

Imami Khojas

Khojas trace their ancestry to India, more specifically to Sind, Punjab, Gujarat, and Kutch where their ancestors were converted to Islam in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. A Persian Isma‘ili missionary, Pir Sadr al-Din (d. 1369 or 1416) was an Isma‘ili *da‘i* (proselyte) who is credited with the mass conversion of the Khojas from the Lohanas, a Hindu caste living predominantly in the Gujarat province in India.

Before their conversion, the Khojas reportedly formed the Lohana community, having descended from the mythic Indian king, Rama’s son, Lav. Due to this, they were known as *thakkar*, which is also a phonetic corruption of the Indian title *thakor* (lord, master). The word is a close Indian approximation to the title given by Pir Sadr al-Din, *khwaja*.

Pir Sadr al-Din laid the basis for the communal organization of the Khojas by building the first three *jamaat khanas* (assembly or prayer halls) and appointing their *mukhis* (leaders). Over a period of time, several pirs or spiritual leaders came after Sadr al-Din and gradually, the beliefs crystallized to those of the Isma‘ili Nizari faith; particularly after the arrival of the Agha Khan Hasan ‘Ali Shah from Iran to India in 1840. By this time, the Khojas had spread all over Kutch and Gujarat. Some had also moved to Bombay and Muscat. They paid their dues to the Isma‘ili Jamaat Khana and lived harmoniously within their society.

The arrival of the Agha Khan Hasan ‘Ali Shah in India led to an escalation of earlier disputes within the Khoja community about the rights of the imam. The genesis of the split probably goes back to 1829 when a rich merchant, Habib Ibrahim, refused to pay a religious tax known as *dasond* (the tenth) to the Isma‘ili administrative authorities. In 1866, a group of disenchanting members filed a suit against the Agha Khan in court regarding the usage of

community finances. The judgment of Sir Joseph Arnold in a lawsuit fully upheld the rights and authority of the Agha Khan, leading to the dissidents separating themselves from the Isma‘ili community. They were known as Sunni Khojas. Later dissidents, seceding in 1877 and 1901, formed the Ithna-asheri (Twelver) Khoja communities in Bombay and East Africa.

In the early 1900s, some Twelver Shi‘i Khojas went to visit the holy sites in Iraq. During their discussions with a prominent scholar of the time, Shaykh Zayn al-‘Abidin al-Mazandarani, they asked him to send a scholar to India so that he could teach them the basic principles of Islam. At the request of Shaykh al-Mazandarani, Mulla Qadir Hussein arrived in India and taught some Khoja families the essentials of Twelver Shi‘i faith. From these few families the community has now grown globally to over 100,000 members.

An important figure in the conversion to and dissemination of Twelver Shi‘i teachings was Haji Gulamali Haji Isma‘il, popularly known as Haji Naji. He is credited with translating Arabic and Persian religious texts to Gujarati, a language spoken by most Khoja Shi‘is of the time. Many of these texts articulated Shi‘i beliefs and practices. His translation of a manual of Islamic ethics, called *Mi‘raj al- Sa‘ada* is known to have transformed the lives of many Khoja Shi‘is in Africa .

Many Khojas living in India migrated to East Africa in the 1840s. They left India due to famine and poverty and by the prospect of better financial opportunities in Africa. In a census carried out by the Khoja community in the late 1950s and then repeated during the 1960s, the Khoja Shi‘is in East Africa, Somalia, Congo, Mauritius, Reunion Island, and Madagascar numbered around 20,000.

The majority of the Khoja Shi‘is migrated to the West in 1972-3, a result of the East African governments’ policies that favored Africans in the social, economic, and educational

spheres. These measures included the nationalization of Asian-owned enterprises and buildings. The measures also stressed better education for Africans, often at the expense of the Indian community. Increased immigration by the Khoja community was also precipitated by the revolution in Zanzibar in 1964 and the expulsion of Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin in 1972. Khoja Shi'is from Tanzania and Kenya also migrated due to the inimical socio-political conditions in their homeland countries.

Khoja Shi'is are known for their sense of discipline and organization. In 1976, under the astute leadership of Asghar M.M. Jaffer (d. 2000), they established a world body called the World Federation of Khoja Shi'a Ithna'asheri Jamaat in England. With the help of this world body, they have established centers of worship throughout the world. The Federation's stated aim is to act as an umbrella organization, catering to the needs of the world Khoja community. The largest Khoja congregation in America is in New York. There are other Khoja centers in cities like Los Angeles, Orlando, Minneapolis, and Allentown.

In an attempt to unite the diverse ethnic Shi'i groups in North America, the North American Shi'a Ithnaasheri Muslim Communities (NASIMCO) was established by the Khoja community in Toronto in 1980. Twenty-four Canadian and American Shi'i communities comprising of about 20,000 people are currently members of NASIMCO. This is an umbrella organization that helps co-ordinate Shi'i religious and social activities in North America. It is open to all Shi'i organizations regardless of their ethnic or cultural background though it is predominately made up of members of East-African derivation. Its stated aim is to propagate Islam according to the Twelver Shi'i school of law (called the Ja'fari school).

Among the goals of NASIMCO is to help establish religious schools for community members, to assist in publishing books and journals, and to educate non-Muslims regarding the

tenets, doctrines, and practices of Islam. It is responsible for providing necessary religious guidance through regular contact with Shi'i centers of learning in Iran and Iraq, as well as financial support for capital projects undertaken by individual member communities. By acting as an umbrella organization, NASIMCO has also attempted to foster unity and promote religious, educational, social, and economic amelioration of the communities. It has also financially supported the establishment of new centers in North America.

Khoja Shi'is have created an efficient religious education system for weekends. The most active wing of NASIMCO is the Islamic Education Board (IEB). In the 1990s, the IEB hosted bi-annual conferences and updated the syllabi for the *madaris* (pl. of *madrasa* - religious schools). It coordinated educational activities between the different Sunday schools in North America, held regular workshops and published newsletters for the benefit of *madrasa* teachers. The IEB has also introduced teaching techniques and newer courses like comparative religions and Islam in Modern Times.