

# Gujarati-Muslims in India and South Africa

## Performing Muslim Identities in the Indian Ocean

### Abstract

The communities of Sunni Bohras in Gujarat and South Africa, amongst whom I plan to do ethnographical research, form examples of the transnational and complex ties of religious and political phenomena in the globalized modern age. The project aims at a critical examination of these ties and the concept(s) of modernity in general. With social science's theories oriented towards a broader comparative approach the globalisation of religions in both the public and the private spheres shall be scrutinized. As regards these religious and political phenomena they shall be looked at in consideration of the gender discourses applied to Bohra communities.

### Indians / Sunni Bohras in South Africa

The history of Indian-African relations mediated through the Indian Ocean reflects centuries of migration, trade and transnational networks. Sunni Bohra communities primarily known as merchants notably started settling in Natal/South Africa about the turn of the 19th/20th century. They followed the colonial Indian contract workers into that region, coming sometimes from Zanzibar. But already in the 1950s  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Indians, free ex-indentured as well as free merchants dwelled in South African cities (Metcalf 1986). It was shown that the so called 'passenger' Indian communities kept steadily in touch with their original districts for the purposes of trade and marriage so that a linguistically as well as religiously conceived cohesion of the Diaspora persisted and further developed (Meer 1969, Klein 1990). The institutionalisations of Indian based Islam<sup>1</sup> in South Africa and the emic perspectives of the Bohras are to be seen as inseparable from the conditions the South African nation state provided through its Apartheid rule (Ebr.-Vally 2001a). In another way the approach of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), who paired the legal process of amnesty with religious concepts of forgiveness, created a moral authority to deal with (Daniels 2007: 119).

To this day the diachronic perspective on the Indian migrants dominates the scholarly literature due to the often glorified engagement of M.K. Gandhi in Africa, and the need for reconsidering the role the Indian 'middleman minority' played during the Apartheid years. In addition to the diachronic level I would like to present a synchronic view thereby taking into consideration to what extent class and 'race' beside gender matter within the Indo-Muslim communities, who are numerically a minority within the minority but nonetheless highly visible and influential.

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<sup>1</sup> There are also people of Southeast Asian or African origin in South Africa professing Islam.

## Sunni Bohras – Some Ethnographical Data

The majority of traders coming from Gujarat to Natal were Sunni Memons from Porbandar and Sunni Bohras (a.k.a. Vohras) from Surat district. For their district of origin the second came to be known as Surtis in South Africa (Vahed 2001: 307). In Gujarat they were called Safaris (Lambat 1985: 53). As Bhana and Brain (1991: 40) mention the etymological root of the Bohras is in the term ‘vohoru’, meaning ‘to trade’. Misra reports the origin of Sunni Bohras to consist of several “broadly agrarian groups that converted to Islam from the time of the Sultans of Gujarat” (Misra 1964: 122). The local origin and ongoing contention resp. identification with the Hindu surrounding area can be traced back to some ‘syncretistic’ rituals still to be performed until today / recent time.

Besides the broad categorizations, which divide Patani-, Kadiwal-, Charotar- and Surati Sunni Bohras, there are distinctions based on following a certain *pir*. As Misra points out in analysing the National Register of Citizens of the 1940s, the Bohras have had developed a fairly high educational standard with a literacy rate of 50%. In his ‘Preliminary Studies’ he also argues that a high number of Sunni Bohras emigrants went to South Africa as traders but nevertheless the marriage circles were held up (Misra 1964: 123, Lambat 1985: 61). These marriage circles are closer examined by Ismail Lambat, who includes the religious contingent rituals and a documentation of social change in his article (Lambat 1985). The discussed circles of *khandans* (‘families’) are differentiated in terms of wealth and Islamic knowledge, thereby highly valuing the possibilities of migration too. But also on the level of villages there is just a certain set of whom to choose a spouse, which is then married without an officially paid dowry or bride-price.<sup>2</sup> Even if there are reform oriented movements within the communities, who tend to reduce certain ‘folkloristic’ elements of marriages and raise more pious issues, Ahmad observes analogies to customs practiced by the lower-middle Hindu castes in Surat district. By the way, Misra, writing 20 years ahead of Lambat, already observed that “Islamization is becoming more and more important” among the Muslim Gujaratis (Misra 1964: 123). The relations between an assumed ‘upgrading’ of one’s family, caste or community (Ashrafization / Sanskritization) and demonstrated religious piety are complex because the motivations for creating such a self-image are not abstract – ‘to be a good Muslim’ – but essentially local, as Ahmad 1981 emphasized.

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<sup>2</sup> “[...] though there are approximately a total of 135 Surati Vohra villages in the Bulsar and Surat districts, the effective marriage ties of the studied village were found to exist only within a set of seven villages, and the outermost circle from which one could select a spouse was limited to twenty-four villages.” (Lambat 1985: 63f.)

## Localize Modernity and Gender it

The performances of gender in South Asian as well as in Muslim societies are in social sciences often reduced to a dichotomization of male and female spheres and roles. That description of social values goes accordingly to the dichotomization of ‘private’ and ‘public’ life or ‘culture’ vs. ‘nature’. In this context western modernity turns out to be an inherently male project associated with all the first notions while the second ones (?) are linked to conceptions of tradition (Kosambi 2007). Indian scholars have scrutinized the difficulties arising from such thinking, e.g. by revealing the Hindu practice of *sati* to be a feature of modernity getting prominent in Bengal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Nandy 1975). Contingent separation of the sexes and the “patriarchy” are in Muslim contexts often to be justified with the Koran and the Hadithes, taking ‘Islam’ as a hegemonic external force determining behaviour (Marranchi 2008: 120). That view of supposed female ‘weakness’ was also supported by 20<sup>th</sup> century western and explicitly modern studies of physiology and psychology, studies which were recognized in South Asia (Hermansen 2007: 261). For my project these ambivalences of modernity (Parameshwar 2001) have to be taken into account as well as the close interrelation of sexual and religious conceptualised stereotypes in India: The Muslim as the impure Other is a sexually loaded trope in common Hindu discourses (Gupta 2001, Menon 2007).

As Marranchi and also the *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Cultures* note it is urgently necessary to reveal how local Muslims, and women in particular, engage with the community. So is the exploration of the “interwinning of local and global strands of a South African Muslim identity” (Daniels 2007: 119), what’s one of the main research tasks.

Due to the different meanings given to performance concepts in the academic disciplines attached to the Excellenz-Cluster, the broad definition of performance as **a mode of action, that is of practice** which is explicitly **symbolic** and reproduced within a **public** sphere is considered as point of departure. In accordance with the aims of the Cluster the performance concept I attempt to use hints at the interface of politics and religion, looking at the authority and liability of performed behaviour.

### So the main questions can be formulated as follows:

- Which self-articulations and performances unite or divide the Muslim communities in the ‘new’ and pluralistic South Africa in their emic perspective?
- How do the so called traditional, resp. the reform oriented (‘fundamentalistic’) Muslim movements in South Africa act under the conditions of globalisation?
- Which religious or political concepts are embedded in these movements and how do they relate to the understandings of modernity?

- Which social relations and normative rules are relevant for the performances of religious identities?
- What are the factors relevant for the conviction effects (?) of the specific religious or secular performances?
- What roles do the socially constructed gender identities play for all these processes and value orientations?

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