

ROUNDTABLE

The Multiple Registers of Arabic in the Daudi Bohra Da‘wa and South Asian Public Life, c. 1880–1920

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In 1917, an Arabic treatise was published by the recently inaugurated Daudi Bohra *dā‘ī* *al-muṭlaq* (chief cleric), Tahir Sayf al-Din (r. 1915–65). In the work, entitled *Daw’ Nur al-Haqq al-Mubin* (The Brilliance of the Light of Transparent Truth), the *dā‘ī* not only underscored his monopoly of religious interpretation in the Daudi Bohra community, but also engaged in a series of jibes against Sunnis and Shi‘is.¹ As the book gained a wider readership beyond the confines of the Daudi Bohra community, several cities in Gujarat were beset by public campaigns against the *dā‘ī* and his followers. Handbills in Gujarati and Urdu were disseminated challenging the *dā‘ī* to a disputation and calling for his censure. Arabic, Persian, and Urdu fatwas were also penned castigating the *dā‘ī* for engaging in what his detractors regarded as *takfir* (excommunication).

In turn, Daudi Bohra commentators rose to the *dā‘ī*’s defense. One of these, the editor of the Gujarati newspaper *Islam*, attempted to justify the *dā‘ī*’s actions by stressing the exclusivity of the treatise’s readership. *Daw’ Nur al-Haqq*, he wrote, was intended solely for the Arabic-literate Bohra religious hierarchy, not the Gujarati-speaking Bohra laity, let alone non-Bohra Muslims.² Indeed, in league with many Daudi Bohra texts of this period, the colophon contained a line precisely to that effect.³

Naive as this defense was about the capacities of print to transcend hierarchy and sect, both it and the larger events to which it responded were evocative of Arabic’s indispensable place in the public and private idioms of South Asian history. As the episode illustrates, Arabic—though undoubtedly possessing a rarefied, patrician status as the preserve of scholarly elites—constantly intersected with other South Asian languages. Even for those constituencies unable to understand the full measure of Tahir Sayf al-Din’s Arabic tract, Arabic was implicated in communal conflict and protest demonstrations. In this sense, the Daudi Bohras were no stranger to what Mohsin Ali describes in his essay for this roundtable as the process whereby “competition to define transregional Muslim communities spilled over into historiographical polemics.” To further underscore that point, the object here is to study how Arabic operated at various octaves within the Daudi Bohra community between roughly 1880 and 1920—whether via the “pure” Arabic of the *dā‘ī*’s epistles; *Lisan al-Da‘wa* (that is, Arabicized Gujarati, often called “Bohra” Gujarati); or as literary ornaments in otherwise Gujarati sources. From there, the narrative traces the dramatic repercussions of Daudi Bohra Arabic sources breaking away from their communal moorings, in turn fueling both sectarian discord and solidarity.

¹ Tahir Sayf al-Din, *Daw’ Nur al-Haqq al-Mubin* (Bombay: Matba‘a-i Bretish Indiya, 1335 [1917]).

² Munshi Fatih Khan Ahmad Khan Dilkash, *Islamana Be Bola* (Bombay: Sanja Vartman Press, 1919 [?]), 8.

³ Tahir Sayf al-Din, *Daw’ Nur*, 201.

The Daudi Bohra community are (predominantly) an endogamous commercial caste originally from the region of “Greater Gujarat” in western South Asia, now numbering around 1.5 million constituents worldwide.⁴ They are practitioners of Musta’li Isma’ili Shi’i Islam and have a chief religious cleric in the guise of the *dā’ī al-muṭlaq*. Over the centuries, disputes over the succession of the *dā’ī*-ship, transferred from Yemen to India in 1567, have generated enduring schisms among the Bohras, which in turn created the Alavi, Daudi, Sulaimani, Atba-i Malik, and reformist sub-branches.⁵ The Daudis constitute the largest sub-branch and are the subject of this essay. Given their connection to Fatimid and Sulayhid-era Isma’ili traditions, the Daudi Bohras are perhaps an obvious choice for an essay stressing the value of Arabic sources to the history of South Asia. Despite this, the Arabic traditions of the various Shi’i Bohra communities—and, to a larger degree, their fraternal Gujarati Muslim trading communities, the Khojas and Memons—remain understudied. This is despite the fact that, as Jyoti Gulati Balachandran has shown both in this roundtable and in a separate monograph, Gujarat has been a locus of rich Arabic written traditions for over half a millennium.⁶

