bohra women reducing significantly by the 1950s.\(^{207}\) However, as the Udaipur revolt reached an impasse, the Reformists alleged that Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin refused to solemnise the marriage of about two hundred couples who were either directly involved in the Bohra Youth Association or openly sympathised with it. The issue is said to have been raised at the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly, but to no avail. In utter desperation the women from Udaipur approached Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in New Delhi, with the hope of her intervention. Indira Gandhi directed an MP from Rajasthan and Dawoodi Bohra dissident, Saleh Abdul Kader, to persuade Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin to solemnise the marriages, but once again to no avail.\(^{208}\)

Just before approaching Indira Gandhi, one of the more clandestine strategies that the Reformist group adopted was in September 1973 when Yasmin Contractor, the daughter of the reformist leader Noman Contractor, issued a public statement in the *Times of India* demanding that her father publicly apologise to Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin in order for her marriage to be solemnised in accordance with Dawoodi


\(^{208}\) ‘Ferment Among the Bohras’, *Times of India*, 25/8/1974. For a detailed understanding of the context in which Indira Gandhi was operating at the time, and her subsequent decision to declare the Indian Emergency, followed by discussions with Jayaprakash Narayan, a personality who would also become crucial for the Reformists, see P. N. Dhar, *Indira Gandhi, The "emergency" and Indian Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 223–269.
Bohra rites. The press statement attracted considerable public attention and a compromise was reached between Noman Contractor and Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin. The Dai-al-mutlaq relented to the extent of agreeing to allow a local *Amil* in Mumbai to solemnise the marriage, provided Noman Contractor did not attend the ceremony or participate in any of the rites.²⁰⁹

Precisely thirteen months later, however, yet another letter to the editor of the *Times of India* authored by Yasmin Contractor appeared which resolutely declared the Bohras of Udaipur as ‘heroic’ as they had refused to “yield to the repressive measures to dissolve the [Bohra Youth] Association and to tender public apology”. Declaring the priestly hierarchy as “unrelenting and obstinate”, Yasmin Contractor argued that prior to Syedna Taher Saifuddin and Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, it was common practice for a Muslim *Kazi* to conduct the solemnisation ceremony of Bohra couples. In pointing to internal contradictions, she allegorically cited the case of Abde Fathema, the mother of the *Mukasir* (‘the third-ranking cleric in the Bohra dawat’) at the time, whose marriage had been solemnised by a Muslim *Kazi* in 1932 and then subsequently declared invalid by Syedna Taher Saifuddin. When the marriage was contested in court, the hierarchy at the time accepted the marriage as valid, but thereafter made it obligatory for Dawoodi Bohra solemnisations to occur only by authorised Bohra priests and only after the blessings of the Dai-al-mutlaq.²¹⁰

Although it may be difficult to ascertain the validity of Yasmin Contractor's claims, armed with stop-gap theatricals and assigned as a mode of ‘resistance’ in the hope of causing problems for the growing hegemony of the Dai-al-mutlaq, the Reformists by

resorting to such tactics had effectively undermined any remaining glimmer of hope for reconciliation with the Dawat.

Following Yasmin Contractor, a flurry of articles appeared in the press citing cases of Reformist women who had been subjected to or had already been placed under baraat but continued to persevere with the movement. The Reformists even presented cases of Dawoodi Bohra women of mixed heritage and parentage. The renowned film actress Asha Parekh's mother, Salma Parekh, who ‘was’ a Dawoodi Bohra, as the article notes, due to her father Mr. Ibrahim Lakdawala's role in the early reform campaign, came out in support of the Reformist movement. Noting how crucial it was for women to mobilise and organise, Salma Parekh noted, “I wish to tell them that they must change with the times. Bohra women must recognise their right from wrong and strive for the truth. Slavery in any form in the 20th century is ridiculous”. One personal account after another followed, couched in intensely emotional language, by which the Reformists attempted to portray the ‘plight’ of women in the Bohra community as one of utter desperation. Citing the case of Sakina Attarwala, a graduate from the University of Bombay, whose marriage had been held up for more than two years, the article quoted her as saying:

It's a long story. This story seems to have no beginning, has no ending. It's a nightmare from which sometimes one awakens only to find that it's really true. Our only fault, if you can call that a fault, was to prevail upon our head priest to give back our fundamental rights which he has usurped from us by force and other means. We revere him in religious matters but we want freedom of expression and association. We do not want him to manage our secular affairs.

On March 16, 1975, in an open challenge to the authority of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, 106 couples from Udaipur who had been refused solemnisation rites held mass marriage ceremonies. The marriages were performed by non-Bohra Kazis

212 Ibid.
from Mumbai, once again attracting much public attention. Noman Contractor declared that “after having failed in all their efforts to persuade Syedna Sahed to perform nikahs held up for many years, the people of Udaipur at last decided to solemnise these marriages independently according to the Islamic Shariat, rather than agreeing to an ignominious surrender on the terms demanded by the priesthood”. In a haughty rejection of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin's requests for the couples to take the Misaq or oath of allegiance, the influence of the Reformists on the print media had been so vigorous that the press reports polemicised the occasion and the Reformist ‘plight’ to dismiss Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin as “following the practices of the medieval period in the 20th century”.  

Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin and the Dawat remained silent on much of these events and allegations. However, the Bohra community mobilised and protested publicly in November 1974 when Shashi Bhushan, a Congress M.P., addressing a Bohra Youth Association gathering in Udaipur, criticised the policies of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin and accused the Dai-al-mutlaq of permitting the “economic exploitation of the community by the priestly class”. Bhushan even went to the extent of euphorically declaring that, like the instance when the government had acted in the case of the Gurdwaras in 1970s with legislation, he would raise the issue of “exploitation the of Dawoodi Bohras in Parliament soon”.  

Bhushan's comments generated an immediate response from different public figures including the labour leader M. U. Khan, who declared that Shashi Bhushan by addressing the meeting of the Bohra Youth Association had become “an instrument in

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the malicious campaign against the religious head of the Bohra community”. The subsequent memorandum that was released to the press noted, “it was a matter of the very faith of the Dawoodi Bohra denomination that it exercises the discipline over its members for the purpose of preserving unity in faith. If everyone was at liberty to defy the essentials of the creed, this community as a group would soon cease to exist.” Following this, Shashi Bhushan released a public apology and urged the representative of the Dawoodi Bohras who had approached him to treat the “matter as closed” and even echoed the Dawat memorandum by agreeing that those who did not accept the tenets of any religion were free to leave it and follow their own beliefs.

In light of the apology, the Dawoodi Bohra community organisers also called for a silent procession in support of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin and to protest against what was termed ‘outside interference’ in the community's internal matters. On November 27, 1974, thousands of Bohras across India kept their businesses and other places of work closed to participate in the silent march.

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Figure 4.1, Posters put up by Bohras around Bombay in response to Shashi Bhushan’s comments. 

