Chapter 11

The Dāʾūdī Bohras (Mustaʿlī Ismāʿīlī Shīʿa)

Using Modernity to Institutionalise a Fāṭimid Tradition

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Introduction

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

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

¹ This chapter is adapted from sections of my monograph, Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity Among the Dāʾūdī Bohras (2001), supplemented by my analysis of the recent leadership schism within the Dāʾūdī Bohra community (2017). A brief history of the denomination with more complete sourcing is found in Blank 2001: 14–52.
in the millennium since, most notably a split in the eleventh/sixteenth century between the followers of two rival clerical leaders named Dāʾūd ibn Qūṭb Shāh and Sulaymān ibn Ḥasan (Mausam-e Bahar 1884: 343–345; Schimmel 1980: 70–71). While the small sect of Sulaymānī Bohras has maintained a separate chain of clerical succession ever since (as has the still-smaller group of ‘Alawī Bohras, product of a subsequent schism), the term ‘Bohra’ is commonly used as shorthand for ‘Dāʾūdī Bohra’, the predominant group. While there is some tension between the group’s ethnic and spiritual definition—that is, whether the community should be bounded by Mustaʿlī Ismāʿīlī doctrine (as the clergy maintains) or by shared ancestry (as some dissidents argue)—the overlap of ethnicity and religion is close enough to make these definitions largely interchangeable. As a practical matter, the term ‘Bohra’ is generally taken by members of the community to mean “a practitioner of Mustaʿlī Ismāʿīlī Islam, who happens to be of Gujarati descent” (Abdulhussein 1995: 225; Davoodbhoy 1992a: 4). It is in that sense that the term will be used in this chapter.

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

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

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

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

2 History and Doctrine

The roots of the Bohra faith date to the Fāṭimid Caliphate, the most celebrated Ismāʿīlī dynasty in history. Like the later divisions within the Bohra lineage, the great schism of Shiʿa Islam into rival Ismāʿīlī and Ithnā ʿAsharī (‘Twelver’)
branches grew out of a succession dispute: Ismāʿīlīs believe that the *imāmate* was passed to the descendants of Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq’s son Ismāʿīl (b. circa 100/720), while the Ithnā ʿAsharīyya believe it was inherited by the descendants of Ismāʿīl’s brother Musa. Modern scholars have noted that the idea of an *imāmate* passed down in secret from second/eighth to the fourth/tenth centuries (as Bohras today believe)⁴ seems to have been first articulated during Fāṭimid times: if such a doctrine was propagated contemporaneously, the veil of *taqiyya*—a doctrine accepted by most Shi‘a denominations permitting public dissimulation during times of extreme danger to the community (Nasr 2016: 54)—prevented it from appearing in the documentary record.⁵ The *dawr al-satr* (period of concealment) ended with ʿAbd Allāh al-Mahdī, who was proclaimed *imām* in 286/899, and caliph eleven years later (Stern 1983: 96ff; Tabataba’i 1975: 81–82).

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

Following Imām Mustaʿṣir’s death, the Ismāʿīlīs experienced another succession schism: Those who believe that the *imām* bestowed *nass* on his younger

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

⁵ Reliable historical dates are unavailable for the three hidden *imāms*: Abdullah al-Mastur, Ahmad al-Mastur ibn Abdullah, and Husain ibn Ahmad. When such dates are provided by much later sources, they are so arbitrary as to be virtually meaningless. Farhad Daftary (1990: 126) states, “the early Ismailis, or at least by their overwhelming majority, originally recognised only seven Imams.” When al-Mahdi declared himself the *imām*, Daftary argues, he retroactively declared his three predecessors *imām* as well.
son Mustaʿlī would become known as Western Ismāʿīlis (because of their initial strength in Egypt and Yemen), and are today represented by the Bohras. Those who believe that nass was bestowed on the elder son Nizār would become known as Eastern Ismāʿīlis (because of their initial strength in Syria and Iran) and are today represented by the Khojahs and other followers of the Aga Khan. The Western Ismāʿīlis won out in the short term: Mustaʿlī was put on the throne by a powerful wazīr, and Nizār died in prison. But the First Crusade shook the weakened caliphate, and the line of the twenty-one imāms recognised by the Bohras ends with Mustaʿlī's infant grandson Abū l-Qāsim Ṭayyib.6

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

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

6 Because they take Imām Ṭayyib as the last unconcealed imām, the Bohras are technically Ṭayyibi Mustaʿlī Ismāʿīlis, to distinguish them from the extinct branch of Ḥāfiẓi Mustaʿlī Ismāʿīlis.

