



Photo: Toronto Sun

### **Visit to the Jaffer Centre in Summer of 2014**

At 9000 Bathurst Avenue in Toronto's plush suburb is the Jaffer Centre. It's markedly different Islamic architecture stands out from the surrounding neighbourhood. As we turned into the Centre's grounds, not far away at the end of the road, I saw yet another religious architectural style, a Jewish Centre. Here, I thought, is a fine example of Canadian pluralism.

The Jaffer Centre speaks of the presence of the Khoja Ithna Asheri jamat in Canada. There are between 13,000 to 15,000 Khoja Ithna Asheris in Canada and around 5,000 live in Toronto.

Anuali Bhai Moledina, the Communications Co-ordinator, one of the 300 volunteers at the Centre from the office bearers to cleaning and maintenance staff, met us at As Sadiq Gate with warm words of welcome. I was visiting with my brother-in-law. There are several gates to enter this beautiful building, each gate named after the progeny of Fatima az Zahra. The gates open into wide corridors and spacious rooms for social functions, reading and studying, physical exercises and contemplation. At the entrances of rooms are names of the donors who have contributed to the building, clearly a statement on what the joint effort of the jamat has achieved. At the same time the names proclaim efforts of a civil society for the posterity to remember, honour and emulate. I could not wait for the tour to start. As a Khoja Ismaili, I was curious to see for myself how my cousin community, the Khoja Ithna Asheris, work as a jamat and present themselves today. That's more than a century of separation from the main Satpanth Khoja body that has evolved as the Shia Imami branch of the Nizari Ismailis who follow the Aga Khan as their imam. I was standing there on 'their' ground.

The religious and social separation between the two ethnic Lohana communities came to be sharply defined after the Aga Khan Case in 1866 presided over by Justice Sir Joseph Arnould in the Bombay High Court. Communal properties such as burial grounds and many of the jamat khana were claimed by imam Hasan Ali Shah (Aga Khan I). Though some jamat khana that were under family or trust names were sometimes divided into two prayer halls with a wall between. Some years back, I had heard Khoja Ismailis who had been for a visit to India, say how surprised they were to find two prayer halls in one building. One was for *vadi* jamat that was the jamat khana, and the other was for *nindbi* jamat that was the masjid of the Ithna Asheri. Both stood shoulder to shoulder like brothers as if to say though their faiths differed they were from one family. The two jamats that share a unique Indian ethnic identity called Khoja, mingled with ease in the jamat khana-masjid yard outside.

It was the separation that led to the development of two Khoja ethnic community structures. One, the Ismaili structure is a vertical hierarchy centering on the absolute authority of the imam. The other, the Ithna Asheri structure functions under the World Federation of Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities or WFSIMC which is based in London. Both the structures are like pyramids if one was to make diagrams. But there is a difference. Members of the WFSICC are elected by the jamat through a parliamentary type of voting process. The jamat feeds its suggestions and concerns through several committees to the central management that makes decisions. The Ismaili structure that includes not just the Khojas but also other Ismailis from Syria, Afghanistan, Northern Pakistan, Central Asia and others like the Punjabis and Momnas, is based on appointments from the hands-on day to day volunteers up the ladder to the International Leaders' Forum. There is yet another difference which is that in the Ithna Asheri jamat there is a marked separation between men and women in all secular and religious functions including sittings in committees. Men and women also vote separately and elect their own leaders. Among the Ismailis, women can be presidents of councils, chairs of boards and they even lead the jamat in prayers, conduct and preside over religious ceremonies. They wear neither the veil nor the hijab.