The Daudi Bohras’ Arabic manuscript traditions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been remarkably well-served by several first-rate bibliographers.⁷ Erstwhile private collections of singular quality are now available for consultation at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. Even once inaccessible archives of Bohra life—such as that of the ‘Alavi Bohras brilliantly examined by Olly Akkerman—have become more accessible, to the great benefit of the field.⁸ Therefore, little purpose is served here by providing an inventory of Bohra Arabic sources (particularly manuscript sources) on offer. The more modest objective is to situate “Daudi Bohra Arabic” in a wider multilingual field across the long nineteenth century and to chart its fluctuating status against the backdrop of Bohra print culture. In what follows, special accent is placed on the development of *Lisan al-Da’wa* and the interaction between that language (consisting of a modified Perso-Arabic script, Gujarati syntax, and innumerable loanwords from Arabic, Persian, and Urdu) and the use of classical Arabic in Bohra texts.

Daudi Bohra printed texts appeared only in trickles in the nineteenth century. In the 1840s and 1850s, some Arabic histories of the Daudi Bohras were printed in Bombay.⁹ In the 1870s at least one Daudi Bohra literary magazine, published in *Lisan al-Da’wa*, operated in Bombay, though its print-run and longevity are unclear.¹⁰ The greatest monument to Bohra print in the nineteenth century was the near-encyclopedic history, *Mawsim-i Bahar* (The Season of Spring), written in *Lisan al-Da’wa* by Muhammad ‘Ali ibn al-Majid Jiwabhai and published in 1882.¹¹ While the text has since become controversial, it has served as an unparalleled reference for those engaged in the study of Daudi Bohra history.¹² In

⁴ The best general introduction to the community’s history is Jonah Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity Among the Daudi Bohras* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 40–41; and Farhad Daftary, *The Isma’ilis: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 279–80.

⁶ Jyoti Gulati Balachandran, *Narrative Pasts: The Making of a Muslim Community in Gujarat, c. 1400–1650* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷ Ismaili Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismaili literature* (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1977); Delia Cortese, *Arabic Ismaili Manuscripts: the Zāhid ‘Alī Collection in the Library of the Institute of Ismaili Studies* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003); and François de Blois, *Arabic, Persian and Gujarati Manuscripts: The Hamdani Collection in the Library of the Institute of Ismaili Studies* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

⁸ Olly Akkerman, *A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books: Arabic Manuscripts Among the Alawi Bohras of South Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

⁹ Two such texts were “rediscovered” in the 1930s and 1940s. See Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 175; and Y.S. Taherali, “The Origin of Bohras,” *Ummid* 1 (1943): 25–31.

¹⁰ *Bahjat al-Akhbar* (Bombay: [n.p.], 1877).

¹¹ Muhammad ‘Ali ibn al-Majid Jiwabhai, *Mawsim-i Bahar fi Akhbar al-Tahirin al-Akhyar* (Bombay: Maṭba‘a Haydari Safadri, 1299 [1882]).