7 Al-Ḥāfiẓ passed the caliphate to his son and two grandsons, but their status as imāms (while contemporaneously acknowledged by the Fāṭimids for half a century) is unrecognised by either of the two surviving Ismāʿīli denominations. Ḥāfiẓi Mustaʿlī Ismāʿīlism did not survive long after the fall of the dynasty: the last Fāṭimid wazīr finally dispensed with the fiction of an independent caliphate, and established his own dynasty under the auspices of the ‘Abbāsid empire: Śalāḥ al-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb, better known to the West as Saladin, officially ended Fāṭimid rule by having the khutba read in the name of the ‘Abbāsid caliph in 567/1171. On the death of his master Nūr al-Dīn, he established the Ayyūbid dynasty in his own name.
to the highest visible title (apart from her own) of the Fāṭimid court-in-exile. When she died six years later, the office of ḥujjat died with her, leaving the Dāʿī al-muṭlaq the peak of the clerical order. Since that time, each succeeding Dāʿī has served as the titular head of a Fāṭimid dynasty that has never theoretically ended (Hamdani 1976: 92–99; Ivanow 1942: 37–38).

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

The first Gujarati Dāʿī was Yusuf Najmuddin ibn Sulaymān, who assumed office in 946/1539: his Yemeni predecessor had been so impressed by the Indian cleric’s scholarly abilities that he passed over all of the Arabs in the court. Syedna Yusuf’s successor, Jalal ibn Hasan, served only a few months, but he transferred the seat of the daʿwat to India permanently. Syedna Jalal was also an Indian by birth, as would be all future Dāʿīs (with the exception of one Yemeni who served for a single year in the eleventh/seventeenth century). The decision to move the daʿwat was influenced not only by the importance of the Indian community, but also by the fall of Yemen to the Ottoman Turks and the persecution of Ismāʿīlis that followed (Ali 1954, 74–77; Poonawala 1977: 137–143).

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

The fact that Ismāʿīlis had no ties to the Deccan sultans (or to these kingdoms’ IthnāʿAsharī patron in Safavid Iran) earned them no mitigation of Aurangzeb’s harsh treatment. Bohras were forbidden to observe Eid-ul Fitr and other rites according to their own calendar, to make pilgrimages to their
shrines, or to practice Ashura rituals. Sunnī *pesh-imāms* were reintroduced to all mosques, and any congregants failing to attend were punished with flogging. All marriage and death ceremonies were required to be performed by Sunnī *qādīs* rather than Bohra ‘āmils, and large sums of money (both official taxes and unofficial bribes) were extorted from community members at every possible occasion (Misra 1964: 32–38, following Abdul Husain 1920: 20–21, 38–39).

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

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

Modern-day Mumbai is the capital of the state of Maharashtra, but until the creation of this state in 1969 the city had always been at least as closely linked to Gujarati as to Marathi culture. In this cosmopolitan milieu, the Bohras were able to leave behind their stigmatised minority status and become full-fledged members of society. While the bulk of the community opened shops and small businesses, from the late colonial period onward a substantial number entered banking and larger industry as well. The Dāʿūdī Bohras were so successful in their new environment, both in Bombay itself and in the various Gujarati cities administered by the Bombay Presidency, that by the end of the century a colonial gazetteer would write, “the trading Bohoras, originally all Shīʿa of the Mustaʿlī branch of the great Ismaili sect, are the richest and most prosperous class of Musalmans in Gujarat” (Campbell 1899: 24).

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

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

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

Syedna Taher Saifuddin conveyed *nass* on his son early enough to avoid a succession dispute, and Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin continued his father’s program through his own forty-nine-year reign. Inside the community, it is sometimes said that Syedna Taher Saifuddin focused more on the modernisation side of the equation, Syedna Burhanuddin more on the Islamisation side. But both leaders saw the two sides as halves to a complementary whole: Both aimed to use the tools of modernity to re-invigorate Bohra society and
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faith. Not all members of the community support this ambitious program—the strand of overt and covert dissidence has remained present to this day—but few would deny that it has been very successful in achieving its goals. The death of Syedna Burhanuddin in 1435/2014 led to another disputed succession, raising the prospect of another community schism. It is noteworthy, however, that both camps remain firmly committed to the modernisation and Islamisation programme carried out over the past century (see Blank 2017).

