

## **Khoja Community: Past, Present and Future**

*O my son, even though I have not reached the age which those before me have, yet I looked into their behaviour and pondered upon the events of their lives. (Nahj al-balagha, Letter no. 31)*

This conference is intended as a community conference in the collaboration among the Khoja Heritage Project of the World Federation of KSIMC and the Council of European Jamaats. Its focus is to stimulate a rigorous discourse pertaining to the adventurous past, affluent present and challenging future of the Khoja Shia Ithna Asheri Muslim Communities.

The intriguing saga of the Khoja Community is skillfully interwoven by the elements of spirituality and cultural identity. The Community embraced the *madhhab* of Ahlulbayt (as) in its quest for the true path (*Satpanth*) and retained the cultural identity to celebrate its distinctive heritage eventually adjusting within the larger Shia Muslim Community. History serves as a model of who we are and what we are to be. We learn from our past in order to plan our future. History does not necessarily confine to narrate the 'event occurred' rather invites the reader to relate to the 'event lived'. It is deliberating on this method of reading history and its impact on the Khoja Community that this conference is primarily concerned.

*Panel: Past (Chair: Sheikh Kumail Rajani, Deputy-Chair Khoja Heritage Project)*

### **Kumail Rajani: The Fate of the Khoja Community and British Courts**

This paper aims to examine the identity transformation of the Khoja community from an Indic caste to an Islamic denomination in the British Courts of India from 1847 to 1866. The eclectic set of religious beliefs and practices were abandoned in the favour of a crystallised state-manded identities of the colonial constructs. This transformation, I argue, was the result of a series of event transpired around mid-

nineteenth century. The Indian rebellion of 1857, the arrival of Agha Khan I in India, and the dissenting voices of the community contributed to the reduction of the regional identities into broader religious identities. The primary focus of this paper is to highlight the role of these political upheavals in crafting a new identity of the Khoja community by examining four different cases filed in the British courts of India.

**Jaffer Manek:** How it was 150 years ago and what is missing now for it to be as good again?

A heartfelt conceptual presentation on PowerPoint. I recreate glimpse of KSI glorious past that appears to have faded somewhat. Broad brush facts but I invite you to tell me your corrections, fill the gaps and thoughts for the matters onwards. I endeavour to find solutions, not the usual approach of a list of complaints. The KSI have a very rich heritage but it is dissolving away like sugar, which is not a bad thing where the KSI identity is kept intact alongside. I take you through a potted history, the current dilemmas and try to offer practical solutions. I want to make you think of how you can fly with the pragmatic wings I have in my presentation. Photos old and new inserted selectively to keep you awake and provoked to keep your mind present in the room for 20 minutes. I deliver my talk to exclude any yawns! Look forward to Q & A at the end of my presentation.

**Nazir Jessa:** From Union to World Federation

This presentation focuses on the genesis of the Khoja Community in UK and Europe. Some of the Khojas of East Africa in search of higher education and economic opportunities found their new home in a land which promised better opportunities. Migration was not alien to them, for their ancestors had crossed the Arabian sea to settle down in East Africa in early nineteenth century. Since they left India, adherence to the institutional ethos, cultural values and religious beliefs were the

three defining characteristics of the Khojas. This presentation endeavours to highlight how KSI Community transformed from the nascent Shia Ithna Asheri Union in the early sixties to London Jamaat in the seventies before its culmination into the World Federation.

*Panel: Present (Chair: Dr. Hasnain Walji, Chair Khoja Heritage Project)*

### **Hasnain Walji: Reading Sources, Shifting Narratives**

A community's appreciation of heritage is gauged by the preservation of its intellectual history. What amount of scholarship it has produced? Which ideas it has entertained? In which discourses it has participated? What is its contribution in the development of thoughts and ideas? How articulate it was in sharing its thoughts? This paper aims to address these pertinent questions by illustrating the literal activities of the Khoja Community in the post Ismaili Ithna Asheri schism. The community has produced a wide range of books, articles, editorial columns, and polemical writings to address the then religious and cultural need of the communities. This paper intends to provide a brief survey on these sources which are currently housed at MARC. In doing so, it also highlights how these sources help us to construct and deconstruct the narratives of the genesis of the Khoja Shia Ithna Asheri Community.

### **Annie Shamsi & Farzana Hirji Karawalli: Evaluation of a Community Health Action Model for a UK Based Khoja Community: Has Inspirational Minds made a Difference?**

This paper aims to discuss developments in Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri identity over time in terms of attitudes towards help-seeking, provision for mental health difficulties, building resilience, availability of social support and investment in self care and emotional wellbeing. The paper will consider changes in current thinking amongst UK based Khoja communities within the context of values and belief systems across generations of Khoja communities from the first immigrants.

Cultural influences upon the importance of psychological wellbeing will be addressed. Identity formation of Khoja communities is couched within firmly held cultural and religious values, creating a collectivist culture as opposed to an individualistic one. This fosters the values of hard work, dedication, planning, organisation and forethought. Resilience and robustness have featured consistently as key elements leading to transparent and well managed institutions within Khoja structures. Psychological and external sociocultural factors will be considered in the tension between maintenance of traditional values and adoption of evolving ones, which can lead to breakdown of systems, including the family unit. Present provision for community members, as well as objectives for future, will be considered within a Community Health Action framework, which is a model seeking to promote collective physical and psychological health amongst communities.

