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‘we are not like them’: reinventing modernity within tradition in the debates on female *khatna* / female genital cutting in India

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abstract

Since 2011, female *khatna*, or the practice of female genital cutting within the Dawoodi Bohra community, has become a big topic of debate in India and globally. The ‘secret’ tradition has been challenged by community activists, tabled in parliament, heard by international courts of law and debated on news channels. In response, a growing number of Bohra women have come to the fore to publicly defend their right to *khatna* by subverting seemingly Western tropes of autonomy, equality and modernity. Situated in the thick of these polarised exchanges, this article examines the complicated, under-explored relationship between gender and Islam by foregrounding self-narratives of the Bohra women who actively participate within, as opposed to fight against, patriarchal norms to preserve the tradition. I juxtapose their narratives with those of anti-*khatna* activists to further contextualise and clarify their ‘modern-yet-traditional’ subjectivities. As such, this article combines a postcolonial feminist lens with Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of ‘invention of tradition’, to investigate the multiple ways in which a majority of Bohra women are using the rhetoric of ‘modernity’ in public—by reinventing history, renegotiating patriarchies, reimagining the other and incorporating biomedicine—to preserve and perpetuate this contested tradition.

keywords

female *khatna*; FGM/C; gender norms; religion; Islam; sexuality; modernity; invention of tradition

introduction

> Whatever the world says, we should be strong and firm … It must be done … If it is a man, it can be done openly and if it is a woman, it must be discreet. But the act must be done.
>
> (Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin, spiritual leader of the Dawoodi Bohra community, referring to the practice of female *khatna*, during a religious sermon in Mumbai, 2016)[1]

Up until 2011, the public image of the Dawoodi Bohra community had largely been centred on its members being 'well educated, business people and qualified professionals' with the ability to 'embrace modernity while staying true to their traditions'.[2] The 'modern-yet-traditional' Bohra women were also publicly endorsed as 'more empowered, educated, and economically independent compared to other women in Indian society' (Anantnarayan, Diler and Menon, 2018, p. 19).[3] Cracks began to develop in this carefully curated image when an anonymous signature campaign surfaced on the internet to mobilise support to 'stop the barbaric genital mutilation of young girls',[4] known as female *khatna*, practised by the tightly knit community. Also identified as *khafz*, *sunnat* or female genital cutting/mutilation, female *khatna* is a Bohra rite of passage that involves the removal of the prepuce (the covering of the clitoris) of community girls at the age of seven. The ritual is believed to have been performed by the community for nearly 1,400 years and is an important marker of the 'purity' and 'sexual socialisation' of the community's girls (Ghadially, 1991, p. 17). This striking contrast between the community's 'modern' public image and the revelation of the 'barbaric practice' performed in private sparked outcry. At first, a small faction of Bohra women began to collectivise and publicly contest the 'private matter' (Anantnarayan, Diler and Menon, 2018) by calling it a violation of their sexual rights that found no mention in the Qur'an (*ibid.*; Barton, 2019). These conversations further echoed from the chambers of the United Nations General Assembly to the Supreme Court of New South Wales, Australia,[5] all calling it a violation of the human rights of girls and women (Abrol, 2018; Shelar, 2018). Newspapers and television news channels, too, carried elaborate stories titled 'India's dark secret' (Baweja, 2016), 'Say no to *khatna*' (Ashar, 2016) and 'A millenial crime' (Nijhawan, 2018). Following global media coverage and growing anti-*khatna* activism, the clerical leadership directed the community worldwide to honour the law of the land in which they reside (Johari, 2017). In India and Pakistan, however, where there are no stringent female genital cutting laws, pro-*khatna* narratives gradually began to emerge. Several community women who identified as modern yet traditional came to the fore to reiterate that female *khatna* was in reality a 'harmless, essential practice' (Kotak, 2018), a marker of 'gender equality' (Shweder, 2022) and their 'religious and cultural right' (Kanchwala, 2019). They called the anti-*khatna* Bohra activists 'more of an irritant, than a threat to an otherwise peaceful community'.[6]

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[1] In April 2016, a four-minute audio clip from Syedna Muffadal Saifuddin's *bayaan* (speech) went viral on several community WhatsApp groups and sparked conversations; the statement—in which the spiritual leader publicly endorsed female circumcision, albeit indirectly—was made in the wake of growing public protests against the practice (Das, 2016; Shelar, 2016).

