

Evolution of Alavi Bohras in the changing Political scenario of Vadodara

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I express my gratitude and gratefulness to the organizers JNU in collaboration with QJSP for arranging this conference and giving me a chance to present a paper on “Ideas of Harmonious Coexistence: Religions and Philosophies of India”.

The Concept of Harmonious Coexistence is the very edifice of the Human Creation by the Almighty God. Human Body is an Ideal example of understanding Harmonious Coexistence where different systems and organs work as a single being. It is a perfect illustration of Unity in Diversity. Not only our Human Body but everything around us... emanates the fragrance of Harmonious Coexistence. Nothing works independently or separately but in a closely interwoven network of functions and purpose. It is the Duality and Plurality or the Creations which explains us the Singularity of Almighty God. Qur’an explains this in a verse – “And of all things, We have created two mates or pairs; perhaps you will remember” (51:49). Elsewhere it states - And hold fast, all together, unto the bond with God, and do not draw apart from one another. And remember the blessings which God has bestowed upon you: how, when you were enemies, He brought your hearts together, so that through His blessings you became brethren... (3:103)

Nurturing the basic instinct of Coexistence of the Human Nature all Religions teach us to maintain Harmony and Amicability among our fellow beings. No religion teaches intolerance and hatred. Qur’an explains this in a verse – “Allaah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes – from being righteous towards them and acting justly towards them. Indeed Allaah loves those who act Justly” (60:8). This verse is perfect lessons for us to live harmoniously with those who are believe in different Faith belong to different Religion.

Primitive Islam of Maulaana Aadam SA’s period evolved with the passing time and attained perfection and got completed on the hands of Rasoolullaah SAWS by the revelation of the Qur’an which is the final word of Allaah. Prophets or Messengers of God, as commanded by the Almighty, guided the people towards the righteous and noble path and taught them to lead a virtuous and purposeful life. Religion retained its true meaning until it was adopted vicious people to fulfil their vested interest. They distorted the Religious Principles and Teachings. They used it as a tool to gain Power and Worldly riches.

People of different Religions and Faith coexisted harmoniously and led a peaceful life during the time of Earlier Prophets. Prophets won the hearts of people not by declaring war on them but through friendly and logical ways. Qur’an explains us the way of Prophets – “Invite (the mankind) to the way of your Lord with Wisdom and Good Exhortation; and argue them in the most kindly manner” (16:125).

Rasoolullaah SAWS, on the Command of Allaah, invited or gave a call to the Pagans of Makkah by Wisdom and Good Exhortation as mentioned in the latter verse. The word Islaam itself is derived from the root word Sa-La-Ma which forms a large class of words relating to the concepts of Wholeness, Submission, Safeness and Peace.

Peace and Safeness is central to the belief of being Harmonious. Peace or being Peaceful to others is a multidimensional virtue. We can establish Peace or we can be Peaceful to others in 3 ways – Peace through Tongue or Language; Peace through Hands or Actions; and Peace through Heart or Belief.

Of others are not at Peace because of us then we cease to be a Muslim. Rasoolullaah SAWS was bestowed with the Prophethood at the age of 40 yrs. He was an ordinary man before but with an extraordinary character and virtuousness. He was famous for his Truthfulness and Trustworthiness – which the pagans of Makkah couldn't even imagine at that time. This proves that Character and Conduct is the base of Religion.

Rasoolullaah SAWS says in a Hadees e Nabawi – The Worthiest of all Merits is to: reconcile with those who have severed relations with you; be generous to those who have deprived you; show kindness to those who have wronged you; and forgive those who have treated you unjustly.

These words of Rasoolullaah SAWS portray the best of character and conduct one can possess before even being Religious and Steadfast in other customs and practices.

Islam continued to prosper and flourish even after the sad demise of Rasoolullaah SAWS. Ahl ul Bayt SA promulgated the true teachings of Rasoolullaah SAWS to the people. A'immat Faatemiyeen SA – the Imaams in the progeny of Rasoolullaah SAWS adhered to the Qur'an and Practices of Rasoolullaah SAWS. A'immat Faatemiyeen SA witnessed good and bad times in their respective periods of Imaamat.

Following the footsteps of Rasoolullaah SAWS, the idea of harmonious coexistence attained new zenith during the period of Faatemi A'immat SA in North Africa and then Egypt which is popularly known to the World as Golden Fatimid Empire. People of different faith and belief coexisted harmoniously along with their Muslim brothers. They even celebrated their festivals with great fervour. They freely observed their customs and practices.

In India, during the time of the 18th Fatimid Imam, Al-Mustansir Billah around 486 AH/1093 AD, the designated learned people (wulaat) who were sent from Yemen by the celebrated missionaries (du'aat ul-balaagh) established the foundation of Isma'ili-Taiyebi Da'wat in the region of Gujarat (Cambay or Khambhat). It was the result of their perseverance and efforts that people started believing and accepting the Isma'ili-Taiyebi principles and gradually the mission of Yemen gave birth to a new community in India – The Bohras. The succession of those designated learned people who worked as deputies of the missionaries of Yemen came to be known as Wulaat ul-Hind in India.

