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Reframing the Identity of Indian Bohra Community: A Close Reading of Asghar Ali's *A Living Faith*

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Abstract:

The study examines Asghar Ali's Autobiography, *A Living Faith: My Quest for Peace, Harmony and Social Change* (2013) to portray the religious, social, and cultural identity crisis of the Bohra Community. Asghar Ali portrays how the powerful religious head (high priest) of his Bohra community has oppressed the common Bohra by the pretext of religious ideology. Asghar Ali talked about the neo-colonial practices within the Bohra community, which was led by the high priest. He observed that Bohra community lost their religious (Muslim) identity and enslaved by the high priest's hegemonic ideology. Under such conjuncture, Asghar Ali commenced resistance movement against high priest's colonial activities and subjugation to regain and reframe Bohras' real religious identity. This scholarship explores Asghar Ali's autobiography to reveal the neo-colonial practices which unknown to the main stream discourses. The article also focuses how Asghar Ali's attempted to resist high priest's subjugation in reframing common Bohras' religious identity.

Keywords: Bohra Community, identity, high priest, ideology, and Shia.

The Bohra nation is one of the minor Islamic sects that follows Shia doctrine. Their religious leader, Syedna (the high priest/religious head), has the ultimate authority over them in religious, social, and economic concerns. However, it is unfortunate that their social, cultural, and religious identities are in peril as members of that community. Even in post-colonial India, they lacked freedom and human rights, as they were treated like slaves and compelled to serve the religious head without question. Seventy-four years ago, Indians gained independence, but they remained *abde-Syedna* or slaves of Syedna until now (Engineer 42). This section will explore Asghar Ali Engineer's autobiography, *A Living Faith: My Quest for Peace, Harmony and Social Change* (2013), to show how the identity of the Bohra nation/community is in crisis and how the author tried to resist the so-called religious head in order to reconstruct and reframe their identity in post-colonial India.

The term "Bohra" derives from the word "Vohra," which refers to a commercial community that converted from "Vaishya" (lower class Hindu) to Shia Islam in the thirteenth century AD (42; Blank 255). This sect of Shia Islam came into existence due to a secret religiopolitical movement in Iraq during the 10th century. Bohras now, almost 12 million (10 lakhs in India), are spread over 35 countries. The Abbasid rulers persecuted them, and then they spread to these countries, particularly in India, Pakistan, Yemen, and East Africa (Sharma 1486). In India, they mostly lived in different parts of Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. However, in the period of the Mughal Emperors, Jehangir, and Shah Jahan, they were tortured and persecuted due to their slightly different Shia faith. Later, during the reign of Aurangzeb, the oppression increased, and even Sunni theology was imposed upon them. Aurangzeb did not stop there; he even sentenced a Syedna, Qutbuddin, to death (Blank 260), and then many people of the Bohra community fled to Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bombay, and Kolkata and started living there permanently. Later, many of them again returned to Gujarat, though they set up many trading centres outside of Gujarat (Engineer, Human Rights 1998). Though the high

priest claims that the Bohra is one of the wealthiest communities, most of them are traders. Whereas, Asghar Ali Engineer opines that more than forty % of Bohras belong to below poverty level, even from whom the high priest collects huge sums of money by force (Sing).

According to Islamic theology, Muslims need to follow the guidelines of Almighty God, the Hadith of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), and the leaders of the Muslim world/Caliphs (The Quran 4:59). During his lifetime, Prophet Mohammad established a small Islamic empire in the Arabian Peninsula. After the death of Prophet Mohammad, caliphs of Islam started expanding the empire. They ruled almost half of the world. However, after the World War I, this empire was destroyed, and instead, many Muslim states were created based on extreme nationalism (Ali 189). Simultaneously, the Muslim community lost its religious leader and became leaderless. Under this backdrop, so-called theocratic politics developed within Muslim Ummah and which has badly affected the very nature of pan-Islam and oppressed Muslims by their own rulers or leaders (Akbarzadeh 28). In his autobiography, Asghar Ali Engineer discussed such a religious leader, Syedna (high priest), who has deviated from the very idea of Pan-Islam and has oppressed the Bohra community for years in order to strengthen his hegemony.