¹² Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, 302.

some sections, where Jiwabhai reproduced historical texts, long passages are given first in Arabic and then translated into *Lisan al-Da'wa*, but the bulk of the text is in the latter language. In that sense, when read in light of the entirely Arabic chronicle of the Daudi Bohras written by Qutb al-Din Burhanpuri (d. 1826) at the beginning of the century, Jiwabhai's magnum opus confirms that *Lisan al-Da'wa* had become a respectable means of prose composition by the third quarter of the nineteenth century.¹³

Jiwabhai's *Lisan al-Da'wa* text also presaged how print pushed the boundaries of the Daudi Bohra interpretive community substantially outward after 1900. This reordered Arabic's status in the *da'wa*. While Arabic still retained a special place of pride as the language of high theology, it increasingly conceded space to *Lisan al-Da'wa* and Gujarati in a variety of genres. Many contemporary Bohra texts—especially those pertaining to Hajj or *ziyarat* to the shrines of southern Iraq, which are replete with Arabic prayers to be recited at specific stages of the pilgrimage—moved comfortably between both languages (Figs. 1 and 2). From the first decade of the twentieth century, however, one sees an enormous expansion of Bohra works written in Gujarati script. These works were likely geared towards a Gujarati-speaking laity with little in the way of an advanced religious education. Arguably, the publication of these works effectuated an additional division of labor between Arabic and Gujarati in the *da'wa*.

Though by no means their exclusive prerogative, the *dā'īs* displayed a singular enthusiasm for Arabic printed epistles, especially from the inauguration of Tahir Sayf al-Din in 1915. *Daw' Nur al-Haqq* was the first such Arabic printed epistle written by Tahir Sayf al-Din.¹⁴ The text was a watershed, as it transcended the strictures of the *da'wa* and thrust Daudi Bohra Arabic scholarship into the public limelight as never before. Curiously, Urdu histories of the Daudi Bohras in the years on either side of *Daw' Nur al-Haqq* revealed how little other Indian Muslims knew about Bohra intellectual traditions.¹⁵ Yet *Daw' Nur al-Haqq* revealed that a greater intimacy with those traditions had the potential to explode into communal discord. That this Arabic treatise elicited both weighty denunciations from Muslim scholars and collective action from Muslim constituencies is the plainest sign of Arabic's embeddedness in histories of South Asian public life.

The episode also underscored the double-edged character of a newly assertive Daudi Bohra print culture: if the goal of the *dā'ī* and his leading disciples was to inculcate his vision of Daudi Bohra religious subjectivity within the *da'wa* by means of the printed word, then the danger was that these same writings could fall into the hands of non-Bohras. As early as 1880 an Arabic book had been published by a Daudi Bohra mullah dedicated to the *dā'ī* and brimming with insults against Sunnis, but a Muslim chief of the Bombay Police blocked its circulation and headed-off any potential sectarian violence.¹⁶ No such intervention happened with the publication of *Daw' Nur al-Haqq* in 1917.

By the standards of twentieth-century Indian Muslim religious polemics, *Daw' Nur al-Haqq* is rather tame. At the risk of taking sides in the subsequent dispute, whether Tahir Sayf al-Din went so far as to declare non-Bohra Muslims to be *kāfirs*, as his detractors claimed, seems ambiguous. That is not to say that the grounds for taking offense were baseless. Even so, interpretations of the *dā'īs*'s sometimes cryptic Arabic declarations were roundly contested by the larger Muslim reading public and that ambiguity must be preserved in the historian's telling, revealing as it is of the mercurial valence assumed by Arabic in the South Asian public sphere. As seen below, several Sunnis rose to the *dā'īs*'s defense and accused his opponents of bad faith (or worse). Nonetheless, it is useful to rehearse some

¹³ Samir Faruq Trabulsi, ed., Qutb al-Din Sulaymanji Burhanpuri, *Muntaza' al-Akhbar fi Akhbar al-Du'at al-Akhyar min al-Da'i al-Dhu'ayb ibn Musa al-Wad'i ila al-Da'i Da'udji ibn Qutb Shah* (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1999).

¹⁴ In fact, the text was the first installment of the long-running series, *al-Risala al-Ramadanīyya*.

¹⁵ See, for example, Maulana Najm al-Ghani Khan Rampuri, *Silk al-Jawahir fi Ahwal al-Bawahir, Ya'ni, Daw'dhiyya Buhrunki Tarikh* (Moradbad, India: Matba'a-i Mutala' al-'Ulum, 1914).