The Challenge of the Nathwani Commission

The polemics only got intense with the 1977 establishment of the Nathwani Commission. With the Janata Party electoral victory in 1977 and the first non-Congress government coming to power in the centre in the post-independence era, the Reformist camp received renewed impetus. The Bohras, who had been staunch Congress supporters ever since 1947, found themselves without their traditional support channels. In contrast, the Reformists, especially public intellectuals like 

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Asghar Ali Engineer, had always commanded respect amongst leftist circles and so the Reformists suddenly found, as Jonah Blank notes, “old friends in high places”.

The first point of contact for the Reformists was the new Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, who had been a crucial proponent of the Prevention of Excommunication Act in the 1950s. Although Desai remained formally distanced, the Reformists pleaded to S.M. Joshi, president of the Maharashtra Janata Party who agreed to establish a ‘non-official’ enquiry commission to look into whether ‘vested interests’ of the community were running a ‘government within a government’, and if “social boycott was being promoted and whether due to that there was an atmosphere of terror within the community”.

The appointed Commission was to establish investigation panels in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Jayaprakash Narayanan, the veteran politician and mentor of the Janata Party, wrote in a letter dated July 14, 1977 to Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin:

> The reformist Bohras do not challenge your spiritual status but have been striving for restoration of their democratic rights and preservation of human values. No other consideration, in my opinion, should be allowed to gain supremacy over humanity and freedom of conscience.

The Reformists, headed by Asghar Ali Engineer, began to approach their ‘old friends’ such as Jayaprakash Narayan, who wrote to Justice (retd.) V.M. Tarkunde, requesting him to institute an unofficial commission on behalf of the Reformists and also make arrangements to invite former-Justice N. P. Nathwani, M.P., to head the Commission.

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219 Although Jonah Blank dedicates some discussion to the findings of the Nathwani Commission, he fails to historicise how the Nathwani Commission came into being and the politics that surrounded it. Moreover, he fails to dwell on how the Commission was represented in the print media. See Blank, op. cit., p. 244.


Surprisingly, in a turn of events some months later, Narayan disavowed the Commission before it even got underway:

I had never associated myself with the so-called inquiry and further make it clear that politicians and political considerations should not be allowed to infringe upon religious susceptibilities or wound them in any way. Every religious community must have the freedom to resolve its internal religious affairs according to the dictates of its faith and beliefs.  

One possible reason for Narayan's disavowal may have been the general concern the Janata government may have had of alienating the Muslim electorate, especially when the prominent Mufti Atiqur Rehman Usmani, who was the President of the Muslim Consultative Council and Vice-president of the Muslim Personal Law Board, criticised the establishment of such a Commission in an article which appeared in the September 1977 issue of Onlooker. Responding to Jayaprakash Narayan's assertion, which he had already begun to deny by then, Usmani voiced that an unofficial commission investigating if “vested interests in the Bohra community were running a government within a government and have their own flag and armed forces” was ‘utterly preposterous’ and vehemently objected to any inference that the community was disloyal to the nation and its values.

Along with Usmani’s reservations about the Commission, Asghar Ali Engineer wrote yet another appeal, demanding the ‘democratic rights’ of the Dawoodi Bohras in 1977. What occurred in response to the publication of the article left the editors of the Onlooker astonished. Starting with an initial telegram sent by the Principal and staff of the Taheri High School in Bombay which noted “that we strongly protest that this [Nathwani] commission should be banned forthwith”, the Onlooker received over 500 letters written by children on ruled exercise book paper – all in protest against the

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establishing of the unofficial commission. By October 10, 1977, S.M. Joshi and Justice Tarkunde had received more than 3,000 telegrams and almost 1,000 letters asking for the Commission to be disbanded.

The letters from the community members, in their generality, are said to have demanded three things. First, that the Indian Constitution had given everyone the right to practise their own religion and, therefore, the Bohras would not tolerate any questioning from any outsider. Second, the Reformists were seen as outsiders because they questioned the authority of the Dai-al-mutlaq, and as a result had undermined their dedication and loyalty to Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin. Third, the zakat (taxes) paid to the High Priest were endorsed by the Quran and were paid willingly.

The writer of the article which documented the massive influx of letters in support of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, however, seems to have been a Reformist sympathiser, given the polemical manner in which any plea or statement by those loyal to the Dai-al-mutlaq were read and represented as ‘written under coercion’. Citing Justice V.M. Tarkunde, the writer noted, “most of the telegrams give the impression that there is some kind of an organised campaign to pressurise members of the Commission into giving up this inquiry. The priestly group within the community seems to be the motive force behind such a campaign”. 225 Following the petition and the letter campaigns, even as the Commission made arrangements to get underway, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin remained silent and shunned its proceedings all throughout 1977. Occasional skirmishes broke out between Dawoodi Bohra

225 ‘Should Bohra Affairs Be Investigated?’ Onlooker, 15/10/1977.
community members who would usually take out silent processions in response to Reformist gatherings or when the Nathwani Commission held its proceedings.\textsuperscript{226}

With the powerful influence the Reformists had over the print media, they presented letters from diverse secular intellectuals, activists, artists and academics.\textsuperscript{227} In late 1977, the \textit{Times of India} published an open letter of support issued by ten teachers of Aligarh Muslim University hailing the Nathwani Commission's inquiry into Bohra affairs. Referring to the practice of social boycott or \textit{baraat} which had been declared on the Reformists, the letter noted how such a practice was an “outmoded medieval practice” to stifle the movement for asserting “human and democratic rights”. The letter asserted that the enquiry should only be concerned with democratic rights and should “have nothing to do with religious beliefs whatsoever”.\textsuperscript{228} Meanwhile, minor clashes between Dawoodi Bohra protestors and Reformist proceedings on occasions such as the Nathwani Commission meetings and the Dawoodi Bohra World Conference, which was an annual gathering of Reformists from across India, continued.\textsuperscript{229} By mid-1978, with protests by the Dawoodi Bohra community becoming more frequent and intense, various Janata Party politicians like Ratnasingh Rajda and the Chief Minister of Maharastra, Vasantdada Patil, came out to declare that the “government had no intention of interfering in any religious affairs.”\textsuperscript{230}


\textsuperscript{227} The feminist-intellectual, Ismat Chughtai, in a letter to the Editor, \textit{Times of India} titled ‘Bohra Affairs’ dated October 20, 1977 lauded the establishing of the Nathwani Commission: “The setting up of a committee recently by the Citizens for Democracy to enquire into the alleged atrocities and suppression of democratic rights must be welcomed by all right-thinking people. We denounce the practice of social boycott and urge the Citizens for Democracy to go ahead with the inquiry. The Bohra reformists are not against Syedna Saheb as a religious head of the community. They only desire socio-economic reforms.”

\textsuperscript{228} ‘Teachers of Aligarh Muslim University Hail Tarkunde Inquiry into Bohra Affairs’, Letter to the Editor, \textit{Times of India}, 17/12/1977.