Since the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, the Satpanthi Khojas honoured the ginans of the pirs that have Vedic and Sufi content, and are sung in melodies that come from the ragas of India. Until 1950 an important ginan called the Dasmo Avatar venerated Hazrat Ali as the tenth manifestation of Vishnu on earth. The dissenters objected to the ancient Vedic beliefs as in the ginans and the Satpanth form of worship. They also objected to the paying of the tithe to the imam, and a number of other taxes pertaining to rites of passage. And they protested most vehemently to community estates coming under the imam's name. A series of events stirred deep emotions in families that divided the community. That led to conflicts often led by wealthy seths, who had previously jointly held community affairs and managed vast communal properties before the coming of Aga Hassanali Shah to India. Eventually, Khoja traditions such as sharing of meals among the kith and kin during festivities that was considered *barakat* or blessings began to lessen. There were dissonances in the community and excommunications of the dissidents. There was so much enmity that the two groups ( i.e. the pro and against the imam groups) though of one ancestry did not even drink a glass of water offered by the other. For at least three generations thereafter, while differences in their faiths divided the close knit Khoja relations, stories continued to be told on the quiet of how such and such a family was partly Ismaili and partly

Ithna Asheri. How they continued visiting each other, and how they drank bottled soft drinks with straws thus not breaking the taboos set on them by the elders on both the sides. My optician, an Ithna Asheri Khoja born in Tanzania, tells me he has cousins and second cousins who are Ismailis. His mother came from an Ismaili family.

### The Masjid

At the heart of the Jafferi Centre is the masjid where tasbihs hang over pegs in neat corner stands over a box of turba. The turba is a palm sized clay pad on which is carved out sacred words in Arabic calligraphy. The faithful rests his/her forehead on the turba while performing the *salaat*. It is a tradition that *sajda* be done direct with the forehead on the earth or anything that's of nature. Thus one could rest one's forehead in *sajda* on straw mat as it used to be in the jamat khana in East Africa when I was young. During the *salaat* the worshiper places the turba on the synthetic carpet before him/her at a convenient distance for the forehead to touch.

There were two pulpits with steps in the high roofed prayer hall otherwise bare of furniture and embellishment. One was for the Friday sermon, and the other with more steps was reserved for special majalises or assemblies. On the carpeted floor there were a few men sitting with legs stretched out, leaning against the wall seeking quietude. Their postures indicated they were calm and comfortable but not in prayers. There were no women. Perhaps they had another space but I did not ask. In fact I did not query or talk. I just listened to Anuali Bhai and found contentment absorbing the feeling of the sacred through observation. The men's serene presence enhanced the solitude while an echo of activities on a Sunday afternoon hovered in at a distant in the background. It reminded me of the time when the Ismaili jamat khana used to be open during the day for murids to seek solace in isolation from the bustle of the world outside. Some volunteers treaded in with silent footsteps and began moving a ladder and decoration things from the back store. They walked out without a sound to the imambargahs where, I was told, three weddings would be commencing soon. There are two imambargahs or social halls, one for men and one for women. We needed to hurry.

### The Cafeteria

But my host Anuali Bhai insisted we eat something at the cafeteria before proceeding. The lady behind the counter wore a hijab. I smiled. She did not respond but was courteous. No eye contact either. The samosas reminded me of the taste of East Africa and could be from the kitchen of any Khoja Ismaili bai. I read a poster about Eid festivities pinned to the wall. Lots of good food and fun. Everyone, Ithna Asheris and non-Ithna Asheris were warmly invited. We met a group of children, all boys around 12 to 14 years old, who greeted us respectfully as their elders something I no longer see children do in Canada. I did not see girls. There is the As Sadiq School on the third floor where 500 primary level students learn the Canadian National Curriculum in addition to the religious education they receive. Incidentally, the school was ranked third in performance across Canada in 2013. Anuali Bhai told me there was much

emphasis placed on brotherly love for each other, sharing and helping when teaching both the secular and religious education curriculum. The same attitude is encouraged during games. In the lobby, on shining brass plaques were names of students who had accomplished recitations of the verses of the Quran according to their age groups. What impressed me was Anuali Bhai pointing to the ravine beyond the playground and talking enthusiastically about a plan to start student managed farming. While learning to love the earth and working with their hands, the children would also come to appreciate the value of wholesome organic food and good health, all a part of education at the Centre. Healthy body and healthy mind is the old axiom, I said to myself. Another extension to the social amenities is a seniors' home. Colourful development model drawings of what the Jafferi Centre complex would look like in future are painted high up on one circular wall for the jamat to see, discuss and aspire for its completion. One part of the project is social housing for the jamat - 375 apartments and 60 townhouses.

