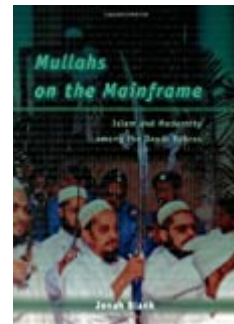


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Jonah Blank.** *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity Among the Daudi Bohras.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. xviii + 408 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-05677-7; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-05676-0.



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**Published on** H-Gender-MidEast (November, 2002)

Jonah Blank's book on the Daudi Bohra sect of the Ismaili branch of Shi'a Muslims is a welcome addition to the scarce literature on both the Ismaili sect of Shi'ism as opposed to the Ithna-Ashari or Twelver branch of Shi'ism, and on South Asian Muslims compared to Middle Eastern Muslim communities and societies. Farhad Detary traced the development of Ismaili Studies and mentions work centering on their literary heritage and history but makes no mention of sociological and anthropological work. Blank's work represents a refreshing departure from this exclusive concern. The only other works in a similar category are those of Shibani Roy, *The Dawoodi Bohras*, and A. Engineer, *The Bohras*. [1]

Drawing on secondary sources, participant observation, interviews and a questionnaire survey, Blank has grasped the main nuances of this important Muslim sect. The major objective of his research, as he states, is to detail the orthodox paradigm of Bohra society. The author describes and analyses its critical markers, namely the traditions as embodied in the figure of their spiritual head, da'i-al-mutlaq, and his neo-traditionalist reform program launched in the 1970s which includes elements of cultural revival and a forward movement in the world of technology and Western pedagogy.

The book is divided into two main parts. Part 1

deals with ethnographic material and is divided into five chapters. The first chapter traces the historical roots of the faith from early Shi'ism through early Ismailism and the establishment of the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt to the origins of the community in India through Yemen in the eleventh century and the various schisms within the community into Daudi, Sulemani, Jaffari, etc. since the sixteenth century. The spiritual history of the community and their religious organization has been written about previously and this chapter offers little new information or insight. What are instructive and novel are the next four chapters. The second chapter focuses on the life cycle rituals of the Daudi Bohras from birth to death of which perhaps the most important is *mithaq* or the oath of allegiance to the da'i. The oath sets the tone of what is expected of every Daudi Bohra, namely complete obedience to the sect's spiritual head in religious and temporal matters. It is the controversy surrounding the content and meaning of the oath that has resulted in much of the power struggle within the community. The next chapter describes the important annual religious rites of the Daudi Bohras. These rituals not only set the rhythm of Bohra life throughout the year but also provide valuable insight into the spiritual heritage they share with other Muslims, simultaneously making space for three sacral identities: a pan-Islamic, a pan Shi'a and

a unique sectarian identity. The primary ritual is *waaz*, a formal occasion presided over by the d'ai himself or his agent. The characteristic aspect of the *waaz* is a sermon. The second most important rite is *majalis* or religious/lamentation assemblies. These rituals are presided over by the clergy and are mixed-sex in nature, although women are relegated to the margins. The author's main source for the description of these rituals is his personal observation combined with instruction from members of the religious establishment. The result is a limited male elite viewpoint, which overlooks the rich fabric of rituals performed almost exclusively by ordinary women in the domestic sphere without any presence of the clergy class or men. To cite two examples: ritual meal trays (*thal bharvanu*) held in honor of important Islamic figures, especially Fatima Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet; and Ali Groups (*Ali ni tasbi*) or women's neighborhood networks which meet every day in homes on a rotating basis during the Islamic month of Rajab, to call out the name of the Prophet's son-in-law. The last two chapters describe the kinship terminology and organization and the status of Bohra women. The centerpiece is the remarkable rise in the status of women not only in the last fifty years but well before India's independence. The 1920s saw the acceptance of secular education besides the vernacular, the 1930s witnessed the relaxation of *pardah* rules and in the 1940s higher education for women was officially approved. The final chapter in part 1 of the book gives a peek into the life of the *Oeroyals* or *Qasr-e-Ali* which Blank translates as children and grandchildren of the fifty-first da'i Syedna Taher Saifuddin, along with their spouses and descendants. Many ordinary Bohras see only one side of the da'i and his family. This chapter serves the function of taking away some of the mystique surrounding the *Oeroyals*.

