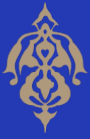
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KHOJA
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KHOJA

KHOJA, a name referring to a cluster of communities belonging to a caste predominant in the region of Sind (Pakistan) and Gujarat (India) and also present as small diasporic communities scattered across East Africa and Western Europe as well as North America. Khoja traditions assert that they belonged originally to two trading castes, the Lohanas and Bhatias. When Pir Ṣadr-al-Din, a 15th-century preacher saint of Persian origin, initiated them into the *satpanth* ‘true path’, he is said to have given them the title *ḵ*^{v} *ā ja* (a Persian term of which Khoja is a corruption) to replace the original Lohana *thākkur,* both meaning “lord” or “master” (*Gazetteer*, p. 39; Enthoven, p. 220). Satpanth as preached by Pir Ṣadr-al-Din, through devotional hymns called *ginān*s (see ISMAʿILISM xiv. ISMAʿILISM IN GINĀN LITERATURE), identified Kalki, the messianic tenth incarnation (*dasa avatāra)* of the Hindu deity Vishnu, with ʿAli (q.v.), the first Shiʿi Imam, and his descendants. In the *ginān*s, the *pir* represented himself as a guide who knew the whereabouts of the long-awaited tenth *avatāra* of Vishnu—a descendant of ʿAli, the Nezāri Ismaʿili Imam (see ISMAʿILISM iii. ISMAʿILI HISTORY) living in the west (Iran). In keeping with the highly polythetic nature of Satpanth, the Imam was also represented in the *ginān*s through interlocking discourses drawn from Sufi, the Indic *sant,* and *bhakti* (devotional) tradition (Asani, 2011, pp. 97-102).

Evidence from British Gazetteers indicates that in early 19th-century Bombay the Khojas functioned socially as an endogamous caste. They had regular meetings to which adult males were summoned by a crier who went through the streets in Khoja neighborhoods. At such gatherings, all kinds of disputes,

including those related to marriages, were presented for arbitration. In case of violation of caste norms, members could vote on excommunication. There were also special caste dinners for which the group, as a corporate entity, owned its own cooking utensils (Masselos, pp. 1-20). In nomenclature and social customs, the Khojas did not differ much from their Lohana and Bhatia brethren. Like other mercantile communities in the region, they had their own writing system, Khojki, which was a refined form of Lohānaki, the script used by the Lohanas (Asani, 2002, p. 101). In personal law, the group was, according to Hamid Ali, “caught within the meshes of Hindu law” (p. 355).

As documented in the early 19th century, Khoja religious practices were eclectic. In addition to performing Islamic rituals of mixed sectarian origins, they recited during their religious ceremonies *ginān*s, of which the most important was the *Dasa Avatāra* attributed to Pir Ṣadr-al-Din. In terms of their prayers, they performed the traditional Arabic *namāz* on the two ʿIds; otherwise, they had their own ritual prayer, in the Gujarati language with a liberal sprinkling of Arabic and Persian phrases, that they recited thrice a day (Mujtaba Ali, pp. 63-67). Their funeral ceremonies, as well as their marriages, were performed by Sunni officiants (Masselos, p. 7). Yet the Khojas were clearly Shiʿi by virtue of their reverence for ʿAli. They venerated their Imams in Iran as his descendants, regularly sending tributes to them and, if possible, undertaking the arduous pilgrimage to see them in person (Hollister, pp. 390-92). They also participated in all the traditional Shiʿi rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn b. ʿAli (q.v.) during the month of Moḥarram. Those Khojas who could afford the expense would have the bodies of their dead shipped to Karbala (q.v.) in Iraq for burial near the shrine of Ḥosayn (Enthoven, pp. 229-30). The significance of Karbala for the Khojas was further underscored by the fact that during a purificatory ritual called *ghaṭ pāṭ*, resembling that performed by Shaktipanthi Lohanas, they sipped holy water in which small pills of Karbala clay were dissolved (Hollister, p. 389).

On account of their uniquely constructed multivalent Satpanthi formulation, the Khojas effectively participated in several social identities simultaneously and navigated between them with fluidity: they were members of a mercantile group who followed Satpanth, a tradition that could be simultaneously be understood within both Islamic and Indic doctrinal frameworks.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, religious identities in colonial India came to be essentialized, and religious difference between Hindus and

Muslims became a source of sociocultural polarization. Consequently, "multilingual" doctrinal and social formulations such as those of the Khojas became impossible to sustain. The Khojas were difficult to categorize, creating many quandaries. For example, Hamid Ali comments that their legal position was such that it was baffling to the [colonial] law courts and the legislature (p. 355). They also became targets of "conversion" by Muslim and Hindu reformist groups. Matters came to a head with the move in 1841 of Ḥasan-ʿAli Šāh, Aga Khan I (d. 1881; see ĀQĀ KHAN i. ĀQĀ KHAN I MAḤALLĀTI), the forty-sixth Ismaʿili Imam, from Iran to India, settling in Bombay, the site of the largest settlement of Khojas at the time. Although historically the Khojas had a tradition of sending tributes to the Aga Khan's ancestors in Iran through specially designated emissaries, they apparently exercised a great deal of autonomy in managing their matters, particularly property. Soon after his arrival, Aga Khan I began asserting his own authority over all matters related to the Khojas (Shodhan, p. 86). He also began to assert control over communally owned Khoja property, a move which upset the upper echelons of the Khoja hierarchy. Resenting his authority, some members of the Khoja elite challenged his control as well as his right to receive tribute from them (Shodhan, p. 87).

British colonial courts became the arena where the furious battles between the Aga Khan and his opponents were fought through numerous suits, the most well-known being the Aga Khan case of 1866. These suits challenged the Aga Khan's authority over the Khojas by questioning their religious identity as Ismailis. Thus, one group of the dissenters claimed that the Khojas were originally Sunni and accused the Aga Khan of propagating "heretical" ideas to bolster his authority. Other dissenters claimed that the Aga Khan's family was Twelver Shiʿa. Ultimately, as a result of these cases, the various Khoja groups witnessed a series of religious reforms in the 20th century that sharpened their doctrinal differences so that today they identify themselves as members of three distinctive communities: Ismaʿili Khojas (followers of the Aga Khan), Eṯnā ʿAšari or Twelver Khoja, or Sunni Khoja (Asani, 2011, pp. 110-17; Boivin, pp. 392-96).

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