### Pilgrimages the anchoring features of the faith

What struck me as I entered the imambargah on men's side, was the reverence that's put on pilgrimage. A cove like annex houses twelve miniature replicas of Shia shrines in silver, encased in glass boxes. They represent the mausoleums of imams and important religious figures in Shia history marking the landmarks on the *ziyarat* or the pilgrim's journey. One of the shrines is that of Imam Ali. Another of Fatima az Zahra whose descendants are the twelve imams acknowledged by the Ithna Asheri. Four of the imams are buried in Medina, as is Fatima az Zahra and the Prophet. Six imams are buried in Iraq and one in Iran. The site of occultation of the twelfth imam where he is said to have gone into seclusion, is in Samarra in Iraq. The city that was founded on the banks of the Tigris in 836 by Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu'tasim as his capital. In the centre of the ring of miniature tombs is a full size baby's cradle. The swing cot signifies the tragedy of the Battle of Kerbala and the sorrow of the parent, Imam Hussein. As he looked for water to quench the thirst of his son, so runs the narration often recited in poetic prose and verse, the enemy's arrow seared through the infant crying of thirst and cradled in Imam Hussein's arms. This is possibly the most powerful imagery of pain evoked by sacred material culture in the imambargah. Jamati members come to offer dua at this cradle and the miniature models. Perhaps they pray for peace in the family, perhaps for fulfillment of their inner wishes, perhaps for safe journeys - there could be many reasons. Before they leave, they drop money into the box near the exit closing their prayers with reverence and humility as befits the modesty of the worshiper and donor of charity.

Pilgrimages and memorializations of important historical sites in miniatures as well as of events through processions and prayer gatherings, forge Khoja Ithna Asheris' oneness with other Shias around the globe - from Iraq, Iran, Indonesia, the Middle East, Africa and many other countries. Recently *the Huffington Post* had an article on Arbacen, a pilgrimage that commemorates forty days after the death of Imam Hussein in Karbala. The Arbacen is said to be the biggest pilgrimage in the world. In 2013 there were twenty million pilgrims converging on Kerbala for the Arbacen. That's many times more than the numbers that come annually for Hajj to Mecca or to the Ganges for the Kumb Mela. There are other features of Arbacen that miss the attention of the media. One is that here is a procession of 20 million men, women and children seeking peace

and hope who have been surrounded by Al-Qaeda for the last ten years and today by ISIL. Both commit heinous crimes on Shia pilgrims and worshippers at local city mosques. Ironically, the spiritual journeys memorialize cruelties of battles and massacres of more than a thousand years like how the museums of peace memorialize World War I and II at locales of massive killings such as at Hiroshima in Japan, No Gun Ri in South Korea and Nanking in China. Here the visitors like the pilgrims reflect on sufferings. Some weep openly, others silently. Another feature of Arbreen that the media overlooks is that though this assembly of millions is distinctively Shia, there are among them Sunnis, Christians, Yazidis, Zoroastrians, and Sabians who participate in the ceremony serving the pilgrims, and even joining in the prayer walk. There is no signpost at Kerbala that reads INFIDELS NOT ALLOWED. Embracing pluralism within religions is a centuries old Shia tradition. The Arbreen is both cultural and religious, and national Iraqi in character.

In the hall on the second level is a gallery of the other pilgrimage that the Ithna Asheri undertake. That's the well-known Hajj in Mecca. One walks into life size mannequins and artefacts with detailed explanations of the elaborate rituals and routes of the Hajj. Here again one is arrested by the images. This time it's the Kaaba, the Devil's Pillar and the sacred geography of the mountains and waters mentioned in the Quran and the ritual objects. Anyone intending to undertake the Hajj would greatly benefit from a visit to this presentation of the Hajj that like the Jaffer Centre is open at all times to everybody no matter what the faith or no faith of the visitor.

