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The Endangered Species: An Account of the Journey of Faith by the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Community

Jamal M. Moosa^a

^a Academy of International Studies , Jamia Millia Islamia , New Delhi , India

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Book Reviews

HASSAN ALI M JAFFAR, 2012. *The Endangered Species: An Account of the Journey of Faith by the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Community*, Toronto (ON), Mulla Asghar Memorial Library & Islamic Resource Centre, xi + 514 pages.

This volume, as the title suggests, is the account of a rather small community's journey of survival, a community which has undergone two transitions over the last century or so. The first transition was that of relocation, being scattered across the world. However, the second more important transition was that of faith. The text is written in a lucid and easy style with many photographs targeted at the community's youth. The primary objective is to introduce the current generation to the complex and traumatic processes of evolution, as a result of which the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri community established itself and prospered in different parts of the world. It recounts anything that an elder or community leader feels would be essential reading in this community's history, evolution, belief systems, salient features and peculiarities. More importantly, it endeavours to pass on to the next generation those traits that are making them different from others. The author's underlying fear is that although the community has experienced great prosperity, its continued existence is rather uncertain, even endangered.

The Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri community is between 100,000 and 120,000 strong, which is just 0.5 percent of the world's Shia population. However, despite their rather insignificant numbers, they exercise considerable influence and are admired around the world. Thus, the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri was the first group of pilgrims permitted by the Saddam Hussein regime, after the first Iraqi war of 1990–1991, to visit Najaf, because of the particular status they enjoy and because of their apolitical stance. Quite pointedly, a leading Indian Shia scholar and leader, Kalbe Sadiq, is quoted as saying that one must not question Allah's ways, but he wished that he was a Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri so that he would be able to do all that he could for the community's development.

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Organisation for Diaspora Initiatives, New Delhi

The Khojas are assumed to originally belong to the Lohana community of Kutch and Kathiawar who, under the influence of Pir Sadr ud-Din, began to adopt some traits of Islam while not severing all ties with their traditional Hindu or Lohana beliefs and heritage. Due to various factors, including famine and the agrarian crisis in British India, they began to migrate in the early part of the nineteenth century. While a sizeable number of them settled in Bombay (now Mumbai), many ventured further afield and sailed from ports such as Porbandar to Muscat in Oman and to territories in East Africa, including offshore islands like Zanzibar and Madagascar. Due to the nature of their profession as traders, they settled in small groups and communities in different port cities on the East and southern African coastline, from where they spread into the hinterland. Later, they migrated to Europe and North America, and some community members have shifted to other vocations such as teaching or medicine. However, wherever they went, they settled in small well-knit communities and established community centres, mosques and, more importantly, burial grounds. But, despite this scattering, the Khojas have remained a cohesive transcontinental community for well over a century, and they intend to remain so.

As the foreword to the book states, ‘... five generations and five continents later, it’s remarkable that the community has retained its identity while continually optimising its social capital’. This is in sharp contrast to the other two Shia communities from the sub-continent which migrated around the same time to Fiji and the Caribbean. Those who went to Fiji have lost their language and culture but retained their faith, the Sunni branch of Islam, while those who went to the Caribbean lost everything including their faith. Hence, the author (Hassan Ali M. Jaffar) feels that the community’s existence has been on a rather precarious footing, and that the future is even more daunting. In a rapidly changing world, due to factors and dynamics from both within and without the community, this feeling has become so pervasive and the sense of loss so great that he chose to use the phrase ‘Endangered Species’ in the title of his book, based on a comment made by someone at the Khoja world headquarters in London. A major undercurrent in the book is that the author does not want his community to be too complacent; and he wants it to balance the desire to retain its core values with a willingness to imbibe positive external influences. Clearly, the old guard is worried about the lack of enthusiasm and interest displayed by the community’s youth, and the hope is that this book will spur them on to become more active.

Jaffar, as the book’s foreword by Hasnain Walji states, is a keen observer well-known for his candid analyses. His ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking about the community’s affairs teases many Khojas out of their comfort zones. Walji further says that:

... when I first studied the manuscript, instinctively my red pen began criss-crossing the double-spaced pages. But after a chapter or two I stopped, as I realised that my editing of the characteristic was sterilising all the flavours and aromas of an author who had lived in the very kitchen of [the] Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri house of history.

The book is divided into five parts, each covering different aspects or dimensions of the journey of faith of the Khojas. In Part One there are two chapters discussing the current international environment. After a brief, concise history of the emergence and spread of Islam and the Caliphate, the first chapter focuses on the causes for its decay, decline and demise. The author lays the blame for this squarely on the interests and forces that kept out fresh ideas and changes, like the printing press, from the Muslim world. As a result, many centuries were lost, while the Europeans could not only catch up but also established an unassailable developmental lead. The next chapter discusses the present situation, especially the post-9/11 world, and implications for not only the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri and other Shia communities but for the entire global society.

