

Ordinary voices: Findings from a Bohra online poll

MULTIPLICITY



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In January, the spiritual head of the Dawoodi Bohras passed away, setting off a battle of succession between the late leader's son, and his half-brother, for the religious seat.

For this trading community scattered across western India, the death of their leader and the ensuing succession dispute was traumatic, especially after one of the claimants to the spiritual chair petitioned the courts to stake his right.

"We felt that after the Syedna's demise, the dispute over the succession and the subsequent court cases were reported by the media," says a community member, who asked to be identified only as Farida. "The ordinary people's voices were not picked up."

If these voices were not heard, it was largely because Bohras were reluctant to speak to the media for fear of attracting reprimands from their powerful clergy.

Then, a few members of the community, including Farida, decided to give ordinary Bohras a voice. An online survey was commissioned on a community website three weeks after the death of Syedna Burhanuddin who was the 52nd in the line of leaders who have headed this Shia group. "There was a lot of fear in the community and we wanted to create a neutral platform where the voice of the ordinary Dawoodi Bohra could be heard," says Farida.

Care was taken that the questions did not bring in charges of partiality, especially since there were rumours of an imminent split in the community. "The questions were not planted in one direction so as not to attract accusations of bias," adds Farida.

Nearly a thousand people have now answered the survey, of which around 40% are from India. Rest of the respondents are from United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Farida says this is a fairly representative sample because the community has a large worldwide Diaspora.

A majority of the respondents said they were 'spiritually pained' when the dispute over succession broke out in the open. They talked about 'spiritual paralysis and betrayal'.

The survey asked the Mumineen, the term the community uses when they talk about themselves, about their social environment after the death of their leader and the dispute. The 20 questions covered some of the most important sources of debate in the community. One issue is that of Misaaq, the oath of allegiance to the Syedna. Every Bohra undergoes this sacrament. Of the respondents who had not, nearly a quarter said they would do so reluctantly or because they felt they had no other choice, even though some objected to it on moral grounds.

Another issue that was discussed was excommunication of members. Only 3% of the survey respondents said they had no problems ostracising or socially boycotting fellow Bohras.

A fifth of the respondents said they were 'absolutely sure' that Mufaddal Saifuddin, the son of the last leader, is the rightful successor. A little less than a fifth said his uncle Khuzaima Qutbuddin should be the successor. One of every four respondents said it did not matter who the rightful successor is.

Among the respondents were a small group of former Bohras who left the community for various reasons, including excommunication. Of those who identified themselves as Bohras, a significant 12% said they stayed in the community out of 'fear'.

One of the limitations of the study, the survey evaluators said, was their inability to reach out to those who do not use computers. Other community issues, like the allegations of female genital mutilation, were kept out of the survey because it was felt that this was not an appropriate subject to raise at this stage.

The survey was conducted through a portal that offers respondents the greatest anonymity possible. "Even if people came to me to ask about the identity of the respondents I would not be able to reveal anything because the portal has no IP," says Farida.