Part 2 of the book, titled "Analysis," also has five chapters. The pervasive, central authority of the da'i extending in both religious and temporal matters is unique only to the Bohras and the Agha Khanis (a sister Ismaili sect) on the Indian sub-continent. This sets them apart from other Muslim sects and groups, which remain by and large leaderless. This centralization of power has enabled the head cleric to promote its own discriminatory brand of modernization and invigorate selective traditions at the same time. The four chapters deal with the variety of ways this two-point program has been accomplished and the final chapter deals with the dissident movement within the sect. The spiritual hegemony of the da'i is exercised by enforcing a strict dress code for both men and women, collecting a variety of taxes and tithes

deemed Islamic and issuing of certificates of orthopraxy. For women this has meant the revival of *pardah* practice in a modern guise called *rida*, which is a two-piece colorful synthetic garment with baubles and embroidery. The certificate colors green, yellow and red reflect the degree of obedience by the holder to the strictures promulgated by the high priest. Many of these traditions have been revitalized by adoption of modern information and communication technologies by the cleric class. But paradoxically, these technologies and the globalization of the sect threaten the very boundaries the spiritual head is trying to enforce. The focus on harnessing of technologies to fulfill traditional purposes and the readiness with which the common Bohras and the cleric class have adopted computer use as constituting modernity of a sect is problematic.

The second half of this section of the book deals with Western education and the whole-hearted manner in which the clerics and the ordinary people have embraced it. The education of future clerics at the main seminary in Surat city and cleric-managed *madrasas cum* schools train ordinary pupils in Bohra cultural and religious norms as well as Western scientific pedagogy, preparing them for a spiritual life and the material world. The hegemony of the spiritual head of the community has not gone unquestioned. The debate centers on secularism, whether Muslim spiritual and material life is intrinsically connected or can be separated. This brings us back to the problem of a limited modernity, which the author leaves unexamined. Why have the demands of the dissidents, with the exception of secular education, remained unfulfilled? Is it because they center on democracy and transparency in the utilization of funds collected from the community? Do these form elements of modernity? How would the community fare if the dissident's demands for modern infrastructure such as hospitals, libraries and other welfare services were included? How would it fare if education included not just the pursuit of business and technical education but also encouragement of the humanities and the fine arts such as creative expression through music and dance? Also, to equate the phenomena of modernity with Western intervention such as higher levels of technology and Western education obscures the possibility of looking for indigenous modernity, for example women's inheritance rights and control over their property. The central belief of Shi'i faith is that every faithful requires guidance and direction from the Syedna. The question of reconciling direction with control is a thorny one and Blank seems to imply that since the overall direction and response to it is posi-

tive, the issue of control can be set aside. Aside from the two main parts of the book, researchers of the Ismaili sect will find the section on bibliographical discussion and its various sources very useful.

Overall the author makes a strong case for how this sect and its leadership has demonstrated that it is possible to modernize and yet remain deeply rooted in one's traditions. This is true provided the word *modernity* is used in a narrow sense of adoption of information, communication technologies and secular education. Secondly, the author highlights the political quietism of the sect vis-a-vis the wider Hindu society; its history of resorting to peaceful means in the face of danger; its implantation on Indian soil not through conquest of territory but through missionary effort and none of the militant stereotypes of Muslim males that the media are prone to conjure up. Unfortunately the flap of the book with mullahs holding swords against a backdrop of binary (machine) language ends up sending a mixed message and dilutes the purpose of the book, which is to challenge the extreme stereotypes besetting the Muslims and Muslim communities. Thirdly, as the title suggests, the spotlight of the book has been on the cleric and orthodox elite of the community. The history of the community has been so far the history of its leadership. What is needed is a shift from an elite perspective to researching the mundane lives of people.

The book has made a small beginning in this direction; what is awaited is a more systematic documentation of the social, economic and cultural lives of ordinary people. Fourthly, Jonah Blank has done a service to future scholars with his diplomatic stand vis-a-vis the spiritual head and his program, laying the ground for access of researchers to a sect and its library which has remain closed for too long and ultimately for a more thorough analysis of its functioning. What is lost in the bargain is an adequate critique of the spiritual head's agenda for the sect and lack of real grass-root level input. The fifth observation is that the strength of the book also lies in its not infrequent comparisons with other Muslim groups on the Indian sub-continent. Related to this is the issue of smaller Muslims sects, which have been neglected in scholarly literature. By researching a relatively small and unknown sect, the author may inspire other scholars to study Muslim minority sects. Lastly, the book is well timed. The new century may see a shift in balance from the predominant focus on the Middle East to South Asia, which has the highest un-researched concentration of Muslims.

#### Note

[1]. Shibani Roy, *The Dawoodi Bohras* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1984); and A. Engineer, *The Bohras* (Delhi: Vikas, 1993).

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**Citation:** Rehana Ghadijally. Review of Blank, Jonah, *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity Among the Daudi Bohras*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. November, 2002.

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