Part Two of the book contains seven chapters and discusses issues centred on community affairs and the identity of the Khojas. The first chapter begins with a statement by Aga Khan III that within another 10–30 years, the Shia Ithna-Asheri would have declined in number and, perhaps, would not even exist after another century. In response, Jaffar discusses the origins and founding of the community. The general belief is that the word ‘Khoja’ is derived from the Persian word ‘Khawaja’. The majority of Khojas, after the adoption of Islam, were followers of the Aga Khan. Due to conditions prevalent in the Persia of 1842, the Aga Khan was forced to flee and seek refuge amongst his followers in the Khoja community in Bombay. Even before his arrival, disagreement over the control and use of the community’s resources led to the first splintering of the Khojas. The breakaway group was excommunicated in 1829 but, subsequently (in 1869), allowed to return under certain conditions. Despite being readmitted, relations with this group remained tense and the final split came in 1877 when they formed the *Barabhaiya* (the 12 brothers) group and adopted the Sunni branch of Islam.

This second splinter group of Khoja dissenters, who left in 1877, was led by Haji Dewaji Jamal (the author’s great-great-grandfather). They moved to Zanzibar, set up a community and built the *Quwat-ul-Islam* Mosque. Jamal, who was quite outspoken about the Aga Khan’s *farmans* (edicts), went to Karbala and met

Mulla Qadir Hussein, who used to run a *madrassa* in the Khoja *mohala* in Bombay in 1862. Later, Hussein closed this *madrassa* and went to Karbala to further his education. It was during Jamal's visit to Karbala that he was reunited with his old acquaintance from Bombay. During their meetings, different aspects of Khoja beliefs and practices came under discussion, which eventually led them to adopt the Shia Ithna-Asheri faith.

Jamal then returned to Bombay with Hussein to educate the remaining Khoja community members loyal to the Aga Khan in the tenets of their newly adopted branch of the faith. However, this resulted in division, and Part Three of the book covers the efforts and struggles of Mulla Qadir Hussein. This was a period of trial and tribulation in the face of resistance from the majority of the Khoja community, who remained aligned to the Aga Khan. This part also discusses how the smaller community moved and settled down in different parts of Africa, and the challenges and problems they encountered. It tries to explain how the community transcended its insularity and began to work among other communities and the natives of East Africa.

Part Four deals with the historical and social dynamics among Indians in East Africa, especially their misplaced sense of security, tragically shattered by the events in Uganda in the 1970s. There is also a discussion on the problems and challenges in the post-independence South Asian sub-continent: the crises and problems that have plagued Pakistan and its Shia community is seen as an almost intractable 'quagmire' while, on the other hand, there is a deep sense of loss and betrayal because of the violence and disorder that the Indian state of Gujarat had witnessed recently.

Part Five discusses the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri community's relations with other communities, such as the Ismailis and Bohras. A chapter is devoted to the consolidation of the community and one to their communal organisations. Jaffar has also devoted a chapter each on what he terms 'common Khoja traits' and 'Khoja humour and peculiarities'. The book ends with a lengthy epilogue of more than 40 pages. Essentially, this is a conclusion not only wrapping-up the main points of the book, but also the author's insights on, and aspirations for, the future of the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri community.

As previously stated, an undercurrent of fear and concern for the future, mingled with a sense of hope and promise, runs like a golden thread through the book. But such promise and tryst can only be realised if individuals place community interests and values above their own immediate, often selfish, needs and desires. This volume

hopes to instil such a feeling of communality. It is a valuable contribution to social anthropology where an insider, with unprecedented access to the inner workings of a community, is able to unravel the unique ability of a minuscule community to project itself onto the global stage. Certainly, this book will be of interest to students of ethnic and diaspora studies for its insights into how a dispersed and scattered community has been able to overcome the drawbacks of its translocation to different parts of the world and, nevertheless, become prosperous while, on the other hand, has been able to retain intact its core identity and community structure despite many internal and external changes and challenges.

Jamal M Moosa

*Academy of International Studies,
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India*
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SAMAN KELEGAMA (ed), 2011. *Migration, Remittances and Development in South Asia*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 346 pages.

International migration and policies governing migration issues have become increasingly important matters of concern for governments in both the developed and the developing world. The labour surplus economies of South Asia have substantially benefitted from remittance inflows, which enabled them, at least partially, to begin to redress unemployment and poverty in regions where emigration levels have been particularly high. As a result, and from a balance-of-payments perspective, many of these countries have been able to meet a good portion of their current account obligations. But, notwithstanding these benefits, the developed countries have not been forthcoming as far as the liberalisation of labour laws are concerned, at least not as much as they have been regarding capital flows, all thanks to threats made by right-wing groups and nationalist extremists on the domestic front. In the context of 'Arab Spring' in some countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, the Saudi Arabian government seems determined to regulate labour flows through a system of *Nitaqat*, the impact of which will have to be borne by South Asian labour. This volume, edited by Saman Kelegama, comes at a time when there is a noticeable increase in the pace of consultation between labour in the