As mentioned earlier, Syedna held absolute authority in society, and all Bohras had to follow his statements. If anyone spoke out against him, he was shunned not only by society but also by his own family (Sharma 1486). Syedna and his hooligans used to control religious issues and social and economic matters to make his hegemony more stable and more robust. In a nutshell, common Bohras had no right to act in their interests. They were treated as slaves of Syedna, and had no identity other than that of Syedna's slaves. Although the Qur'an forbids prostration to anyone other than Almighty (Akbarzadeh 27), the Bohras had to prostrate at the feet of Syedna despite their reluctance. He did not stop there; if anyone dared to do the same, he would be punished and declared a heretic. During the prostration, the men of Syedna used

to collect a large sum of money, although many of them (Bohra) were from the below poverty level (Engineer 14-15). In addition, no Bohra could marry without the permission of the high Priest (Syedna). If anyone got married without the permission of the High priest, it was declared illegal. They were excommunicated; even their offspring were also declared illegitimate (Lokhandwala 128). Further, they did not have the right to set up any institution, school organization, or charitable trust without the command of Syedna. Besides, they could not bury their deceased without Syedna's permission (Engineer 43). All these were examples of human rights violations that are even against Islam's principles. On the other side, from literary criticism, all these were instances of a dystopian society where people are being oppressed and treated like slaves by the pretext of extreme theocratic rule (Kadhim 26).

It is said that a nation is like a human body (Verdery 40). If a small part of it gets damaged, the whole body suffers. Likewise, in India, many nations are united and constructed the Indian nation. If a small nation/community is underdeveloped and suffers different problems, it is necessary to resolve their problems to cope with the other nations with respect and dignity. Further, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan metaphorically considered Hindus and Muslims as separate nations, and they are the two beautiful eyes of a bride called India. Hence, if one eye became blind or got damaged, India would have suffered (Jalbani, et al. 6441). That is why, when Asghar Ali Engineer found that the high priest was oppressing his Bohra nation and their identity was in crisis, he started the Bohra reform movement and tried to reframe their identity, which they had lost for centuries. He begins by emphasizing how challenging the movement was to revive the Bohras' religious identity and socioeconomic rights as human beings. Some Bohra intellectuals challenged the authority of Syedna and his brother to dismantle the government registered youth organization and institution in Rajasthan. Syedna's brother (they called Sahajada) denounced them as heretics and subjected their female members to oppression in Galiakot. The daily newspaper Times of India published news about this issue. Following

this, Asghar Ali Engineer authored a scholarly article in endorsement of the reformist Bohra intellectuals. As soon as this news spread, Syedna got furious. His men encircled the office of The Times of India. They requested the editor to apologize and ban the author's article. Amidst such pressure, he felt compelled to do so. Asghar Ali's relative requested him to apologize. The author attempted to convince them that his stance was not anti-Islamic, but rather anti-oppression of the general populace by the high priest. Despite acknowledging the correctness of Asghar Ali Engineer's efforts to reclaim their identity, his relatives urged him to disassociate himself from the Bohra reform movement; otherwise, they would disconnect all relations with him. Once, he was declared a heretic by the high priest and subsequently expelled from the Bohra community and excommunicated from the Islamic faith. Currently, his identity and existence are undergoing a state of crisis. However, the author never succumbed to injustice and lies. He consistently advocated for equitable treatment, despite experiencing such a state of isolation and vulnerability at some point (43-45).

Moreover, Asghar Ali Engineer's father died a few years ago, and his mother was staying with him. She was an ardent believer who regularly participated in religious gatherings. She found herself at a pivotal moment, faced with a decision regarding which path to take. As her son had become a heretic. At last, she decided and went to Syedna's house, claiming shelter for herself. They denied it and advised her to stay at her son's house, putting a curtain. She did so, but day by day, it was becoming challenging for her to make food alone and stay this way. Once, she went to the author's office and alleged that he had destroyed her life. He feels very sad, thinking he had never faced such an extremely critical moment (45-46).

Based on the preceding discourse, Syedna and his brothers wanted nothing but wealth and authority, with little regard for the religious or societal well-being of the Bohra nation (Minault 139). By any means, they wanted to play a hegemonic role over common Bohras. Their intention was to exert hegemonic control over the Bohra community. Thus, they

established an atmosphere of intimidation that precluded any potential challenge to their authority. Antonio Gramsci posits that political leaders and intellectuals often utilize ideology as a pretext to suppress the masses and establish hegemony over them. Asghar Ali Engineer's autobiography recounts the efforts of the high priest to consolidate his authority over the Bohra community. His autobiography also describes how the Bohra reform movement under the leadership of him challenge the high priest's oppressive neo-colonial rule which exists even after the Independence of India. Asghar Ali was contemplating strategies to confront the influential high priest and restore the Bohra nation's distinct identity as Bohra Muslims, rather than being subservient to the high priest's authority. Asghar Ali Engineer endeavoured to preserve the social, religious, and economic rights of the Bohra community, as chronicled in his autobiography.