With significant mass mobilisation of Dawoodi Bohras across India, especially in Bombay, protesting against the Commission, the Janata Party that had risen to power in the 1977 elections began rethinking the approach they had adopted. Morarji Desai had remained aloof from the events ever since he was appointed Prime Minister, except for one occasion in 1977 when S.M. Joshi briefed him on the need to establish a Commission to look into human rights violations within the community. Jayaprakash Narayan, the Janata Party patriarch who had led massive rallies against Indira Gandhi under the banner of ‘Total Revolution’, had subsequently denied any support or involvement in the Reformist campaign. With the Janata government withdrawing its explicit acknowledgement of the Commission, the Reformists’ predicament had already begun showing signs of desperation by late 1978.

Similar to the ‘plight’ of the Reformist women, the print media was continuously mobilised to publish the occasional ‘torture’ story so the movement would remain in the public imagination. On September 28, 1978, the Mumbai-based English language weekly magazine *Blitz*, which had remained sympathetic to the reformist cause, reported the case of Mulla Taherally A. Lokhandwala, a Hindi teacher at the Taheri High School in Mumbai. Mulla Taherally was said to have been assaulted by ‘supporters of the Mullaji’ for reading a copy of *Blitz* within the school premises. On rushing to the Pydhoni police station and attempting to file a report, Mulla Taherally, the article claims, “was bluntly told by the officer in charge that that he would not interfere in the affairs of the school”. The article concludes with a plea: “how long will the Government sit back and allow ‘religious tolerance’ when *goondaism* and mental torture are inflicted by the alleged followers on a section of the community in
the name of religion?" Likewise, in an article that Asghar Ali Engineer had written a few days earlier, he petitioned:

Will our teachers and intellectuals not protest against such a shabby treatment being meted out to a poor teacher just because he chose to act according to his conscience? Will the Government of Maharashtra take note of this and take suitable action against the erring school authorities since it gives substantial aid to the school? Prof. Varde, our education minister, is a man of great integrity and conviction for social reforms. May I appeal to him to initiate action against such inhuman practice being resorted to by the school authorities?

In April 1979 when the Nathwani Commission published its ‘findings’, it inevitably ended up reproducing the very predicaments the Reformists had been complaining about since the early 1970s. The Report declared that “Baraat should be made illegal” and even penalised as an offense; that the misaq (‘oath of allegiance’) should be either limited to the Dai-al-mutlaq's directions over religious matters or done away with altogether; and that all the Trusts of which Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin was the sole trustee should be regulated by suitable legislation. With the aid of a published report that had seemingly ‘verified’ the Reformist ‘plight’, once again a flurry of articles appeared in newspapers demanding that the Government pay heed to the findings and initiate suitable legislation. Ideas of secularism, the need to protect it, flaunt it even, at the expense of the sensibilities of an entire Muslim community became extremely overwhelming as the Reformists once again mobilised the media against Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin. Amidst inquisitions like ‘Should the Syedna Have Secular Powers?’ in the Times of India, which inadvertently presented the findings of the Nathwani Commission as indicative of obvious violations of

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231 ‘Mulla Hounds Teacher for Reading Blitz’, Blitz, 28/10/1978
235 Also see David Selbourne, An Eye to India: The Unmasking of a Tyranny (New York: Penguin, 1977).
‘human rights’ and India’s secular ideals, the articles more often than not written by Reformists or their sympathisers, concluded:

Considering the hardships suffered by members of the community who wish to free themselves from the wide range of restrictions on secular activities, the move to curtail the religious leadership’s powers in non-religious affairs is amply justified.\(^{236}\)

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\(^{236}\) Darryl D’Monte, ‘Should the Syedna Have Secular Powers? Looking at the Nathwani Commission’s findings on the Dawoodi Bohras’, *Times of India*, 6/5/1979. In stretching the polemics, for instance, in an *India Today* article titled ‘Chronicle of Cruelties’, May 16–31, 1979, the writer it is noted wished to remain “anonymous since he was advised to wear a ‘crash-helmet’ if he revealed his name”.
Figure 4.3. Caricature that appeared in the print media after the publication of the Nathwani Commission Report in 1979. Source: ‘Dawoodi Bohras: Unrest in the Community’, Onlooker, March 7–21, 1981.
The Reformists' struggle had caught the imagination of the media to such an extent that in response to the *Multaqa* of 1979 and the reforms, which Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin initiated, magazines such as the *Onlooker* even went to the extent of engaging in outright polemics against the Bohra community and its clergy. Drawing similarities with Ayatollah Khomeini and branding Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin as ‘India's Khomeini’, the supposedly ‘secular’ media demonised the Dai-al-mutlaq unthinkingly. From the caricatures that emerged of the Dai-al-mutlaq holding a whip, suggesting a demand of compliance from his followers, to the cartoons depicting him as taking hold of Bohra women and refusing them any freedoms or agency, the tone of the Reformists and the ‘secular media’ became suggestive of what the neo-conservative media, contemporarily, brands as the ‘Jihadist’ or ‘irrational Muslim’, abiding almost unthinkingly to the mandates of an Islamic clergy which struggles to cope with the complexities of modernity. For instance, about the re-imposition of *purdah* in 1979, one article claimed:

> Women without purdah, are not allowed to enter religious places like mausoleums, mosques etc. In one instance a daughter accompanying her mother without wearing a veil was disallowed from entering the mausoleum at Bhendi Bazaar. When her mother insisted that her daughter had yet to reach puberty, a physical check was carried out, perhaps inspired by the notorious incident at Heathrow Airport. 237

In response to the flurry of articles that had begun to appear, the Dawat finally decided to speak with the *Times of India*. Tayebally A. Davoodbhoy, a lawyer based in Mumbai and an official spokesman for the Saifi Foundation, a trust controlled by Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, vehemently dismissed the Nathwani Commission findings. “The Bohras subscribe to a code of beliefs”, Davoodbhoy noted, “there is no compulsion to remain one. There is a litmus test: either one must accept the authority of the religious head or not. How else can one million people scattered all over the globe be kept together?” Davoodbhoy maintained, “Islam prescribes a code for life in

its entirety. This covers the food you eat, births and burials, the relationship between husband and wife. But the very fact that there are 40–50 subsects (comprising both Shias and Sunnis) in Islam, shows that there are differences. What prevents the rebels from leaving the fold?” The year 1979, it seems, marked a turning point in the Dawat's patience with the Reformists. Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, however, remained silent and did not grant any press interviews, suggesting that the Dawoodi Bohras had rejected the bona fides of the Nathwani Commission and the matter needed to remain internal to the community. In that same 1979 interview, Davoodbhoy acknowledged, “there is no longer any meeting ground between the Bohras and the rebels”. 238