¹⁶ H.L. Adam, *The Indian Criminal* (London: John Milne, 1909), 155.

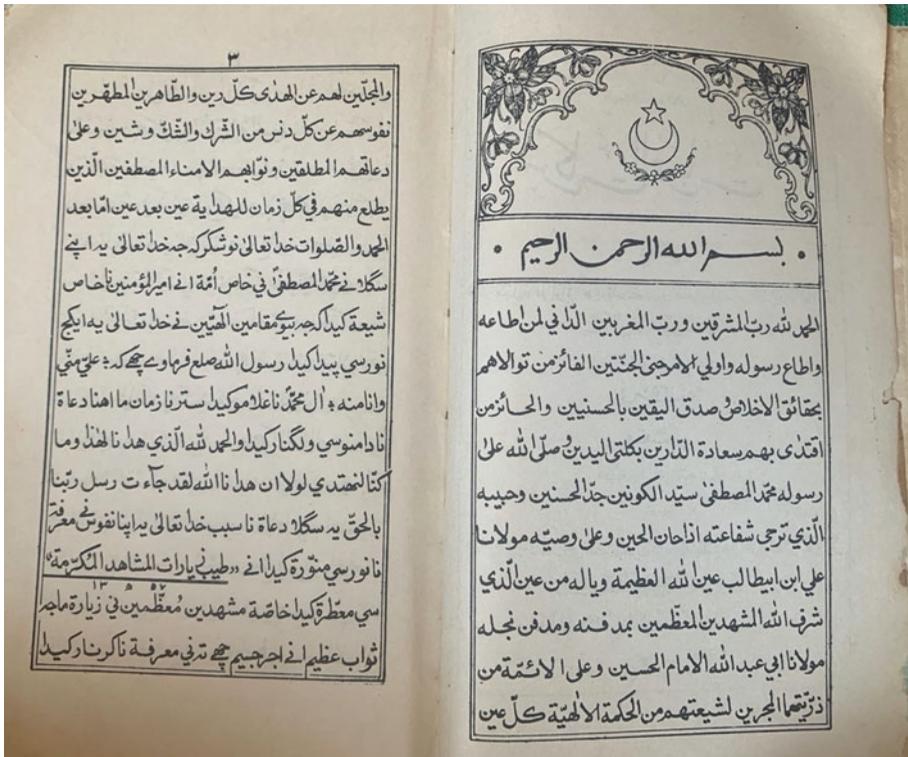


Figure 1. An example of the dual use of Arabic and *Lisān al-Da'wa* in a Daudi Bohra pilgrimage guide titled *Barakat al-Qurbat*, published in 1938/1357. The transition between Arabic and *Lisān al-Da'wa* occurs on page three, following the *amma' ba'd*. The remainder of the text moves back and forth between the two languages, with instructions in *Lisān al-Da'wa* and prayers in Arabic. Author's personal collection.

of the text's more controversial passages. For one, Tahir Sayf al-Din asserted that the Sunnis' profession of faith was illegitimate since they believed only in the Prophet and "reject the rank of the trustee who is the first of the hierarchy of faith (*ḥudūd*) etc."¹⁷ Elsewhere, he proclaimed, "Whoever claims that his knowledge of his Prophet, or the successor of his Prophet, or the imam of his time is sufficient without the knowledge of the *dā'ī* of his time strays from the right path."¹⁸ Taken together, these insults were oblique rather than on-the-nose.

