

Title: Khojas

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Synonyms: None

Definition: Originating from India, Khojas were initially converted from Hinduism to the Isma'ili branch of Islam. Later communal fighting split this group even further. Known for their sense of discipline and organization the diverse Khoja groups are now well established throughout the world. .

The Early Khojas

Khojas trace their ancestry to India, more specifically to Sind, Punjab, Gujarat, and Kutch where their ancestors were converted to Islam in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. A Persian Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* (proselyte), Pir Ṣadr al-Dīn (Sadardin; d. 1369 or 1416) is credited with the mass conversion of the Khojas from the Lohanas, a Hindu caste living predominantly in the Gujarat province in India.

Before their conversion, the Khojas reportedly formed the Lohana community, having descended from the mythic Indian king, Rāma's son, Lav. Due to this, they were known as *thakkar*, which is also a phonetic corruption of the Indian title *thakor* (lord, master). The word is a close Indian approximation to the title given by Pir Ṣadr al-Dīn, *khwaja*.

Pir Ṣadr al-Dīn laid the basis for the communal organization of the Khojas by building the first three *jamaat khanas* (assembly or prayer halls) and appointing *mukhis* (leaders). Over a period of time, several pirs or spiritual leaders came after Ṣadr al-Dīn and gradually, the beliefs crystallized to those of the Ismā'īlī Nizārī faith; particularly after the arrival of the Aga Khan

Ḥasan ‘Alī Shāh from Iran to India in 1840. By this time, the Khojas had spread all over Kutch and Gujarat. Some had also moved to Bombay and Muscat.

In the course of time, three variations of Khojas were organized under three different *jamaats*: the Sunni Khojas, who are very few, the Twelver Khojas; and the majority who are the Nizari Ismaili Khojas, followers of the Aga Khan.

The arrival of the Aga Khan I Ḥasan ‘Alī Shāh in India led to an escalation of earlier disputes within the Khoja community about the rights of the Imam. The genesis of the split probably goes back to 1829 when a rich merchant, Habib Ibrahim, refused to pay a religious tax known as *dasond* (the tenth), which was imposed by the Nizari Imam. It was regarded by Habib Ibrahim and some fifty families as lacking any Islamic basis. When all the families were excommunicated in 1830, they chose to become Sunnis. By that time Bombay had become the point of convergence for many Khojas who had migrated from Kutch and Kathiavar to take advantage of its commercial growth.

The period between 1845 and 1861 was marked by socio-religious turmoil in the Khoja community. In 1861 the Aga Khan circulated a general announcement declaring the Khojas to be Shī‘is; their marriage and funeral rites were to be performed in accordance with Shī‘ī practices. Moreover, he required his followers to put their signature under this announcement, declaring their Shī‘ah affiliation and unquestioning loyalty to him.

In 1866, a group of disenchanted members filed a suit against the Aga Khan in court regarding the usage of community finances. The judgment of Sir Joseph Arnold in a lawsuit fully upheld the rights and authority of the Aga Khan, leading to the dissidents separating themselves from the Ismā‘īlī community. These formed the nucleus of the Sunni Khojas. Later dissidents, seceding in 1877 and 1901, formed the Ithna-Asheri (Twelver) Khoja communities in Bombay

and East Africa.

In the early 1900s, some Twelver Shī'ī Khojas went to visit the holy sites in Iraq. During their discussions with a prominent scholar of the time, Shaykh Zayn al-'Abidīn al-Mazandarānī, they asked him to send a scholar to India so that he could teach them the basic principles of Islam. At the request of Shaykh al-Mazandarānī, Mulla Qadir Hussein arrived in India and taught some Khoja families the essentials of Twelver Shī'ī faith. From these few families the Khoja Twelver Shī'ī community has now grown globally to over 100,000 members.

The success of the Twelver Khojas in Bombay in forming their own group spread throughout the Khoja world as new *jamaats* were formed. The movement of spreading Twelver teachings was symbolized by the construction of Islamic mosques instead of the *jamaatkhanas* as well as the performance of regular Muslim practices like the *salat*.

On realizing this influence of Twelver Shi'ism among their followers, Nizari leaders started to impose restrictions on Twelver Shi'i practices. Under the Aga Khan III the Nizari Khoja community asserted its separate identity, dissociating itself from Twelver religious practices.

An important figure in the conversion to and dissemination of Twelver Shī'ī teachings was Haji Gulamali Haji Isma'il, popularly known as Haji Naji. He is credited with translating Arabic and Persian religious texts to Gujarati, a language spoken by most Twelver Khoja Shī'īs of the time. Many of these texts articulated Shī'ī beliefs and practices.

Many Khojas living in India migrated to East Africa in the 1840s. They left India due to famine and poverty and by the prospect of better financial opportunities in Africa. The majority of the Twelver and Nizari Khojas migrated to the West in 1972-3, a result of the East African governments' policies that favored Africans in the social, economic, and educational spheres.

These measures included the nationalization of Asian-owned enterprises and buildings. The measures also stressed better education for Africans, often at the expense of the Indian community. Increased immigration by the Khoja community was also precipitated by the revolution in Zanzibar in 1964 and the expulsion of Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin in 1972. Khoja Shī'īs from Tanzania and Kenya also migrated due to the inimical socio-political conditions in their homeland countries.

Under the leadership of the Aga Khan III (d. 1957) the Nizari Ismailis consolidated their identity and have engaged in educational and socioeconomic reforms that made the community self-sufficient. The unquestioning devotion of the Nizari Khoja to the Aga Khan in addition to the restructured hierarchical communal organization with the Aga Khan as the supreme authority, facilitated the implementation of religious social, and economic reforms.

The fact that the Aga Khan is a spiritual leader who is believed to have access to esoteric understanding of texts means that he possesses the authority to interpret religious texts and laws in keeping with the times. Based on the *farman* (religious edicts) issued by the Aga Khan, Ismailis have their own genre of prayers and supplications. They have their own special religious taxes and have established congregational places (*jamaat khanas*), which, as with many Ṣūfī ṭariqāhs, are out of bounds for non-Ismailis.

Twelver Khoja Shī'īs are known for their sense of discipline and organization. In 1976, under the astute leadership of Asghar M.M. Jaffer (d. 2000), they established a world body called the World Federation of Khoja Shi'a Ithna'asheri Jamaat in England. With the help of this world body, they have established centers of worship throughout the world. The Federation's stated aim is to act as an umbrella organization, catering to the needs of the world Khoja community.

The largest Twelver Khoja congregation in America is in New York. There are other Khoja centers in cities like Los Angeles, Orlando, Minneapolis, and Allentown.

Cross references: Ithna'Ashari & Shi'ism

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