Summing Up

After the 1980s, the Reformist movement has effectively gone into decline and has not engaged in any outright controversy like that of Udaipur in the 1970s. The lack of overt conflict between the two camps, however, need not be assumed as an indication of a softening of approaches between the two. In fact, Asghar Ali Enginner, who has been the leading Reformist figure for over three decades, seems to have given up any hope of reconciliation. 239 The Dawat, on the other hand, especially in light of the success of the changes introduced in 1979, has extended the argument it held on to all throughout the 20th century. Indicative of an odd resolution, years after his initial press statements in response to the Nathwani Commission Report, Tayabally

238 Darryl D'Monte, ‘Should the Syedna Have Secular Powers? Looking at the Nathwani Commission’s findings on the Dawoodi Bohras’, Times of India, 6/5/1979. 239 By 1983 the reformist challenge had been subdued, although the flurry of articles and pleas continued for the government to intervene and address the reformist ‘plight’. The Congress administration continued to remain aloof even after Asghar Ali Engineer met with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1986. “Bohra Board meets Rajiv”, Poona Herald, 5/2/1986.
Davoodbhoy in a 1992 document reflected in a community pamphlet titled ‘Faith of the Dawoodi Bohras’:

Neither materialism nor the heresies of modernism are allowed to weaken the spiritual will. The Dai is the sentinel. He warns against passing intellectual fashions and tempting fads. The Dawoodi Bohra believes in the complete authority of the Dai over all areas of his life. The austere personality, discipline and administration of the Dai keeps the believers animated, contented and on the straight path. Authority is maintained, accepted and respected for centuries because of the legitimacy of the creed. So the confidence and reverence of the followers is preserved, increased and vitalized. Belief in the presence of the Dai in the pivotal role is the bedrock upon which the structure of the entire community is built.

Davoodbhoy continued, reaffirming the community’s dedication for the pre-eminence of Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin:

Dawat-e-Hadiyah for centuries, has applied the Fatimi philosophy to all the human problems, approached them in a perceptive manner, blended them with the essentials of the times so that the best in this world could be ensured hand in hand with eternal emancipation which was the end purpose of human destiny and Allah's divine will. Al-Dai-al-Mutlaq’s spiritual mission and the efficacy of his administration is one of the bonds that hold the community together as one entity. Al-Dai-al-Mutlaq enforces the purity of the followers and preservation of the entity. He expounds and interprets the law applicable to the faith which interpretation is final and binding. The management and administration of all properties, institutions and affairs of the community wherever situated is controlled and administered by al-Dai-al-Mutlaq or under his authority and written permission and approval. Al-Dai-al-Mutlaq is the Sole Trustee of the property of the community by virtue of his position as al-Dai-al-Mutlaq.²⁴⁰

Spanning the ever-increasing multiplicity of worldviews in late-colonial and post-Partition India, from the earliest of ‘reforms’ initiated by the 51st Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Taher Saifuddin, and then by his successor, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, it seems both had successfully bridged the gap between the impersonal and personal modes of Islam by emphasising ‘universal love’ and loyalty to the Dai-al-mutlaq. The very existence of the Reformists and their various ‘agendas’, led by Noman Contractor and Asghar Ali Engineer, had benefited Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin much more than the Dawat would like to publicly admit. While the Reformists sought to take advantage of the post-colonial ‘secular’ state by harnessing the print media

and civil society institutions in an attempt to undermine the authority of the High Priest, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin responded by embracing secularism, eschewing Islamic extremism and reasserting the ideals of self-reliance. The landmark 1979 Conference of Fatimi Knowledge (al-Multaqa al-Fatimi al-Ilmi) symbolised these measures, which were aimed at achieving greater cohesion within the community. In overall terms, the High Priest succeeded in re-invoking bonds of culture, traditions and the past embodied in community institutions. In effect, he addressed many of the issues raised by the Reformists, while never acknowledging their locus standi.

This chapter has not only sought to document how the Reformists freely mobilised the ‘secular’ print media in the 1970s, but also what was simultaneously occurring within the community. As the various community sources have highlighted, the Dawat, unlike the Reformist claim of being representative of a particular ‘medieval’ and ‘unchanging’ authoritarian structure, was in fact changing and evolving to the multiplicity of challenges that confronted it and were intensely committed to the renewal of the community. From these historical developments, a comparatively well-organised and socio-economically successful community has emerged in India and overseas. The community may be described as thoroughly modernised, forward-looking, and well integrated into (but as the following chapter highlights, identifiably distinct from) its social environments that, ranging from the violent events in the medieval history of the Fatimids and the numerous challenges of the 19th and 20th centuries, appear not to have obstructed this development.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Between Community and Secularism

By the early 1990s, a distinct, though imperceptible, reconfiguration of Dawoodi Bohra self-identity had taken place as the different waves of the Reformist challenge had been decisively dealt with, first by Syedna Taher Saifuddin (1915–1965) and later by his successor Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin (1965–present). Both Dai-al-mutlaqs responded to the challenges based on the changing dynamics within the community and the shifting contexts of the late colonial and post-colonial periods. Through these debates and challenges, the ‘community’ as a sociohistorical category then emerged as Janus-faced, neither traditional, nor modern, inhabiting both spheres at once. Both Dai-al-mutlaqs evoked bonds of culture, tradition and the past, but legitimised these dispositions in modern governmentalities as the previous chapters sought to highlight. In retrospect, the 20th century marked a crucial epoch of transition, as the community went about defining itself as deeply traditional and religious, yet modern and willing to embrace ‘change’.

While this thesis has sought to historicise the role of the various agendas of ‘reform’ in the 20th century, due to space limitations it has not been able to adequately consider yet another element which has shaped the necessity for change, i.e., the transnationalisation of the community. The Dawoodi Bohras had moved to various parts of the world, especially to East Africa, Ceylon and Malaya under British patronage aligned to colonial trading interests from the 19th century and increasingly from the 1980s to North America and Europe with younger generations seeking...
professional careers. It may be recalled that Syedna Taher Saifuddin had succeeded under colonial rule in consolidating the various communities spread across the Indian Ocean. Likewise, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin responded in the 1990s by reinventing the political structure as a constellation of communities organised in ever-widening circles.241

Unlike the ideal of the Gandhian ‘village’ where each unit would eventually become self-sufficient, the rhyzomic Dawoodi Bohra community structure operates almost as a pyramid, with its apex structure sustained by the base. This effective but anomalous apex came to be layered by a number of measure or identity markers initiated since the landmark 1979 Conference of Fatimi Knowledge (al-Multaqa al-Fatimi al-Ilmi). These ranged from prescribed dress codes, the issuance of certificates of orthopraxy, standardisation of the pilgrimage experience and mosque architecture and Internet-based websites that would be centred on devotion to the Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin. Whilst Jonah Blank has studied many of the measures listed above in depth, many gaps remain, especially with reference to the adoption of Fatimid architectural motifs at the newly built and restored community mosques around the world. The community’s use of the Internet as a technology for social