Though much was subsequently made of the text's polemical disposition, a sizable portion of the treatise was devoted to long commentaries on Isma'ili texts, including those of the twelfth-century scholar, Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (d. 1021). In his masterwork, *al-Masabih fi Ithbat al-Imama* (Lights to Illuminate the Proof of the Imamate), al-Kirmani wrote one of the most sophisticated Isma'ili defenses of the imamate, and Tahir Sayf al-Din reproduced large sections of the text.¹⁹ Tahir Sayf al-Din also devoted long digressions to the subject of *naṣṣ* (succession), accenting its unbroken progression from the Prophet to 'Ali, the Shi'ci imams, and eventually the *dā'īs* down to his day.²⁰ Yet it was in his bid to settle intra-Bohra scores that the *dā'īs*' rhetoric overstepped the bounds of acceptable decorum. In particular, his assertion that the famous fifteenth-century Sunni Bohra and erstwhile Daudi

¹⁷ Tahir Sayf al-Din, *Daw' Nur*, 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁹ See Paul Walker's excellent critical edition and translation, *Master of the Age: An Islamic Treatise on the Necessity of the Imamate* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

²⁰ Tahir Sayf al-Din, *Daw' Nur*, 56–59.

dā'ī's insults quickly spread far and wide. Soon enough, Muslim scholars throughout the Middle East and South Asia penned fatwas condemning the *dā'ī*.

A compilation of these Arabic, Persian, and Urdu fatwas were printed in an anthology titled *Sayf bar Din: Sunni Shi'a ki 'Alaniyya Dil Azadi* (The Sword Upon the Religion: The Heartfelt Public Declaration of Sunnis and Shi'is).²² The inclusion of the word *sayf* (sword) in the anthology's title was a clear pun on the name of the *dā'ī*, Tahir Sayf al-Din. The treatise—edited by Haji 'Umar Haji Ahmed, a native of Surat—reprinted opinions from an array of Sunni and Shi'i scholars, from Farangi Mahal's 'Abd al-Bari to the Naqib al-Ashraf, the custodian of the shrine of 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani in Baghdad. For all the eminence of these contributors, it is striking that many of them also appealed to Parsi, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian readers for support in their censure of the *dā'ī*. And the inclusion of the following subtitle on the first page of the preface was equally revealing: "Muslims! Stand Up and Complain to the Government!" In the minds of his critics, the *dā'ī*'s resort to *takfīr* violated both the efforts of India's religious communities to cultivate a spirit of mutual friendship and the Indian government's attempt to foster peaceful relations among the same. Of course, this papered over the inconvenient truth that religious polemics constituted one of the most vibrant print genres in colonial India. Even so, the *dā'ī* was unfortunate: he indulged in invective at a time when calls for Muslim and non-Muslim unity were more emphatic than ever due to the onset of the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements (1919–24).

For all his denigrators, the *dā'ī* had no shortage of supporters, both in his community and beyond. Among his Sunni supporters was Hakim Maulvi Muhammad Hanif Hashimi, a self-confessed Hanafi from Karachi. Hashimi's book was a carefully-worded refutation of a broadside written by a Sunni resident of Junagadh, which subjected the *dā'ī*'s treatise to a systematic *Textkritik*.²³ In a curious twist, Hashimi admitted that he could not obtain a copy of *Daw' Nur al-Haqq*, so he relied on the Arabic passages reproduced by the very author he sought to gainsay.²⁴ Hashimi labored to absolve Tahir Sayf al-Din of the serious charge of indulging in *takfīr*, finding no credible grounds for the accusation, even in the treatise's most controversial passages.²⁵ Meanwhile, Munshi Fatih Muhammad Khan Dilkash was Tahir Sayf al-Din's most effective Bohra apologist. Both in a dedicated treatise, *Islamana Be Bola* (Islam's Two Cents), and in his Gujarati newspaper, *Islam* (hence the pun in the book title), Dilkash brooked no quarter with Tahir Sayf al-Din's critics.²⁶ The object of his special ire was Ahmedabad's *Politikal Bhomiyō*, along with a series of writers in that city who posted handbills defaming the *dā'ī* and calling for a general mobilization against the Bohras.²⁷