He intended to meet with political figures, writers, social activists, film personalities, and teachers to elucidate the culpability of the high priest and the necessity to terminate his economic, religious, and social subjugation over the Bohra nation. During his initial encounter, Asghar Ali Engineer first met Shashi Bhushan (a social activist and member of Parliament), whom a Bohra reformist, Noman contractor, accompanied. Asghar Ali then requested him to support the Bohra reform movement and address the meeting they were going to organize in Bombay. He agreed and promised to address the meeting. Despite all the problems and public pressure, he participated in the meeting and utilized allegory to criticize the high priest's desire for authority and material possessions. Many men of Syedna were present at the meeting. They raised slogans and tried to attack him and the reformist Bohras. However, fortunately, police guarded them and assisted them in reaching their respective homes (46). The high priest expressed concern that if today the reformist Bohras could not be stopped, they might be gaining greater support among the Bohra community, thereby jeopardizing his own position. Therefore, the high priest spread the regime of dismay among the Bohras and started listing the

suspects who had a connection with reformist Bohras. Suspects were declared heretics and boycotted from the community and religion. After this declaration, many people sought absolution and presented the high priest with a vast sum of money. A few of them were couples who were forced to give talaq and boycotted from the community. The High Priest did not stop there. He also declared Asghar Ali as a heretic and made multiple attempts to assassinate him. On the other hand, Ali was unafraid of death and stood firm above the truth. Throughout his lifetime, he dedicated himself to combatting oppression and advocating for a nation that has undergone a loss of its identity as Muslim.

The author portrays another picture of the high priest's brutality, which was carried out under the guise of religion. More than 100 couples could not get married during the emergency because the high priest refused permission. Asghar Ali viewed it as a violation of human rights. Therefore, he reached out to Saleh Abdul Kader, a reformist Bohra MP from Bombay, to discuss the issue and implored him to take necessary measures to address the issue. They approached the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi to solicit her assistance in facilitating their wedding, which had been prohibited by the high priest for a duration of a year (48). Saleh Abdul Kader met the high priest's brother, Yusuf Najmuddin, at Indira Gandhi's request. However, he regarded it an incursion into their religious concerns and threatened Abdul Kader with a boycott unless he stopped the campaign. He informed Indira Gandhi about the matter, but she never attempted to resolve it. Therefore, Asghar Ali Engineer and the reformists made their own matrimonial decisions. They met with local authorities in Udaipur, and the author suggested that they hold a mass wedding in the presence of priests of many faiths. In March 1975, all the leaders and reformist Bohra accepted Asghar Ali's proposal, and a mass marriage ceremony was held in Udaipur. Around 25,000 people were invited to the event, which included writers, human right activists, and journalists. They all blessed the couples, and the

ceremony ended without a hitch (48-49). From there, the Bohra reform movement grew as people learned the truth that had been kept hidden by the high priest's repressive regime.

Asghar Ali Engineer experienced a surge of elation and commenced contemplating the establishment of an entity aimed at countering the neo-colonial subjugation perpetrated by the high priest. In 1977, there was a scheduled meeting that was intended to take place in Udaipur. Reformist Bohras from various countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Mauritius, Kenya, France, Canada, and India, were received with hospitality. Despite the attempted disruption by the high priest, the meeting was successfully concluded with the assistance of the state government, reformist Bohra, and the 'Samanthar Lekhok Sangh.' During the conference, the 'Central Board of Dawoodi Bohra' was founded and a constitution was formulated based on the recommendations of progressive Bohra intellectuals (49-50).

To keep the Bohra Reform Movement active, Asghar Ali Engineer contacted several Marathi, Hindi, and Urdu writers and journalists. Among them, Kamleshwar organized a conference in Kutch, Gujarat. He extended invitations to Asghar Ali Engineer, the members of the 'Samanthar Lekhok Sangh' and many Dalit writers. He perceived the occasion as a chance to garner backing and strengthen the Bohra reformist campaign. Consequently, they participated in the conference and delivered speeches on the marginalization and estrangement of reformist Bohras from their loved ones. Such experiences of suppression and torture were also described by Dalits and other writers, evoking emotional responses from the audience. As a result, many Marathi and Hindi writers opted to write about the Bohra community and their reform campaign. This led to the movement gaining popularity in various regions of India (50-51). A prominent Marathi journalist, Daya Pawar, authored a full-fledged essay on the high priest's neo-colonial exploitation of the Bohra community. "Sarika", a weekly magazine published by the Times of India group, edited by Kamleshwar wrote regarding the same. Members of the "Samanthar Lekhok Sangh" also authored many articles on the high priest's

abuse of human rights in his community (52-54). Thus, the Bohra Reform Movement continued to reframe the Muslim identity of the Bohra nation. Further, to bolster the reform movement, Asghar Ali Engineer contacted the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) writers, who were working with many Urdu newspapers. Many of them, particularly Qamar Rais (general secretary of the PWA), backed the Bohra reform movement, and they took part in activities of the reformist Bohra (55). Thus, through writings in various newspapers and magazines, seminars, and conferences, the narrative of the persecution of the Reformist Bohra spread in the country and abroad.