241 As the writing of this thesis was nearing completion, a new study by Jonah Steinberg was published on complex and intricate details of global Ismailism referring specifically to the Aga Khanis or Khojas, the sister community of the Bohras. Whilst the introductory chapter of this thesis has documented how both communities separated, both in terms of theological authority and leadership in 1094 AD, both the Bohras and ‘Ismailis’ (a terms which, is commonly used to refer to the followers of the Aga Khan) have designed and maintained very similar centralized structures across varied transnational contexts. In this regard, Steinberg notes, “The organizational dynamics of the Ismaili community raise important questions about the nature of citizenship and political identity at this moment in history. They present a basic challenge to theoretical and popular understandings of the state, of globalization and of Islam. They point to a transformation in the relationship between territory and allegiance, a fundamental shift in the possibilities for sociopolitical organization. The Ismailis are widely scattered across the planet, but their community’s institutional infrastructure is highly centralized and provides for subjects a vast array of services, symbols and social spaces. …In this way, the complex of Ismaili forms, processes, and structures seems to represent a new possibility for transnational social organization, for social participation beyond the nation-state, for citizenship without territory”. Jonah Steinberg, *Ismaili Modern, Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), p. 1.
cohesion is also a relatively ignored field, as the accompanying description relating to the *Ashura* celebrations of 2007 will highlight.

Perhaps we could begin this discussion with the contemporary Dawoodi Bohra community structure, which may be defined in metaphoric terms as an oceanic circle whose centre is filled with every Bohra ready to sacrifice for the community, with the Dai-al-mutlaq ready to perish for the circles which are spread across the world. The premise of such a structure is further layered by the various identity markers spread across time and space, till at last the entire community becomes one life composed of individuals. To adopt an analogy from Mahatma Gandhi, “the outer most circumference of this circle [read: Dawoodi Bohra *jamaats* spread across the world] would not possess the power to crush the inner circle [read: the centre of Dawat located in Bombay] but would strengthen it and gain strength from it”. Such a vision has animated the Dawoodi Bohra experiences of the 20th century, first during British rule and later in post-colonial India, overall exercising a powerful mobilising appeal as the previous chapters have shown.

With regard to the reform movement, the most distinct development one is able to discern is that various Reformists did not fully envision how their demands would figure within bourgeois civil society with which they identified and the modern state they relied upon for supporting their reformist agenda. Beginning from Adamji Peerbhai and his sons to Asghar Ali Engineer and Noman Contractor, it would be problematic to see them as located outside the community or as anomalous figures who stood completely apart from other Bohras who they more often than not labelled as ‘slaves of the Syedna’. As such, despite the valiant and mostly well-meaning
attempts of the Reformists, they failed to come to terms with the imperatives of 
organising sustained mass-mobilisations (something the Dawat succeeded in, time 
and again) while coming to terms with the bourgeois, legal and political orders of 
their time.

Both in terms of appeal and resources, the Dawat coped better than the Reformists by 
rejecting and accepting the colonial and the later post-colonial state. Not shunning 
the structures but also selectively accepting them, the Dawat and Syedna Mohammad 
Burhanuddin reckoned with intrusions into community affairs, locating themselves at 
the centre of modernising the Dawoodi Bohra self, but also mobilising the 
community as an ‘intervention’ and steering it as a whole towards consolidation. 
Recalling Syedi Najmuddin’s note about the Dawat policy of ‘apolitical quietism’, 
the community would be a nation within a world of nations “without the burden of 
managing physical geographical territories”.242 The community as an expression of 
collective life had undeniably become linked to the modern state. Rather than 
wishing away the state, it insisted and subjugated it to its pressures. The only demand 
the Dawat made from its followers was they embody loyalty to whichever state and 
regime they resided under, but also uphold the Dawoodi Bohra ‘identity markers’ 
listed earlier. And as the following notes on the Dawat’s initiatives since the 1990s 
and the observations of Ashura (2007) celebrations in Colombo, Sri Lanka highlight, 
the Dawoodi Bohras not only continue to negotiate the modern state, but re-inscribe 
it, representing an effort to create something new and authentic from the available 
and perhaps even the exotic.

242 Syedi Najmuddin, 75 Momentous Years in Retrospect, p. 15.
Writing the Dawoodi Bohra Past

As the community increasingly became transnational from the early 1990s, one of the new initiatives by the Dawat was the use of print publications, especially in the English language, which sought to systematically present a civilisational narrative of the community ranging over a millennia, and documenting the critical role played by the present Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin, in reinvigorating these traditions. In 2001, Shaikh Mustafa Abdulhussein led an editorial team in putting together a biography of the current Dai-al-mutlaq titled *Al-Dai Al-Fatimi, Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, An Illustrated Biography* which had first been published by the Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah Trust, London in 2001 and then distributed under the aegis of Oxford University Press. A first of its kind, especially in the English medium, the pictorial book features critical turning points in the community’s modern history such as the nas or ceremony of handing over of traditions from the 51st Dai-al-mutlaq Syedna Taher Saifuddin, to the current 52nd Dai-al-mutlaq Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin in 1934, to the reaffirmation of Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah, the Islamic university in Surat established by the 43rd Dai, Syedna AbdeAli Saifuddin, in 1814 as the centre of learning and knowledge production in the Dawoodi Bohra canon.

What makes the publication unique is that it not only lays out the major developments after the 1970s in terms of the different ‘reforms’ initiated by the

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243 The set of written communiqués that outline the Dai’s personal message to the members of the community along with the initiation of different reforms are titled *Missal- e sharif* which were issued from the mid-1970s until the late 1980s. The Bohra specificities witnessed today such as dress code and socioeconomic ethics may be located back to these key writings, which were originally published in *Lisana l-Dawat*, or ‘The language of the Da’wat’, which is written in Arabic script but is derived from Urdu, Gujarati, Persian and Arabic. For a discussion on *Lisana l-Dawat*, see Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, p. 143.

current Dai, but also that it may be considered as one of the first attempts by the Dawat to present its history in the English language. As such, the pictorial biography becomes a crucial resource for the community in terms of reinforcing the Dai’s authority transnationally, but is also indicative of forming a response to and reclaiming of the public sphere from the stereotypical narratives of Dawat excesses perpetuated by Reformists such as Asghar Ali Engineer. Similarly, an earlier and no less significant contribution which suggests this new drive of the Dawat is apparent when the same ‘Dawat affiliated author’ (to borrow a line from Jonah Blank), Shaikh Mustafa Abdulhussein, contributed three brief entries on Bohra-related topics to the *Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World* which was published in 1998. These entries seek to succinctly define whom the Bohras as a ‘community’ are, explain their historical and spiritual lineage, which is intimately linked to the Fatimids in Egypt, and more importantly highlight the office and achievements of the current Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin.