Even so, Dilkash was careful to frame his work as an olive branch, stressing the fundamental unity of all Sunnis and Shi'is in his preface.²⁸ In the same way he underscored that Arabic-literate Bohras were the exclusive readership of *Daw' Nur al-Haqq*, Dilkash maintained that Sunnis were not the object of the book's animus. The burgeoning Bohra dissident movement was the true target. Indeed, by Dilkash's reckoning, the book first became a subject of discussion during a legal case adjudicated in Bombay's Police Court that pitted one such dissident against the *dā'ī* ("Rahimtulla vs. Emperor").²⁹ There, the defendant, Mullah Rahmat Allah, had put forward *Daw' Nur al-Haqq* as evidence of the *dā'ī*'s hostility towards the contemporary Bohra dissident movement. Still, Dilkash was emphatic that the court's official translator—a Konkani Muslim—had translated the contents of the text and found no offensive material. Despite this, *Politikal Bhomiyō* besmirched the book and its author in a special

²² Haji 'Umar Haji Ahmad, ed., *Sayf bar Din: Sunni Shi'a ki 'Alaniyya Dil Azadi; Musalmano! Utho Sarkar se Fariyad Karo* (Delhi: India Press, n.d.).

²³ Hakim Maulvi Muhammad Hanif Hashimi, *Sayf al-Din 'ala Ru'us al-Mut'addin* (Karachi: Jhuna Market, 1919).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13, 28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶ Munshi Dilkash, *Islamana Be Bola*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

issue on the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference.³⁰ Dilkash set out as his task the repudiation of the special issue, remaining emphatic that the conference went off without so much as a whisper against the *dā'ī*. He also zeroed in on the Sunnis' selective outrage. To Dilkash, *Politikal Bhomīyo*'s silence in the face of the publication of bona fide anti-Islamic texts, such as a recent diatribe against the Prophet Muhammad printed in Calcutta's *Daily News*, was a plain sign of its duplicity.³¹ As these lines evinced, a single controversial Arabic text yielded discursive spinoffs that were polyglot, embracing English, Gujarati, and Urdu.

Eventually, the scandal over *Daw' Nur al-Haqq* petered out. Nonetheless, the Bohras faced unprecedented internal divisions of their own thereafter, as the Bohra dissident movement emerged precisely at this moment to challenge Tahir Sayf al-Din's authority. While Bohra dissidents adopted English, Urdu, and Gujarati as their vernaculars of dissent, Arabic continued to enjoy enormous prestige in the mainline Bohra *da'wa*, as it still does.

Both the variegated status of Arabic in the Bohra *da'wa* and the quarrels stirred up by *Daw' Nur al-Haqq* should give pause to any assertion, so persistent in the historiography of South Asian Islam, that Arabic was extraneous to the subcontinent and its presumed traditions of "lived"/non-textualist Islam. As Nile Green has noted, extraordinary advances in the study of Persianate literary/scrabal traditions in South Asia over the past two decades have contributed to the occlusion of Arabic's subcontinental history. But as Green suggests in his introduction to this roundtable, as the scholarship on South Asia undergoes its own Arabic turn, this need not work to the detriment of other South Asian languages, provided scholars privilege modes of multilingual interaction.

All the same, even the best scholars continue to decry the "Arabistic" bias in scholarship on Islam, seeking to privilege languages of South Asian origin over and above Arabic.³² The study of other languages of Islam is indeed most welcome, but with such little work done on Arabic traditions in India, this "othering" of Arabic seems a misguided historiographical program. Historians can do no better than follow the lead of Roy Bar Sadeh, who persuasively argues that Arabic *is* a South Asian language in its own right.³³ And in keeping with all other South Asian languages, Arabic has been both a bridge and a barrier between communities.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

³² Shafiqe Virani, "Khwājah Sindhi (Khojki): Its Name, Manuscripts and Origin," in *Texts, Scribes and Transmission: Manuscript Cultures of the Ismaili Communities and Beyond*, ed. Wafi A. Momin (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022), 275–301.

³³ Roy Bar Sadeh, "Recasting Minority: Islamic Modernists between South Asia, the Middle East, and the World, 1856–1947" (PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 2022).