The word 'Bohra or Vohra or Vohorwu or Vyavahar' itself indicates maintaining healthy relations and is derived from the Gujarati word 'vohorvu' or 'vyavahar', which means "to trade". Secondly its name reflects the characteristic of "al-Jamaa'at ul-Baaherah" meaning the extraordinary brilliant community with full of life and love. The cultural and social upbringing of Bohras is such that we have inherited the values of peace and prosperity from the Fatimid A'immat SA. We do not believe in social discord or religious conflicts. The early Indian converts of the 11th century AD during the reign of 18th Fatimid Imam Mustansir comprised a single group of Isma'ili Bohras owing allegiance to

the missionaries (du'aat ul-balaagh) who conveyed spiritual orders of the Imaam to the common believers in Yemen and India.

However this historic episode does not denote the beginning of Islaam in India. History of Islaam in India dates back to the time of Rasoolullaah SAWS. The 21st Faatemi Imaam Taiyeb SA went in to concealment or seclusion in 528 AH from Egypt.

ad-Da'i ul-Mutlaq or Da'i e Mutlaq is the spiritual rank in Isma'ili Da'wah which became more explicit and operational after the seclusion of 21st Fatimid Imam of Cairo, Abul Qasim at-Taiyeb in 528 AH/1134 AD. Before the concealment of Imaam, the Da'i or a missionary works under the direct orders of Imaam and his trusted associates in all the 12 islands among the believers. In Yemen, after the seclusion, Da'i was given Itlaaq or a free conduct and absolute religious and social authority but under the governing principles of Isma'ili Taiyebi Faith. His command is regarded as a final decree guided by the divine support of Imam and this is the reason he is called Da'i al-Mutlaq.

The succession of Da'i e Mutlaq began in Yaman in 532 AH and continued till 24th Da'i e Mutlaq Saiyedna Yoosuf Najmuddin RA – 974 AH. Saiyedna Yoosuf Najmuddin RA was from Sidhpur who went to Yaman several times to acquire Religious knowledge from the then Du'aat of Yaman. Ahmadshah founded Ahmedabad in 810 AH and invited the Bohra scholars to settle in Ahmedabad because he knew the Bohra expertise of trade and business.

The seat of succession of Da'i e Mutlaq got transferred from Yaman to India, in Ahmedabad during the time of 25th Da'i e Mutlaq Saiyedna Jalaal Fakhruddin RA in 974 AH. Bohras lived peacefully with other communities like sugar in the milk. However they witnessed challenging times during some extremist rulers. From the mainstream Bohras, 'Alavi Bohras got their distinguished identity in 1030 AH in Ahmedabad.

31st Alavi Da'i Saiyedna Hasan Badruddin bin Wali in Ahmedabad instructed 32nd Da'i al-Mutlaq Saiyedna Jivabhai Ziyauddin bin Noohji to migrate along with the community to Vadodara. He spearheaded the cause of migration and in 1110 AH/1699 AD he established a new locality for the community where he built Ziyaai Masjid and Badri Mohalla. Badri Mohalla proved a cradle of progress and prosperity for the entire community.

Since 328 years (1110-1438 AD/1699-2017 AD), Vadodara has remained the centre and the seat of Alavi Bohras (ad-Da'wat ul-Haadiyat ul-'Alaviyah) where our 13 missionaries (du'aat) in succession have stayed here. All of them are from the progeny of Noohji bin Mohammadji, the father of 32nd Da'i. The present 45th Da'i Saiyedna Haatim Zakiyuddin saheb is the descendant from the same Aal-e-Noohji. Badri Mohalla, Fakhri Mohalla, Ajwa Road, Taiwada, Fatehgunj, Mughalwada, Pratapnagar, Panigate are the main areas of Vadodara where Alavi Bohras stay. We have 4 mosques and 3 community halls in Vadodara.

Since our migration from Ahmedabad we have evolved with the city of Vadodara – socio-politically as well as culturally. Miya Mahmood, a devoted man, was moved by the personality of our 32nd Da'i e Mutlaq and gifted a land to him on his arrival. Alavi Bohras who migrated from Ahmedabad settled on this land – which is now known as Badri Mohalla. He constructed a mosque at the entrance of Mohalla. There was a sizeable population of Alavi Bohras even before migration. Manufacturing

Paper was one of our main businesses at that time. The traders of paper were popularly known as Kagazis.

We had close relations with the Gaekwadi rulers of Vadodara during the time of 41st Da'i e Mutlaq. Our community members were indulged in making the turbans of Gaekwads. During the grand celebrations of festivals, our Da'i e Mutlaq was specially invited and honoured in their assembly. Since 12th century AH we have prospered in Vadodara. Alavi Bohras have settled in various cities in India and Abroad. Even today, in our speeches, sermons and congregations our Saiyedna Saheb preaches us to adhere to the Basic Principles of Islam. He advocates "Unity in Diversity".

Our customs and practices is a perfect blend of Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Indian culture. We have evolved accepting various dimensions of different cultures yet conform to our Religious principles. We speak Gujarati – which is a regional language of Gujarat but having imports and additions from Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages. It is called as Lisan ud Da'wat – language of Da'wat.

Alavi Bohras present a unique example of Entangled Histories under the Idea of Harmonious Coexistence.