3 Centrality of the Dāʿī al-muṭlaq as Distinguishing Feature of Bohra Practice

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

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

Shīʿa theology in general, and Ismāʿīlī theology in particular, is based on taʾwīl (esoteric interpretation of scripture). This doctrine holds that beneath the ẓāhir (apparent) aspect of revealed text and religious doctrine, a deeper and more important bāṭin truth lies hidden. While any Muslim can try to learn the ẓāhir by reading the Qurʾān and other religious texts, only a muʿmin (true believer) can hope to uncover the bāṭin learning with the guidance of the imām or his representative. Ismāʿīlis regard the entirety of the Qurʾān as a text with hidden allegorical interpretations underlying even the most
seemingly straightforward of passages (Corbin 1984; Fyzee 1965; al-Hamdani 1933; Stern 1983).

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

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

From the earliest times to the present, there has been relatively little Ismāʿīlī literature devoted to tafsīr (external explication) of the Qurʾān or other texts: the imām is regarded as a ‘speaking Qurʾān’ whose presence in the world makes tomes of ordinary exegesis unnecessary. During the imām’s concealment, such authoritative interpretation is carried out by his legitimately delegated Dāʿīs. One major result of this has been the liberation of Ismāʿīlī thought from the confines of strictly proscribed text: while much Sunni intellectual debates (at least outside of certain Sufi circles) has been bounded by a literalist interpretation of the Qurʾān and aḥadīth, Ismāʿīlī speculation has been much less constrained. For the brief period of the Muʿtazila ascendancy during the ʿAbbāsid caliphate, Sunni intelligentsia experienced a similar burst of speculative energy. With the triumph of the Hanbalites and the “closing of the door of ijtihād,” however, such experimentation fell to disfavor. In general Sunni intellectual exploration has been circumscribed by text and tradition, while Ismāʿīlī
philosophy has been free to draw on a far wider range of sources (both internal and external) for inspiration (Corbin 1984; Daftary 1990: 239–241).

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

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

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

The Dāʿī embodies personal charisma to a degree very rarely found in Islam outside of certain Sufi traditions (Blank 2000: 474–475). This charisma is transferable to a wide array of objects: any item touched by the Dāʿī is believed to have ingrained merit. Not only did eighty-four per cent of survey respondents report having asked the Dāʿī to name their children, but a great many reported seeking scraps from his discarded clothing for their newborn babies’ chatti garments. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported regularly seeking the blessing of Syedna or his ʿāmils for their home or business, through the ritual of
The Dāʾī confers this blessing by inscribing the word bismillāh (Arabic for the words ‘In the name of God’) or its numerical stand-in (‘786’) on a plaque mounted on the wall of a new house or office, or on the first page of an account book for a new fiscal year.

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

4 Program of Modernisation and Islamisation

4.1 Modernisation

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

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

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

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

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

Computer ownership, use, and literacy are far more prevalent in the Bohra community than in most other segments of Indian society. At time the survey associated with this study’s fieldwork was conducted, the rate of computer ownership among the Bohra respondents was more than twenty times the national rate of Indonesia, more than ten times that of Thailand, nearly quadruple that of Malaysia, about fifty per cent higher than those of Taiwan or South Korea, and almost on par with that Japan. The rate for Karachi’s Bohras was marginally higher than that of ultra-high-tech Singapore. Respondents were a whopping seventy-two times as likely to own a computer as was the contemporary norm in India (see Blank 2001: 176–178). Rates for Bohras and non-Bohras alike have risen since.
Bohras were on the Internet practically as soon as it became globally operational. By January 1995, three linked email networks had been initiated, and in their first year of operation grew to include several hundred subscribers in Canada, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Britain, and Egypt. One network was “a forum for mu’mineen [muʾminīn] professionals” to facilitate business ties, a second was for social or general messages, and the third was devoted to spiritual discussions. While not officially set up by the da’wat, its stated purpose is the dissemination of spiritual material. By the late 1990s, email had replaced the postal service as the primary pathway for Bohras to seek guidance or favors from the Dā‘ī al-muṭlaq. Videos of important religious rituals were distributed as soon as broadband service made such access possible, and soon every appearance by the Dā‘ī al-muṭlaq was viewable on YouTube within minutes of the rite’s conclusion. Additional streaming services like Periscope now permit such rituals to be viewed in real time. A member of the community in Mombasa can keep track of her co-religionists’ activities in the United States or Canada (to name just two) simply by checking the groups’ Twitter feeds (@Bohras_USA and @Bohras_Canada).

