

The Tyranny of Religion

An Interview with Farida Dabbawala
— a Bohra Muslim

CAN you tell us something about the Bohra religious system ?

The Daudi Bohra movement began around the time of the prophet Mohammed. Many Gujarati Hindus from the trading community got converted to this faith. The Bohras believe that the Dai (summoner to faith), the head priest, must enjoy supreme religious authority. The present Dai is Syedna Durhani. No marriage of funeral ceremony can be performed without his permission.

His family consisting of about 150 persons who all have religious authority, collects taxes from Bohras. A tax has to be paid on every important occasion – from childbirth, naming ceremony, circumcision, joining school, marrying, having children, to death. In this way, the Syedna family collects not less than Rs. 12 crore in a year – all tax-free and non-accountable.

What do they do with so much money?

They do what all rich people do. Enjoy themselves. Go to five-star hotels, laze in swimming-pools, watch cabaret dances! They tour India or go abroad in the most expensive ships. The property of the whole Bohra community is in the name of the Syedna family. They invest this money in hotels and other businesses. The scandals about the purchase of Sandoz House and Ambassador Hotel in Bombay have come to light.

What are the latest oppressive laws against women ?

Women are terribly oppressed in the Bohra community. In January, an order was issued that all women must wear the veil (chadar or burkah) in public. Also, this veil must not be of the traditional

black colour but must be differently coloured and designed. They want to keep us hidden from others but still decorate us to please their eyes.

Of course, everything depends on their sweet will. If we are told not to wear the veil at a particular ceremony, we have to remove it. But if they decide we should wear it, we have to put it on. Their laws don't even give us a right over our own bodies. They decorate or strip our bodies as and when they like.

What are the other restrictions on Bohra women?

Other restrictions ? When we don't have the right to wear the clothes we want, to talk to a person we like, what freedom remains ? There are nothing but restrictions and more restrictions all around us. We are not allowed to talk to a Hindu man. We can't step out of the house without veiling our faces. Why, even if my small child falls down in the verandah and gets hurt, I can't run out of the house without putting on the burkah.

Were any rules proclaimed for Bohra men also ?

Yes. They are all supposed to wear caps and grow the typical Bohra beard. They have to cut their hair very short. Any man with slightly longer hair, gets kicked out of the Masjid.

Does the Koran sanction such laws?

Who knows ? Even if I read it, I can't understand its language; 99.9 per cent of those who read the Koran don't understand a word of it. We are forced to mug up the sentences and sanzar even though we don't know what they mean. These big bosses of ours claim to understand it, but of course they are above all earthly laws ?



How did you react to these new rules?

I have defied all their rules from childhood onwards. I was the first Bohra woman in Baroda to sit in the shop and do business without a veil. And I didn't ask their permission.

In fact, a very brave reformist movement against this authoritarian rules is going on without the community. The reformists are socially boycotted, beaten, even murdered. Social boycott is called Barat, and means being literally thrown out of the community. Women are forced to divorce their reformist husbands. My brother was boycotted a few months ago. The pressure, both economic and social, was really terrible but we withstood it. Now we have been accepted back into the community.

Inspite of this, I have refused to wear the veil. I continue to help my brother in his business. Recently, a religious procession was taken out in support of these new laws. When it passed in front of our shop, I came out to the gate and stood there, unveiled. The passed on, their stares couldn't frighten me!

But do you think this will change the situation? Or how do you think Bohra women can be liberated?

My defiance will not change the condition of Bohra women – I know that quite well. This was my individual protest. *We Bohra women can only liberate ourselves by collective action. We will have to do what our sisters in Iran did – fight against the religious leaders and force them to retreat.* □