#### Exhibitions imaging the Struggle

There is an historical exhibition in the library. The ceiling to floor panels give an overview of the history in the making of the Khoja Ithna Asheri community. The break away from the Satpanth tradition that had begun in India came to be defined sharply on the East African coast in the post migration period in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The photographic diorama focuses on the principal personalities who confirmed the new path similar to the dominant Iranian Shiism. Personalities like Haji Gulamali Haji Ismail, a student of the famed educator and reformer, Mulla Qudir Hussein, were not only religious role models but also scholars who travelled to Iran and Iraq visiting shrines and receiving lessons from the learned sages. The Ithna Asheri Khoja scholar-preachers from East Africa continued communication and consultations with their patrons in the Middle East during their lifetime devoted to community service. On a raised space in the library these elders are honoured as the founding fathers of the community. Among the photographs towards the end of the display, I recognized one of Hassan Jaffer. Hassan Jaffer who comes from the line of scholars and is the author of *Endangered Species*. The book is about the work of the Khoja Ithna Asheri pioneers and scholars, and how they changed the history of the jamat while separating from the Satpanth and Ismailism.

Also on the panel are photographs of Seth Hirji Bhai Alarakhia and Seth Laljee Bhai Sajan who were assassinated in 1901 when tensions between Ismailis and Ithna Asheri jamats ran high. Dissent in the community was deep and hurtful. The assassins believed to be Khoja Ismaili belonging to the fidai mandali, a clandestine group, were not brought to court of the legendary impartial British justice system. On the other hand a Khoja Ithna Asheri, Kilu Khatau, who killed a mukhi of a jamat khana in Bombay was tried and executed. Thereafter, the divisions

sharpened and a new jamat called *choti* jamat or small jamat began to consolidate. From having inherited almost nothing from their ancestral properties because the 1866 Court Case granted that to Aga Khan I, the small jamat has made remarkable progress by building a civil society that maintains institutions and provides social amenities. Today the world-wide Shia Ithna Asheri community numbers about 150,000. This figure is candidly spoken about without showing doubt, reservation, and without embellishment. In fact the seriousness of the concern of the diminishing Khoja ethnic identity in the frame of the larger Ithna Asheri faith community is often discoursed. In the *The Endangered Species*, Hassan Jaffer argues that the jamat's closeness has been a vehicle for its survival while breaking away from the stronger Khoja Ismailis and asserting its distinct identity. The progress that Khoja Ithna Asheris have made today is attributed to their struggle illustrated in exhibitions and written about in episodes of heroism. In fact the title of the book *The Endangered Species* suggests the concern for the lessening of the religio-ethnic community and remembrance of the hard struggle of the forefathers in building a unique group of people that is the Khoja Ithna Asheri.

At the exhibition I noticed a picture of Dewji Bhai Jamal. Dewji Bhai Jamal (1820 – 1905) was a prosperous merchant who lived on the coast of East Africa and who helped the young, poor and hungry Khoja men disembarking from the dhow from India to find employment and settle in the new land. This was at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. At the time the two Khoja jamats easily mingled because of strong bloodlines, marriage and caste ties, and often the young men would follow the faith of their patrons. I suspect many would have been undecided what jamat they wished to belong to because the boundaries were not as distinct as they are today. For example, when Allidina Visram, a Khoja Ismaili, sent young Khoja men to Madagascar as he was known to do in other parts of East Africa, these men were all assimilated into the Ithna Asheri fold probably because of the well-established Ithna Asheri merchants on the island. There was that fluidity in ethnic and family socializing that the leaders later attempted to restrict by putting religious barriers on communal interaction. In the legendary Alidina Visram's business empire as among his family, there were both Khoja Ithna Asheri and Khoja Ismaili. Sugra Visram the first woman MP in Uganda, was born in an Ithna Asheri family and married Haider Abdulrasool, the grandson of Allidina Visram. Sugra's father, Mohamedali Jamal worked for Allidina Visram when he was young and learned to do business through apprenticeship like many other Khojas both Ithna Asheri and Ismaili employed by Alidina Visram. At the exhibition there is no photograph or even a mention of Alidina Visram, a bridging personality like his marriage between the two faith sections. Alidina Visram's wife, Jena Bhai, was from a prominent Ithna Asheri family of Nasser Virji of Tanzania. Also while Mohamedali Jina is celebrated as an Ithna Asheri born Khoja politician, there is no reference to Sugra Mohamedali Jamal Visram also an Ithna Asheri born Khoja much loved woman politician of Uganda.