[2] The Dawoodi Bohras, 'About the Dawoodi Bohras', https://www.thedawoodibohras.com/ [last accessed 20 September 2023]; see also Blank, 2011, p. 2.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] 'Ladkiyon par khatna khatam karo', petition, https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-barbaric-genitalmutilationofyoung-girls-ladkiyon-par-khatna [last accessed 25 September 2022]. The anonymous petition was addressed to Syedna, the community leader, asking him to end the practice of female *khatna*; it received 3,490 signatures. It is currently closed.

[5] In November 2015, the Supreme Court of New South Wales found a Bohra mother, a retired nurse and a senior clergy member guilty of carrying out genital cutting on two minor sisters between 2010 and 2012. The three members were given a fifteen-month sentence for the crime. It was Australia's first female genital mutilation prosecution. They were later acquitted by an appeal court (Hakim, 2019).

[6] Khadija, pro-*khatna* community member, interview; see section on methodology.

Situated in the thick of these polarised exchanges and growing anti-*khatna* protests, this article examines the complicated, under-explored relationship between gender and Islam by foregrounding self-narratives of the modern-yet-traditional Bohra women who actively participate within, as opposed to fight against, patriarchal norms to preserve female *khatna*. Using a postcolonial feminist lens (Najmabadi, 1993; Abu-Lughod, 1998; Göle, 2002), I expand Eric Hobsbawm's notion of 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) to ask, what are the ways in which a majority of Bohra women are using the rhetoric of 'modernity' to reinvent the practice of female *khatna* in public? And, in doing so, how are they reformulating their own subjectivities as they perpetuate the 'partly invented, partly evolved' (*ibid.*, p.4) practice in the name of community honour? As such, I provide an ethnographic account of how the 'conflicting claims of modern life and Muslim morality' (Mahmood, 2004) are reflected in the choices made by a section of Dawoodi Bohra women to preserve and propagate female *khatna* amidst burgeoning dissent. In the following sections, I first situate the lines traced by postcolonial feminist scholarship to 'recontextualise, historicise and fragment' (Wassef, 2001) gender, patriarchy and modernity within Islam. I then offer an overview of the Dawoodi Bohra community, their modernity project and the culture of cutting. This is followed by a discussion of my research methodology and a synthesis of the key themes that emerged from my conversations primarily with Bohra women defending *khatna*. Throughout the article, I juxtapose their narratives with those of anti-*khatna* activists to further contextualise and clarify their modern-yet-traditional subjectivities. The themes are centred on the reinvention of histories, renegotiation of patriarchies, reimagination of the 'other' and incorporation of the biomedical to legitimise and propagate female *khatna*. The article ends with a call for reflection.

the Bohra woman question

In the wake of Third World feminism, scholars envisioning a theory grounded in an analysis of women's claims to knowledge have called into question the politics of 'difference' and accountability for the 'multiplicity of experiences' (Harding, 1993; Dietz, 2003; Mohanty, 2003).[7] For instance, Donna Haraway's (1988) effort to achieve a rapprochement with standpoint theory replaces a unitary and privileged epistemological position of 'women' with a concept of diverse and publicly communicable (but not necessarily privileged) 'situated knowledges' and 'partial perspectives'. Turkish-American scholar Seyla Benhabib (1992, pp. 10–11) recognises this epistemological shift from the 'standpoint' of the generalised to the 'concrete', particularised and distinct other(s) as an 'ethical continuum'.

Born from and within these complex sources of influence, contradiction and tension, Muslim women have argued that their standpoint as women within Islam is integral to understanding a gendered concept of Islam's epistemology (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Wassef, 2001; Mahmood, 2004; Ishaque, 2013). The production of knowledge appropriated by colonial discourses, they claim, does not consider the categories of 'difference' such as religious identity, in this case, the 'Muslim woman' (Ishaque, 2013, p. 339). Those employing a gendered epistemology do not believe that Islam itself gives men an epistemic privilege; rather, this privilege is read in patriarchal readings of Islamic texts (the Holy Qur'an and hadith) by male-centred epistemology (Cooke, 2001; Barlas, 2002; Waller, 2005). Recent work on women in religious movements has also moved from a reductive focus on causal or

[7] This section's heading, 'The Bohra woman question', draws on Afsaneh Najmabadi's (1993, p. 487) conceptualisation of 'the Woman Question'.