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

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

8 Supporters of the Dā‘î’s son Mufaddal Saifuddin say that nass was given privately while Syedna Burhanuddin was in a London hospital, and reiterated at a public ceremony several months later. Supporters of the Dā‘î’s brother Khuzaima Qutbuddin say that Syedna Burhanuddin had secretly conveyed nass decades earlier, and that his public designation of his son Mufaddal is invalid since he had recently suffered a stroke. Each camp cites a video of the public designation to support its own interpretation of the event. The video of the ceremony, which took place on 19 Rajab 1432/21 June 2011, is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ge9wG2Irv-Q, accessed 31/10/2018. There is a more detailed discussion of this schism in Blank (2017). Khuzaima Qutbuddin passed away on 30 March 2016, after conferring nass (his supporters believe) on his son Taher Fakhruddin.

9 Even the nomenclature of the practice is controversial: Opponents often regard the first three terms as offensive, because they see these names as conferring an Islamic patina to a non-Islamic action; proponents object to the third, as well as to its ideologically-laden
While circumcision of boys is practiced almost universally throughout the Muslim world, the custom has no widely-accepted female counterpart (Boyle 2005). Before the Internet era, it was nearly impossible to offer an informed response to the question of whether such a practice occurred occasionally, frequently or almost never among the Dāʾūḍī Bohras: During my initial fieldwork, all reports of which I became aware (whether through personal informants or mentions in the local press) were non-specific, and second- or third-hand. That is no longer the case:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

12 Nearly one-quarter (twenty-three per cent) of those living in India are shown in wholly untraditional ways (generally in Western clothing with no beard, but occasionally in Indian garb unassociated with Bohras). Well over another quarter (twenty-nine per cent) wear Bohra headgear but no beard, indicating easy mobility between the traditional and nontraditional worlds: all of these men could put on a *topi* for a photograph or for official occasions, but would blend perfectly well into the Indian or Western mainstream as soon as they removed their headgear. For Bohras living outside of India, only sixteen per cent had an appearance that would be acceptable today. When figures for India and other countries are combined, the population of over three thousand individuals breaks down roughly into thirds: thirty-seven per cent have a traditional appearance, thirty per cent have semi-traditional appearance (community headgear, but no beards), and thirty-three per cent offer wholly non-traditional self-presentation.
If such a work were published today, it is highly unlikely that any of the more than three thousand men pictured would present themselves without a beard or dressed in anything other than uniform topi/kurta. In every da’wat publication examined for this study, and every Bohra function attended during the course of the fieldwork on which it is based, adherence to mandated community dress codes has been close to universal. Dress is but one element of orthopraxy—but it is among the most visible, and stands as a statistically-measurable proxy for a much wider range of behaviors (including fasting during Ramadan, avoidance of alcohol, and communal prayer) that the Bohra da’wat monitors with similar attention.

5 Conclusion

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

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

13 The Jamea-tus-Saifiyah was first established, in a less ambitious form, in the 1224/1814 in Surat, and became the cause of considerable contention between the clergy and dissident reformists before the da’wat established full control in the fourteenth/twentieth century. The Karachi campus was inaugurated in 1404/1983. Construction of the Nairobi campus
level of education attained by any member of their household, ninety-one per cent of respondents to the survey cited secondary school or higher; only fifty-eight per cent of the same families reported such educational levels for their previous generation. Such a survey, if carried out today, would almost certainly yield even higher numbers.

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

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

References


was initiated by Syedna Burhanuddin, and the new institution was inaugurated by Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin on 23 Rajab 1438/20 April 2017.