Earlier in 2014, curator Burket Ali wrote on the poster commemorating Khoja History and Heritage: *Learn the origins and the history of our community and understand how we have evolved.* The poster informed about a people to people educational exhibition that was put together in Leicester, the UK. Hundreds of Ithna Asheris of varied ethnicities attended this exhibition. There also came an invited group of Khoja Ismailis including the mukhi of the Leicester jamat Khana, and a donation from a well-wishing Ismaili was warmly received. Also in 2014 I saw a

parallel between this exhibition, the exhibition at Jaffer Centre and a short film called *The Khojas, A Journey of Faith: A People's History*. This enchanting movie made by Hasnain Walji from California had premier showings in Vancouver, Toronto and Calgary in the summer of this year. There were groups of Khoja Ismailis among the audience.

#### Library and Archives storing memories

In the library and the adjoining archives are books that would delight researchers studying the Satpanth and history of the Khojas. Among the Khojas these are not only the Ismailis and Ithna Asheris but also Sunni Khojas whose masjid in Dongri in Mumbai stands in view of the Ismaili jamat khana like two estranged brothers of the parent Satgur Pir. In her book, *Crossing the Threshold*, Dominique Sila Khan writes that there are also smaller groups of Swamynarayan and Arya Samaj Khoja. These two reformed Hindu groups were the only ones that accepted the Khojas wanting to return to Hinduism. Once they had broken away from the religiously defined caste boundaries it was not possible for them to be accepted back into the fold. Among the literature that caught my eye were titles like *Gupt Path ki Sharaja* by Adalji Dhanji published in 1916, *The History of the Khojas* by Jaffer Ali Remtella published in 1905, *Kera no Kajjo* by Jaffer Bhimani published in 1955 and *Defending Women's Rights* by Mohamed Hakmi and translated by Hamideh Elabinia in 2008. I learnt that the library and the archives are open to all whether they are within the jamat or from outside.

#### Closing the tour

As we were leaving the Jaffer Centre after the tour that had engrossed me for two hours, we met a group of men standing in a circle a little distance away from the entrance. Anuali Bhai introduced me as the author of *Bead Bai* and showed them the book he had with him. I spoke a little about *Bead Bai*. Then one of them seemed to query politely almost like he was holding back the question. It was the look on his face that asked:

“Khoja?”

“Yes, I am a Khoja,” I replied. The men stopped talking and looked at me. I saw curiosity flash by on their faces like wanting to ask, “Have not seen you at the Centre before? Where are you from?” and more.

“I am an Ismaili,” I said with pride. “But a Khoja like you nonetheless,” I added also with pride. Their lips stretched in quiet smiles of approval as if telling me, “Yes, we know you. Welcome brother!”

We were walking to the carpark when I saw the wedding guests arriving. Most men were in dark elegant European style suits with tiny white flower sprays on their lapels. The women walked in gorgeous full body veils but for the faces lit up with tints and shades of colour that enhanced their features in the looped around head and neck hijabs. Fragrances of oudh and perfumes flowed in with the joy they carried with them. I noticed only one lady in a sari and

heard some Kutchi and Gujarati amidst a lot of English. A token of the jamat's Lohana Indian legacy that the Khoja Ithna Asheris share with the Khoja Ismailis.

Next I look forward to visiting a Sunni Khoja masjid and jamat. I wonder how they have come together and made their community after the separation from the Satpanth in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I wonder how they keep their historical memory and if they would identify themselves as Khoja Sunni similar to how Khoja Ithna Asheri do twining their ethnic identity with their religious one. Or if they would rather wish to be known as Sunni similar to how the Khoja Ismaili present their identity today as just Ismaili or more recently as Ismaili Muslims. I wonder if they would remember me as their estranged cousin brother? And I am thinking if they would be as warm and welcoming as the Khoja Ithna Asheris were to me visiting the Jafferri Centre in Toronto in the summer of 2014.

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