Most discerningly, it has been the Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah which has undertaken the role in publishing books on the Fatimid ancestry of the Dawoodi Bohras. Two recent English publications include *Al Aqmar: A Living Testimony to the Fatemieen* and *Al Juyushi: A Vision of the Fatemiyeen*, both authored by Jafar us Sadiq Mufaddal Saifuddin, a grandson of the current Dai, Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin. Drawing on a range of sources, from medieval Fatimid manuscripts contained at the Al-Jamea-Tus-Saifiyah libraries to sermons of the Dai-al-mutlaq, the impressive study, originally written in Arabic, goes on to note that the masjid complex of al Jame’ al Juyushi was built by *Amir al Juyush*, Badr al Jamali, in the year 1085 AD.\footnote{Saifuddin, *Al Juyushi*, p. 14.} Perched
on the edge of the Muqattam hills overlooking the city of al Qahera (Cairo), the structure had almost been ruined due to centuries of neglect. A massive restoration project was undertaken under Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin’s leadership during the 1980s and it reached completion in 1995. With the restoration work successfully carried out, *Al Juyushi* became the architectural and symbolic blue-print for other Bohra mosques and mausoleums that were to be built in India and elsewhere:

This leadership transferred to successive Doat [referring to the unbroken chain of succession from the Dais of Yemen to their Indian counterparts] and during the era of the 51st and 52nd Dai al Mutlaq, father and son both initiated a revolution in the transfer and replication of Fatemi art and architecture, to reflect the Fatemi legacy that they had inherited from their predecessors.246

Even prior to the *Al Juyush* restoration, one of the earliest architectural projects to adapt Fatemi architecture in India was the *Raudat Tahera*, the mausoleum of the 51st Dai, Syedna Taher Saifuddin, which is located in Bhindi Bazaar, Mumbai. Construction began in 1965 after the Dai's passing and was completed 11 years later. According to Shaikh Mustafa Abdulhussein, “it was the first mausoleum in India to lavishly imbibe Fatimi design principles, heralding a new age in building activity”. 247 Around the same period in the early 1960s, the 17th century mausoleum of the 32nd Dai executed by Aurangzeb, Syedna Kutbuddin Shahid, and its surrounding buildings were also restored with a hybrid design which sought to conserve the original Mughal-style architecture but also actively “infuse the freshness of Fatemi features”.248 The development of such a hybrid architectural method evolved further into the different mosque-building initiatives, which were undertaken by Bohras around the world.249

246 Ibid., p. 148.
248 Ibid., p. 58. Also see Saifuddin, *Al Juyushi*, p. 149–51 which details the use of different Fatimid architectural forms in the *Raudat Tahera*.
249 The Bohra-led restoration projects in Old Cairo have not been free of controversy. Paula Sanders, the only scholar to have studied the restoration projects in detail, dedicates an entire chapter to the controversy, which erupted in the 1990s, when architectural conservationists raised concerns. Sanders
Since taking office in 1965, the current Dai-al-mutlaq has built 140 new mosques across the world with about 90 new projects under construction to accommodate an increase in community numbers and establish mosques and community centres in the West where more and more Bohras are living. One of the first mosques to be built in the West was the al-Masjid al-Sayafi in Toronto, Canada that was completed in 1990. The al-Masjid al-Sayfi in Dallas, Texas which became a reality in 1998 won the 1999 Texas Society of Architects Design Award. In Southeast Asia, the al-Masjid al-Burhani in Klang, Malaysia was completed in 1997.

It may be posited that the diasporic Dawoodi Bohra negotiation of identity, symbolised through its architectural forms, lies between what could be referred to as a pre-modern transnational tradition and the spatial politics of the nation state. Architecture attempts to evoke and recreate an almost ‘ahistorical resilience’ of faith and belonging, and at the same time serves as a reminder that no analysis is complete without understanding how Bohras living in different parts of the world are subject to and negotiate different inequalities and dynamics related to class and race as the following discussion highlights.

notes, “the preservation community’s condemnation of Bohra restoration efforts is founded upon the internationally accepted standards of preservation as indicated in the Venice Charter”. For Sanders, however, the debate is not purely about architectural preservation or features, but “the collision of two indigenised colonial traditions – one Indian, one Egyptian – in Islamic Cairo. Both are the products of colonialism, but they emerge out of distinct colonial experiences with different histories and trajectories”. Overall, Sanders notes that after the Al Juyush restoration was complete, the Anglophone The Egyptian Gazette ran an appreciative article and editorial commending the transformation of the “the saddest building” on the street, which had once been the major thoroughfare of Fatimid Cairo. The Gazette concluded, “No one who saw the mosque before the Bohara [sic] group began its task would deny the improvement. Not only had the mosque been dilapidated for centuries but also the area in front of it had been the site of a large onion and garlic market. The Bohara sect did not go to Unesco for financial aid, or to their national government. This self help project would not be lost on well-to-do Muslims closer to home.” See Paula Sanders, Creating Medieval Cairo, Empire, Religion, and Architectural Preservation in Nineteenth-Century Egypt (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), pp. 115–126.

250 It needs to be noted that Mustafa Abdulhussein was writing in 2001. Newer masjids and mausoleums have been subsequently launched and completed. A good example is the completion of the masjid in the United States in Fremont, California (metropolitan San Francisco) in August 2005.
The seventh Dawoodi Bohra mosque to be opened in the United States of America was the *Anjuman-e-Ezzi* in Boston, Massachusetts, which was inaugurated in August 2004 with about 5,000 Dawoodi Bohras attending from all over the world to catch a glimpse of the Dai as he officiated over the opening ceremonies. However, before the North Billerica property where the mosque is located was procured, the local Dawoodi Bohra community had been meeting at a *markaz* at the First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. In the late 1990s, as a series of mosque projects were being launched across the United States and Canada, wealthy members of the American Dawoodi Bohra community approached the Dai-al-mutlaq, expressing an interest in initiating and funding mosque projects both in Massachusetts and New Jersey. Upon approval, the new mosque complexes did not merely contain a prayer area, but also spaces dedicated to educational or *madrasa* activities for the young, social spaces such as a *jamaatkhana* and even a housing development within the vicinity of the mosque. Like most migrant communities, South Asian *mohalla*-style landscapes were being mirrored in the architectural, social and spatial organisation of the Bohra diaspora with a steady recognition of the newer cultural setting the community found itself in. As the *Pluralism Project*, an initiative by Harvard University to document the changing religious landscape of the United States, notes:

In late 2000 the community found a plot of rural land to purchase in North Billerica and held a groundbreaking ceremony in July of 2001. On September 12, 2001, the application to buy the property was addressed in a town hall meeting and, despite requests by other religious communities for the plot, the Masjid received strong support from the council, local residents, and soon to be neighbors of the Islamic center. The building went up extremely quickly but construction was slowed by customs procedures for the importation

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252 The Pluralism Project, op. cit.
of architectural and decorative pieces from India and Egypt, extending the project into 2004.253

Most pertinent, then, is the question of the hybrid culture of post-colonial transnationality itself. Would it even be possible to contend and recast the category of ‘Dawoodi Bohra’ as a diasporic category centred on the role of Dai-al-mutlaq? This category affirms the centrality of the Dai-al-mutlaq by maintaining an affinity to symbolic markers, but also re-imagines newer contexts attentive to localised subjections.254 Identities emerge as attached to particular places by simultaneously conflating and collapsing the specific involvement of the diasporic individual and community in a system of hierarchically organised spaces. As such, the transnational Dawoodi Bohra public sphere, to borrow from Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, emerges:

In the pulverized space of postmodernity, space has not become irrelevant: it has become reterritorialized in a way that does not conform to the experience of space that characterized the era of high modernity. It is this that forces us to reconceptualize fundamentally the politics of community, solidarity, identity and cultural difference.255

Such a notion of transnationalism, in the Dawoodi Bohra case, becomes reconfigured into the idea of a single imagined community and their relationship vis-à-vis


254 From the relatively conducive atmosphere for mosque building in North America, John Eade in his article titled ‘The Islamization of Space in London’ documents the Bohra experience of building a mosque complex, first in Boston Manor, a neighbourhood close to Old Southall in London and then the subsequent decision to relocate the development to Northolt, a place several miles north of Southall, after protests by the local ‘white’ community. According to Eade, the space in Boston Manor acquired by the Bohra community in the early 1980s was a former Jewish youth club. This acquisition triggered off “a series of events that exposed the racist nature of some white residents’ opposition to Muslim centres”. At first the Conservative and Labour officials agreed to the use of the space by the Dawoodi Bohras. However, as protests and complaints by the local community continued to increase, the new Labour government in 1986 offered to buy the Boston Manor site in exchange for a more ‘appropriate’ location. The Northolt Masjid was completed in 1998 after nine years of bureaucratic and sociocultural challenges. As one of the community websites notes: “it stands testimony to the resilience of the Dawoodi Bohra faith regardless of environment, and it demonstrates the Bohra communities attachment to our new land of abode”. See Mark Crinson, ‘The Mosque and the Metropolis’ in Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (eds.) Orientalism’s Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 92 and Eade, ‘Nationalism, Community, and the Islamization of Space’, pp. 227-9.

imagined places through architecture and the spiritual authority of the Dai-al-mutlaq. In this reconfiguration, the native land has disappeared to the play of how religious longing becomes displaced to other places and is then perpetuated in simulacrum in the love of the Dai-al-mutlaq. Only love of the Dai-al-mutlaq could transcend the ever-increasing hierarchical and physical distance between a devout Bohra and an ever-mobile Dai. Distinctions between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’, ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ become blurred, only to be reaffirmed at the same time. The enterprise of propagating Bohra-ness qua Bohra-ness becomes, in the contemporary context, a very modern phenomenon. Rather than purely relying on members of the community coming to the Dai-al-mutlaq in Bombay, for instance, immediately identifiable architecture and readily accessible print media has bolstered and preserved the community as an institution with unprecedented ‘imaginary’ coherence.

**Transnational Convergence: Ashura Celebrations in Colombo, Sri Lanka (1428H)**

Unarguably, the most important ritual in the Dawoodi Bohra calendar is the commemoration of Ashura, which literally translated means the ten days of Muharram. When historicised, the event marks a defining moment in the Shia weltanschauung, the date on which Imam Hussain and seventy-two of his relatives and companions were slaughtered on the fields of Karbala in the year 61H/680AD.257

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256 Arthur Buehler makes a similar point about the Sufi Shaykh Jama'at Ali, who took advantage of the geographical mobility provided by the modern Indian rail network and print media to redefine the role of the Sufi pir in the early 20th century. See Buehler, ‘Current of Sufism in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Indo-Pakistan’.

257 In terms of the general study of the Shia of the sub-continent, which pertain specifically to the importance of Muharram in the Shia weltanschauung, a few studies need to be mentioned. The pioneer is definitely David Pinault who has published rigorously on the practice of Muharram by different Shia groups especially from Ladakh, Hyderabad and Darjeeling. Nadeem Hasnain, Sheikh Abrar Husain and Richard Wolf have all studied various ritualistic aspects of Muharram and noted how the event evolved historically over time and could not be essentialised as an event.
The month of Muharram also signifies the start of the new year and, even though the first of Muharram is celebrated with a hefty feast in each Dawoodi Bohra home, the following days are spent in overwhelming grief over the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. As David Pinault characterises it, “Ashura is an opportunity for Shi’a to atone for all the moral failings of the world—their own, those of their ancestors and those of ‘mankind’ in general”.  

More so than at any other time of the year, Muharram provides an opportunity for Dawoodi Bohras to develop and express a self-conscious ‘transnational’ solidarity. Each year, the Dai-al-mutlaq, Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, personally leads the Ashura in a different city with thousands of Bohras flying in from various parts of the world to participate in the waaz (a formal ceremony officiated over by the Dai). Over the past fifteen years, the Dai has chosen cities as far and varied as Mombasa, Colombo, Nairobi, Houston and Surat, implicitly reflecting how the community has spread transnationally, especially over the past two decades. Most pertinently, since the site of each year’s Ashura service is kept secret until only a few weeks before Muharram, most jamaats find themselves in a constant state of readiness to host the Syedna and other Bohras from around the world. As such, Muharram – the ‘event’ – becomes a commemoration where old histories are renewed and preserved as timeless (read the ‘Martyrdom of Hussain’), but also each new cityscape becomes a terrain where the Bohra community’s history is re-inscribed in its willing embrace of

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commemorated by the Shias only. Jim Masselos in ‘Change and Custom in the Format of the Bombay Mohurrum during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’ notes that the Bohras figured in the Bombay landscape and their practice of Muharram included ‘bloody’ matam, which made them notorious, although much of it happened in their ‘own’ mosques in various localities across Bombay such as Bhindi Bazaar. Pinault, The Shiites, p. 106.

258 Ibid.
‘transnationalism’. In the context of this paper, Robin Cohen’s observation seems most pertinent:

Transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination. 259

As such, this multitudinous convergence of Bohras raises many complex questions: from notions of how bodies and knowledge transfer and produce themselves across religious, political and cultural spaces (or ‘scapes’ as Appadurai conceptualises it) in the late-modern context, to the provisional act of readiness which each local jamaat undertakes in terms of hosting Bohras from all over the world. Both of the above concerns, it should be asserted, are interrelated and only raise more questions of how such small, yet mobile communities, preserve and perpetuate a sense of commonness and belonging amidst scholarly assertions of ‘fragmenting’ globalised identities. 260

In this section, however, I focus primarily on one operational element of Muharram, i.e., how the Bohras use modern communications technology not merely to organise but also to create a community history during and after the event of Muharram. In the ensuing paragraphs, I attempt to unravel this ‘transnational’ event as a site where identities are negotiated time and time again by analysing two contemporary sources, which have documented the Ashura of 1428H/2007AD in Colombo, Sri Lanka. At the outset, however, I would like to note that any attempt to analyse these sources in

