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Home is where the heart is



LIFE ON MOORE STREET Dawoodi Bohras have melded well into the locality where they live. Photo: R. Ragu



LIFE ON MOORE STREET: At prayer Photo: R. Ragu



• LIFE ON MOORE STREET The façade of the Saifee mosque Photo: R. Ragu



• LIFE ON MOORE STREET Graves at the cemetery Photo: R. Ragu

A peek into the lives, culture and history of the Dawoodi Bohra community in George Town

Inside George Town, you can turn a corner and leap back centuries. At narrow Moore Street, which winds its way past the busy banking area of First Line Beach, many languages, dresses and cuisines rub shoulders as I make my way to the pink-stoned Saifee Mosque.

One of the spiritual centres of the Dawoodi Bohras in Chennai, it is filled with men and women heading out after a crowded morning. It's Independence Day and the flag on the mast outside the mosque flutters in the breeze that also carries the call to Friday prayers.

Three flights of marble-lined stairs take me to the office of 32-year-old Abdul Qadir, the assistant aamil saheb, whose father Sheikh Shabbir Nomani is the spiritual head (aamil) of the community in Chennai. Women in ridahs, the bright skirt and head cloth, work at the computers that line one side of the quiet office. Men in exquisite gold-embroidered topis, saya (overcoat) and kurta-izhar (pyjama) kiss the aamil saheb's hand in greeting.

Qadir ushers me into a room lined with intricate sketches of Cairo's Al-Jame Al-Anwar mosque, and the previous and present heads of the community, Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin with his son, Ali Qadir Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin. Even as he conducts official business in Lisan-ud-dawat, a sweet mix of Gujarati, Arabic and Persian, Qadir tells me of the origins of the community in Yemen, their journey to India after the Fatimid empire weakened and their history here in impeccable English. "The Dawoodi Bohras are a sub-sect of Shia Islam. The Dawat (mission) was shifted to India sometime in the late 1500s."

The Bohras exchanged the harsh living conditions of Yemen, perched at the cutting edge of the Arabian Peninsula, for the gentler shores of western India. While they thrived under the patronage of some of the Great Mughals, persecution and drought during the reign of Aurangzeb forced them to leave Khambat. The community today has a formidable presence in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra and in the cities of Chennai, Coimbatore, Bangalore, Kozhikode, Kochi and Kolkata.

"Most of the 8,000 members here live in George Town. Our lives are centered around the Saifee, Vajihi and the 200-year-old Mohammedi mosque, our businesses, and the 80-year-old Madrassa Saifiya Burhania, our school on Salai Vinayagar Koil Street. Through the British Council's 'Connecting Classrooms' project, the school has a tie-up with Launceston College, Cornwall. The community is 100 per cent literate," says Qadir. "Records and the graves at our cemetery in Angappa Naicken Street show we have been part of this city for at least 300 years."

This explains the ease with which Huzefa Kapasi of Gujarati origin, who runs Allied Agencies that deals in rare carpets, converses in Tamil. He guides me through the Saifee mosque, its tiled courtyard, the grand chandeliered hall where the men pray, past the lattice screens behind which sit the women and the arches and windows lined with gold-leafed calligraphy.

Kapasi then goes down a twisting staircase to the reception halls where weddings and misaq (the oath-taking ceremony where young members are initiated into the community) are celebrated and the tidy kitchens where steam rising from the cauldrons quivers in the afternoon heat. This is where a daily meal, comprising dal, chawal, kadi and roti are made and supplied in labelled tiffin carriers to every family. It is this act of liberation from the kitchen that underlines the equality Bohra women enjoy. "This idea came from Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin so that women could devote more time for business or work and their families," says Qadir.

Zainab Huzefa Darbar, a 35-year-old mother of two, has lived here for the past 14 years. "With less time now spent on daily chores, I've opened a gift wrapping business and enjoy creating ridahs," she says. Sold in boutiques in this area, but mostly created at home, ridahs are works of art. The cotton and silk base is fringed with a mind-boggling variety of designs put together with

crochet, lace, ajrakh, tie-and-dye panels and zardosi. “Our brides wear ghagras and dupattas for weddings but wear a ridah when they set out,” says Zainab.

Bridal make-up is another area of interest — Nifisa, Kapasi’s wife, specialises in it.

Although many Bohras follow a host of professions, the hardware business is their mainstay. At the mosque, their surnames — Bandoowala, Carpetwala, Rangoonwala, Palanpurwala — signify their place of origin or trade. The word Bohra itself comes from the Gujarati word for trade, *vehawar*.

Akbar Palanpurwala, born in Chennai, says, “Some of the family-run shops are very old. Ahmedally Hassanally in Broadway has been around for 77 years, A.H. Taher for 72, A.K. Abdullah Bhai on Erabalu Chetty Street for 80 years, and A.M. Hassanally on Linghi Chetty Street for 104 years.”

Dawoodi Bohras have melded well into the locality where they live. “We are a peace-loving community,” says Qadir, with polite finality as I leave.

Kapasi sees me off at the gate. Then, taking off his blinding white saya, he folds it neatly, and whizzes away to his life as a businessman in George Town.