Asghar Ali was well aware that the high priest was abusing human rights under the guise of religious ideology, and that he was a powerful man who held the support of about 8 lakh people. Therefore, in order to challenge such an influential religious leader, he identified the necessity of governmental collaboration. Consequently, he contacted Prime Minister Moraraji Desai and apprised him about the Bohra reform movement. He expressed his sympathy to them and asked Asghar Ali to meet Jayaprakash Narayan, the leader of the civil rights organization Citizens for Democracy (CFD), and the chief founder of the “Janta Party,” and to discuss the issue briefly. He was shocked to learn of such human rights violations and asked party member S. M. Joshi to write a letter to the high priest requesting that his community should not be exploited. Accordingly, he wrote the letter and sent it to the high priest. In response, the high priest’s brother stated that they had been following the teachings of the Holy Quran and the Hadith (Prophet Muhammad’s sayings), whereas the reformist Bohra were breaching the Quranic canon (56). Further, S. M. Joshi, after talking with Asghar Ali Engineer regarding the same, requested him to provide a reference from the Quran that permits him to do all he and his men were doing. However, they did not get any reply from the high priest.

When Asghar Ali Engineer saw that there was no way to stop the High Priest’s oppression, he decided to take legal action. Hence, due to his efforts, the Tarkunde Nathwani

Commission was formed. Many intellectuals and prominent figures, including Justice Tarkunde, Justice Nathwani, Professor Moin Shakir, and Professor Alam Khundmiri, were members of the commission. It conducted inquiries and found a severe violation of human rights through the denial of the social, religious, and economic rights of the Bohra community. The high priest came to about it and started finding a way out of it. He secretly contacted many Muslim mullahs and political leaders. He bribed them heavily in order to gain their favour. Thus, these corrupt Muslim mullahs and leaders supported the high priest and opposed the Nathwani Commission. They argued that it was a direct interference in religious matters, and the reformist Bohras had gone astray from Islam (55). They even pressurized the government not to implement the law against the high priest. Therefore, the central government could not enact on the law against the high priest due to intense pressure. Thus, though Asghar Ali Engineer was defeated many times, he never deviated from the movement of reframing the identity of Bohra, he always took a different path to continue the movement against such a mighty oppressor.

He started signing a petition (supporting the Nathwani Commission) stating how the high priest was guilty of violating the social and religious rights of the people belonging to the Bohra community (Engineer, Human Rights 1999). He visited Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University, and Aligarh Muslim University and discussed the issues with many faculties. They supported him and signed the petition. He also went to Bihar, UP, and West Bengal and talked to many elites and intellectuals. They also sympathised with him and signed the statement to support the Nathwani Commission (52-54). During that time, Indira Gandhi again came into power. Asghar Ali Engineer, took this petition and met Indira Gandhi and some MPs and human rights activists. He requested her to enact the law against ex-communication and financial oppression. However, it was a direct interference with the particular religion. Asghar Ali tried to convince her that it was not about interference with religion but about neo-colonial

oppression under the guise of religion and human rights violations. Further, he added, the way the high priest was controlling the Bohra community was entirely against the Holy Quran. Besides, he argued that her government was here to save its citizens from oppression and human rights violations. Thus, she accepted the petition and asked Mr. Meena to bring a private member's bill to the parliament. However, it is unfortunate to share that she was murdered before doing anything in 1984 (65-66).

Then the regime of Rajiv Gandhi commenced. Asghar Ali Engineer and many influential Bohra reformists met Rajiv Gandhi with the second petition supporting the Nathwani Commission. He showed them sympathy and asked to meet the law minister. Asghar Ali met him and discussed the issue of the high priest's human rights violation. He listened carefully and requested the deputy secretary to inquire about the facts. On the other side, the high priest had a good connection with the law minister and persuaded him that it was an intrusion into religious issues. So, once again, the government failed to prevent the high priest from violating human rights (66-67). Actually, neither the Congress nor the BJP-led administrations spoke out on Muslim-related concerns. Both governments had the power to stop the High Priest if they wanted to, but they chose not to act because of vote-bank politics (68).