motivational factors to more sophisticated analyses using religious subjectivity to explicate processes of agency, subject formation and alternative modernities (Najmabadi, 1998; Mack, 2003; Mahmood, 2004; Kandiyoti, 2005 [1998]; Kamali, 2012). They address the complexity of Muslim gender norms and highlight the difficulty of simply juxtaposing them with liberal and egalitarian gender regimes (among others, Abu-Lughod, 1986; Ahmed, 1992; Göle, 1996; Deeb, 2009). Muslim women's engagement in Islamic revivalist movements (Barlas, 2002; Badran, 2007) and the 'pursuit of piety' within them (Mahmood, 2004), for instance, have been analysed in terms of 'bargaining with patriarchy' and furthering women's autonomy within a religious framework. Similarly, couched in the Islamic religious idiom, feminist scholars have put forth alternative formulations of modernity (Ong, 1990; Brenner, 1996; Abu-Lughod, 1998; Göle, 2002; Jamal, 2005; Kandiyoti, 2005 [1998]) that challenge the Western-centric imagination of a 'singular and linear modernity' (Weber, 1968, cited in Kamali, 2012, p. 246) and further contend that neither Islam nor modernity can be taken as a 'static project' (Göle, 2002). By the same token, needs, priorities and costs differ on a subjective basis and, as Nadia Wassef (2001, p. 120) argues, they are not easily understandable even to other women in their communities. Rather than disregarding what falls between dichotomous poles, it is precisely the 'slippage', Wassef (*ibid.*) adds, that offers the chance to gain a deeper insight into women's subjectivities.

Anchored in this slippage, the segment of Bohra women I interviewed for my research came from different political and socioeconomic backgrounds, and also belonged to different generations. Even as they self-identified as 'Dawoodi Bohras', their notions of religion, modernity and community varied significantly. These threads of diversity (Wassef, 2001; Mahmood, 2009; Amir-Moazami, Jacobsen and Malik, 2011) within a relatively small and monotheistic religion anchor this article in which I document the 'plurality of feminisms' (Seedat, 2013, p. 36) and the 'more subtle and complicated realities' (Wassef, 2001, p. 113) that defined what being 'Dawoodi Bohra' and 'woman' meant to the participants. In my formulation of the Bohra woman, I draw upon Moroccan feminist scholar Fatima Mernissi's (1987, cited in Seedat, 2013, p. 36) metonymic production of the term 'the Muslim woman' as 'an unfixed yet situated signifier' formulated in a manner that resists closure. Here, I wish to clarify that my construction of 'the Bohra Muslim woman' should not be looked at as a metaphoric production (as in a Western, Orientalist discourse) to illustrate alterity (Zayzafoon, 2005, p. 1). In fact, the Bohra woman's stance in this research is necessarily epistemological (Narayan, 1997a, p. 80), grounded in 'practice, place, class ... and the dynamics of gender' (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 22).

Da'i, *deen* and *duniya*

The Dawoodi Bohra community is a sub-sect of the Ismaili Shia Muslims, who follow the Fatimid School of Law (Ghadially, 1991, p. 19). The Fatimid Dynasty spanned across much of North Africa to the eastern side of the Red Sea, encompassing Mecca and Medina. In the sixteenth century, after spending over 500 years in Yemen, the Dawoodi Bohra leadership shifted their headquarters to the western coast of India in Gujarat.[8] Currently, about 80 per cent of the community lives in India and

[8] In the years ahead, they spread to the rest of the country based on the familial residence of the Syedna, and finally moved their main administrative base to Mumbai at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Pakistan, but a Bohra diaspora resides in the Middle East, East Africa, Europe, North America, Australia and other parts of Asia (Bootwala, 2019a, p. 222).

At the top of the leadership structure is the *al-Dai al-Mutlaq* (officially translated as the 'unrestricted missionary'), known as the Syedna, and his *dawat*, the clerical hierarchy.[9] As the supreme leader, the Syedna exercises complete primacy in all matters of the community globally, both in the *deen* (spiritual/religion) and the *duniya* (material/world). From the best course to adopt when ill, the advisability of starting a new business enterprise or the way to reorganise an old one, to the choice of a partner for marriage, the Syedna's judgement is always solicited (Blank, 2001, p. 7; Bootwala, 2019a, p. 222). For the community, thus, religion and religiosity remain the principal sources of ethics and ways of knowing. The members are awarded green, yellow or red cards based on the degree of their participation and religious performance (Blank, 2001, p. 181). These cards, which serve as certificates of orthopraxy, are required for every ritual in the Bohra lifecycle: to receive the Syedna's blessing, take *mitaaq* (communion), solemnise a marriage, visit a shrine or even bury a dead relative. Those who question this clerical hierarchy face the prospect of social boycott or excommunication, also known as *baraat*.[10]