260 My aim here is not to counter dominant scholarly assertions, especially within Cultural Studies, where considerable debates have raged about how transnational identities are marked by dual or multiple identifications. For instance, see Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Christina Szanton Blanc, ‘Transnationalism: a new analytical framework for understanding migration’, in Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Christina Szanton Blanc (eds), Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992), pp. 1-24. What I am trying to assert here is that, given how this condition of transnationalism is comprised of ‘ever-changing representations’, they inadvertently provide an ‘imaginary coherence’ for a set of identities which are in a constant state of flux across political and cultural borders. See Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’ in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), Identity: Community, Culture, Difference (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-37.
A Token of Remembrance: Ashura 1428/2007

The DVD compilation of the Dai’s coming to Colombo in 2007 documents the Syedna’s visit from the moment of landing at Bandaranaike International Airport to the various activities he attended to and presided over till his final departure on May 15, 2007. The main purpose of the DVD it seems was to document the cultural activities of the Ashura from the daily waaz sessions to the official nikah ceremonies that are held under the auspices of the Dai after the official commemoration of Ashura had ended. Thereafter, this DVD was disseminated as a ‘token of remembrance’ to almost every Dawoodi Bohra home, not just in Colombo but also across the world. As such the visual content of the video, from fleeting representations of devout Bohras attending daily waaz sessions to images of the Syedna meeting the President, ministers and other dignitaries of Sri Lanka, becomes a critical tool in the community’s cultural production. This flow of cultural media images alludes to what Gayatri Spivak describes as the “discourse of cultural specificity and difference, packaged for transnational consumption” particularly thorough the medium of “microelectronic transnationalism”.

The film depicts children of the community carrying the Sri Lankan flag, while others carry placards reading ‘Ya-Ali’, ‘Ya-Hussain’ and ‘Long Live Dr Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin’ in a procession to celebrate the arrival of the Dai in Colombo, creating the greatest ambivalences in terms of how one should understand

the Bohras, because, as Appadurai and Breckenridge comment, “in the electronic media in particular, the politics of desire and imagination are always in contestation with the politics of heritage and nostalgia”.263 As such the viewing potential of the DVD and every individual Bohra’s feeling of a sense of ‘Bohra-ness’ and belonging is not restricted to just those who were able to attend Ashura in Colombo, but is extended (i.e., electronically) even to those who were unable to attend. In this way, the transnationalisation of the community that the Bohra clergy was concerned about two decades ago seems to have been displaced into a transnational network that is consolidated with the aid of media technologies that implicitly emphasise allegiance to specific countries of residence, but also seeks to reinforce loyalty to the Dai’s spiritual leadership and authority through visual narratives and discourse.

Electronic ‘Pastiche’: www.malumaat.com

This transnational network is further consolidated with the use of the Internet. Although the Dawat endorses only two websites as presenting the ‘official’ stance on community matters, namely, www.mumineen.org and www.malumaat.com, I have chosen to focus only on the latter’s coverage of the 2007 Ashura commemorations in Colombo.264 The first story the reader encounters once she/he has entered the ‘archives’ page of www.malumaat.com (which is systematically sorted by year and month) is a headline: Aqa Maula TUS meets with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa at Temple Trees, followed by three to four photographs of the meeting. Thereafter, the reader discovers ten links, each leading to more photographs of the daily waaz proceedings, with a special section for the Ashura day proceedings,

containing not just images of the Dai and multitudes of Bohras, but also short audio-visual clips of various murashiyas (hymns) and munajaats (poetry) on the martyrdom of Hussain.

The above observation may not be unique in terms of various religious and cultural communities mobilising across the Internet. But what is most discerning is how the Bohra experience of ‘virtuality’ is driven in terms of a layout, which lacks ‘textual narrative’ except for short captions provided alongside the hundreds of photographs that document Ashura 2007. Addressed through their reflection of a larger practice within the dominant discourse of Bohra identity formation, which centres on the martyrdom of Hussain, the lack of accompanying textual narrative alludes to how the ten days of Muharram and Ashura unfold through a steady stream of images which at once bring together the activities of the Dai-al-mutlaq with the larger narrative of Imam Hussain’s martyrdom that each and every Bohra seeks to identify with.265

As a result, Imam Hussain’s martyrdom is re-produced as an unspoken assumption and as a lived reality of the Dai and every Bohra. This is constantly re-worked every year, with every new city and every new photograph. As the scape may register a shift, Hussain’s martyrdom (channelled through the Dai), however, remains the basic conceptual social reality, which is constantly invoked to encourage a sense of belonging to a community in five continents. Such a constant cycle of ‘re-signification’ is located within the photographic narratives as they are ‘uploaded’ and made available to Bohras across the world.

265 Even beyond the commemoration of Ashura, for instance, any majlis (in Bohra terminology, any gathering less formal than a waaz) ends with the narration of Hussain’s martyrdom– be it a marriage ceremony or the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed or urus of one of the previous fifty-one Dais.
This almost ‘artistic pastiche’ in representing religiosity raises more questions than this thesis can seek to answer. However, what is pertinent is how the Internet as a medium becomes crucial for the late-modern institutional framework instituted by Syedna Mohammad Burhanuddin. Firstly, as the various jamaats remain transnationally spread, they are still connected through the World Wide Web; and secondly, the external boundaries of the network are open such that new nodes and new links can always be added as Bohras continue to migrate to different parts of the world. Given such an incremental and ‘fluid’ accessibility, the Bohras seem to have managed to harness the potential of new media technologies in fostering religious membership and belonging by articulating discourses and organising movements (in this case, of Ashura) aimed at invoking and then preserving a global religious consciousness as a crucial element of their identity mix.

The central issue is that a reconfiguration or reconceptualisation has taken place over the 20th century. With the Reformist voices successfully quelled, the community has consolidated itself across diverse contexts. For transnational convergences such as Ashura, with every new cityscape that witnesses the convergence of Bohras, what had been an annual mourning of the martyrdom of Hussain and mediation between heaven and earth around a largely immobile spiritual centre, has now become a ritualistic deedar (‘witnessing’). Every individual seeker is blessed with seeing and being seen by the Dai-al-mutlaq, both in physical and virtual manners, enacting the ever-contracting hierarchical distance between the Dai-al-mutlaq and the seeking Bohra. This also reinforces the understanding that with the love for the Dai, everything else, including salvation, follows. The deedar of the Dai is then cast into
and draws upon the religious networks that sustain the convergence of Muharram both in material and electronic forms. Dedicated websites enable the proliferation of real-time images of the Dai's movements, and while this may appear to suggest a form of democratisation or depersonalisation that often is equated with scripturalism or access to texts (in this case, the Internet), we may posit that each and every Bohra who witnesses the steady flow of images is plugged into and participates in a process of sustaining the community which is centred on devotion to the ‘intercessionary saint’ by emphasising love to the Dai, or as Arthur Buehler notes in the case of the 20th century Punjabi Sufi pir Jama't Ali, “The goal itself became love.”266

266 Buehler, ‘Currents of Sufism in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Indo-Pakistan’, p. 300.
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