### **Sabira Lakha:** Financial dignity for married women

Our just Creator instructs men to treat their wives honourably [Al-Qur'an 2:231]. Financial dignity is key to treating women honourably. This paper will discuss what that could look like for us as a Khoja Shia Ithnaasheri (KSI) community. We were created as "*peoples and tribes*" [Al-Qur'an 49:13]. I'm grateful for our Khoja Heritage. Culture and traditions are key to any civilisation and Islam facilitates these by way of '*urf*' (custom). The financial position of married women has been and will continue to be a concern for our community: past, present and future generations, as our circumstances change. An Islamic marriage is a transaction between two consenting adults yet culturally, women are unable to negotiate contractual terms to secure their Islamic entitlements. For instance, women can't ask for a meaningful mahr or maintenance whilst husbands have the cultural authority to decide whether their wives can earn in or outside the house. When God given protections and opportunities to be financially independent are denied under the weight of cultural expectations, then in marriage, upon widowhood or divorce without alimony, women can suffer dishonourable financial indignity. This paper will consider some 'KSI' options using Islamic financial tools.

Third panel: Future (Chair: Dr. Sibtain Panjwani, founder of the Awakening Project)

**Morgan Clarke & Ali Reza Bhojani:** A case study of what it means to follow the sharia in Khoja Shia Muslim communities of Europe

Sharia (often rendered as 'Islamic law') is a controversial topic in the UK and other European liberal democracies. Talk of 'sharia law' can suggest exceptionally harsh (albeit rarely practiced) criminal punishments and patriarchal family law. But the sharia is also – or still more – a code of personal ethics, in theory covering the whole of life, from religious observance, to dietary prohibitions and dress. As God's right path through life, its content is subject to continued interpretation and debate: by legal experts, but also by ordinary Muslims striving to lead a righteous life in contemporary circumstances. Academic research on Islam, however, usually focuses more on political questions than on understanding everyday Muslim religious life. In this paper, we introduce research that aims to change that by exploring what it means to follow the sharia in the context of the personal ethical and devotional lives of Khoja Shia Muslim communities in Europe. We discuss the prospective scope of our project and share some of our initial findings. Our results so far reveal both the importance and the complexity of the ways in which sharia-mindedness is interwoven within a particular spiritual and cultural identity, informing the challenging present of day to day lives within the Khoja communities of Europe.

**Farhan Jamal:** Khoja Voice

The preface of my theme has derived from Agha Sistani's letter and guidance on this issue; I therefore believe it is our obligation to adhere to this instruction. My chosen topic shall be on the Khoja identity through its diverse range of languages it has adopted and cultivated over the last 50 years. We shall celebrate the assimilation of our heritage from the East to West and comment on the direction

our culture is heading in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Critically evaluating our current use of Gujarati, Kswahili, urdu/hindi and English I shall identify this medium through the multifaceted identity we now wear here in the U.K. Born in the West my heritage plays a monumental role in how I represent my culture away from home. I am proud to say I am trilingual however greatly lean on my elders to bring recognition to this now fading practice. When looking at the psychological stability and identity, our language provides strength and unity, something I believe historically was so apparent 100 years or so till date, I shall comment on this further. When looking at the past I can see a strong patriotic sense of honor in the preservation of our mother tongues, is this something that will be in seen in 20 years to come? Or are we now evolving into a uniformity accessible and relatable to all. Preservation of our culture vs progression in society.

### **Sibtain Panjwani:** [Harnessing the power of Our Community: Integrating Mimbar with Madrasa and Family](#)

My paper focuses on the much-neglected role of the mimbar in holistically transforming the intellectual, moral and spiritual state of the Khoja Shi'a Ithna Asheri community. After sharing statistical data based on several surveys conducted through the Awakening Project (a grassroots think tank I run), I will go on to discuss a significant narration by Ali ibn Abi Talib (a.s) that shows his vision for a mosque. This narration implicitly covers the kind of knowledge and teachings we should gain when visiting a mosque and may provide us with an enduring and foundational vision of how we should conceive of the role of the mimbar today. This is all the more important at a time when the Khoja Shi'a Ithna Asheri community may fear new ideas about the interpretation of Islam and not react using the wisdom and justice of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s). My paper will conclude by exploring the links between the mimbar, madrasah and family units as interconnected institutions that need to work together more to solve contemporary social and moral issues.

## A poem on the Khoja Community: The Past, the Present and the Future by Taj Jaffer

In the days of our parents of old  
Our grandparents were truly of gold  
Left the ideology of their ancestors of old  
In pursuit of what they truly believed in and thought

But manners of old are hard to leave  
So retained some traditions for generations to seive  
They in turn, for better future had gradually to leave  
Their homeland for a distant land in their view

Tiring journey they willing undertook  
Hardships of new land they overlooked  
Settlements in time they managed and took  
Land of other nations they held and stood

Business flourished and settlements grew  
Institutes of different categories then grew  
Natives had a share in the flourishing and flew  
But the hard earned heritage our parents never threw

Now challenges began to appear anew  
For the betterment of their offspring they withdrew  
New pastures in different lands they pursued  
But at a great cost to heritage it all grew

Bit by bit the preserved heritage became as dew  
Enslavement in tradition and language with a hue  
New rules and restrictions now became due

Ashamed of their heritage the modern generation then grew

The future seems bleak and not in the least bright

A fine coating upon the rust is the plight

Dépendance upon others is the blight

À new seal upon the ragged tapestry is the sight

The awaited saviour when makes his show

What the possessors of khoja heritage will show

The inner faith if be great and displayed

The sacrifices of our great parents will then be paid