In between, Asghar Ali Engineer tried to get assistance from many Muslim organizations. First, he visited the office of *Jamat-e-Islami's* chief, Abdullah Bukhari. He explained the issue in detail. People seated around him felt sad and showed sympathy for the reformists. First, he refused to help, but Asghar Ali somehow managed to convince him and get him to promise to help in support of the Nathwani Commission. However, not exceeding two days, the chief of *Jamat-e-Islami* proclaimed that the Nathwani commission was against the tenant of Islam. So, it needed to be withdrawn. Despairingly, he went to the Muslim Personal Law Board (MPLB) office to seek help to implement the Nathwani commission.

However, the members of it secretly felt pity for the reformist and did not help anymore. Besides, Asghar Ali Engineer sought assistance from the Muslim political leaders, but due to the vote bank policy, they did not support the reformist Bohras, and they also, did not talk about High Priest's human rights violation (58-59)

On the other hand, the high priest started a propaganda campaign saying the reformist Bohra were atheists and enemies of Islam to get Muslim intellectuals' support. Hence, Asghar Ali planned a press conference in Kolkata to let the people know the reality about reformist Bohra and who is the real culprit. He rented a press club and invited many Urdu journalists. But one of the journalists informed the high priest's local men regarding this conference. They paid a huge bribe to the press club, and the conference was cancelled. Asghar Ali knew nothing about cancellation and reached the place in time. The local goons of the high priest gathered there and attacked Asghar Ali. However, his journalist friends saved him and took him to a nearby safe house. Further, the author was invited by the "Muslim Institute Hall" for a lecture. However, unfortunately, it was cancelled due to pressure put on the management committee by the high priest's men in central Kolkata. Seeing no way, Asghar Ali was invited by an Urdu poet and journalist, Salik Lukhnawi, to his house and requested to talk about Bohra. Author Asghar Ali Engineer accepted his invitation and presented his article there in front of 25 influential journalists (55).

After Kolkata, he visited Hyderabad to join a seminar on the occasion of the sixtieth birthday of Professor Alam Khundmiri, who was one of the eminent members of the Nathwani Commission. The seminar was held at Nizam College. When the author arrived at the dais, the high priest's goons approached him and stabbed him on the right cheek, causing terrible bleeding. In such a bloodcurdling situation, the writers and journalists came around him and saved him from further attack. Finally, some writers helped Asghar Ali to reach a nearby hospital. Thus, he was saved from a certain death (61-62). Asghar Ali Engineer's Bohra reform

movement was not confined to India; it spread worldwide during the late twentieth century. He tried to let the world know how the identity of Bohra Muslims was in crisis due to the neo-colonial oppression of the high priest.

He went to Cairo, Egypt, in 1981 for an interview with the editor of the daily *Al-Ahram*. He took Asghar Ali's interview regarding the Bohra reform movement and printed it in *Al-Ahram*. This newspaper was quite famous in Middle Eastern Gulf countries, and thus, his interview was spread in those Gulf countries. Listening to this, the high priest got angry and wanted to assault Asghar Ali Engineer. During this visit, he went to see Jami Al-Hakim Mosque in Cairo. Supporters of the high priest again assaulted him there for 45 minutes. When he got his senses back, he was in a police station (62–64).

From the 1980s to 2000, many conferences were held in Toronto, Bombay, and London. Bohra reformists from the UK, US, Canada, France, Sweden, Kenya, Tanzania, Germany, and Switzerland were present. Topics of the conference were human rights violations and the reform movement. All the conferences were successfully completed, and thus they stayed connected to each other to enhance such movements for saving Bohra Muslims' religious identity (71–72).

Asghar Ali Engineer portrayed a small nation, Bohra, which adheres to the Shia doctrine of Islam. However, they lost their religious identity as they were bound to prostrate to their religious head, the high priest even though Islam forbids the prostration of anyone other than Almighty. The study explores his autobiography and unveils how the high priest has violated human rights and oppressed the Bohra nation in different ways and how he attempted to resolve such problems to save the religious identity of the Bohra. Even in post-colonial India, he saw that people in the Bohra nation lacked social, religious, and political rights and became slaves of the high priest. Unfortunately, nobody cooperated with him regarding this issue. The goons of the high priest attacked Asghar Ali Engineer many times, he was always rescued from death

and continued his movement until death. Thus, the study of his autobiography has examined the Bohra nation's sufferings due to the loss of religious, social, and political identity which was remained unknown before in mainstream discourses. It also examines Asghar Ali's efforts to restore such identities, which they had lost and had become slaves of high priest for many decades.

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