For the Bohras, the 1970s marked an important period in the process of cultural revival and the cementing of the community identity. Former leader the 52nd Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin launched a reform programme of 'cultural retrenchment' that involved the reinvigoration and reinstitutionalisation of the community's core traditions using 'modern' tools in the world of technology, Western pedagogy[11] and mandated codes of personal appearance and language (Engineer, 1994, p. 297; Blank, 2001, p. 7). The tools were chosen in a way that they would 'bolster core values (of the religion) that were in danger of erosion' (Blank, 2001, p. 7). Speaking about this neo-traditionalist reform programme, the former Syedna has been quoted saying, 'We must learn and derive benefits from Western societies without becoming enslaved by them … While we focus on worldly and material success we must at all times remain aware of our religious obligations. *Deen* and

[9] The Dawoodi Bohras, https://www.thedawoodibohras.com/ [last accessed 30 September 2023]. There have been schisms within the Bohra community over the centuries. The most recent controversy is over the succession of the 52nd Da'i al-Mutlaq, who passed away in 2011. Most Bohras follow Mufaddal Saifuddin, the 53rd Da'i, who retains control of all community mosques and properties. But properties; however, about 1,000 Bohras follow a different spiritual leader. Both of these groups consider themselves true Bohras. There is another group termed Progressive Bohras, who embrace the religious authority and status of the Da'i but challenge the *Kothar*, or the clerical and political administration of the Dawoodi Bohras (Bootwala, 2019b, p. 231).

[10] When late Bohra scholar Dr Asghar Ali Engineer established the alternative Reformist school of thought in 1973, questioning the 'dictatorial regime' of the clerical hierarchy, he faced multiple assaults and eventually social boycott and excommunication (Punwani, 2013). In 1949, Bombay province's legislature passed *The Bombay Prevention of Excommunication Act* (1949). The Dawoodi Bohras were the only group to challenge the law. The 51st Da'i al-Mutlaq claimed that the law infringed on his constitutional rights. The judges were not unanimous but agreed that the power of excommunication was vested in him to keep the sect together. Since that time, the *Maharashtra Protection of People from Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2016* (2017) has passed, making social boycott or excommunication a crime that is punishable by up to seven years in jail and a fine up to ₹300,000 (INR). This legislation applies to the large Indian Bohra community who reside in Maharashtra but does not extend beyond the state.

[11] Here, Western pedagogy refers to a move towards secular education. The community leadership also runs a global chain of private schools and universities that offer local board curriculums.

duniya must coexist within us in harmony' (*ibid.*, p. 3). The Bohra women's presence in the 'heterosocial world of modernity' thus remains 'coterminous with the construction of a disciplined female language and body' (Najmabadi, 1993, p. 489).

This modern-yet-traditional approach was most recently employed by senior Bohra members to counter the anti-*khatna* voices growing mainly from within the community. Prior to the public debate, questions and conversations on female *khatna* were 'discouraged, dismissed or deferred' within the community (Bootwala, 2019a, p. 221). However, in 2017, the Dawoodi Bohra Women's Association for Religious Freedom (DBWRF) was founded and promoted as the public face of the community's 'practising Dawoodi Bohra women' who advocated for their 'right to practise *khafz*'. This association of 75,000 community women identified themselves as 'forward-thinking yet culturally-rooted' as they propagated the practice (Kanchwala, 2019). They vehemently rejected the anti-*khatna* activists' claims of 'mutilation', 'violence' and 'pain' by publicly supporting the community leadership's move towards medicalising the practice. 'Sexual pleasure', too, was equated with marriage and procreation. Again, the *deen* and *duniya* were assimilated into one, and there remained no room for the 'other', even within the religion.

methodology

A long line of feminist scholarship has asserted that good research has to include 'women's voices' in ways that are substantive rather than performative—which requires moving beyond the 'add women and stir' approach (Scott, 1986, p. 1056; Cornwall, 2003, p. 1338). It has advanced an epistemology that sees knowledge as partial, grounded, relational and infused by power relations (Mohanty, 2003; Weeks, 2011; Tripp and Hughes, 2018). Early on, I began to realise that it would not be possible to assume the role of an 'objective observer' who would be able to fully distance myself from the different groups of Bohra women, deliver questions without influencing them and access their perspectives in a neutral and singularly correct manner. This was because (a) the Bohras have a reputation of being a close-knit community, and I do not belong to the community; (b) the community representatives had refused to comment on a news story I had previously been working on; (c) the contestations on *khatna* were ongoing, and more importantly; (d) a majority of the Bohra women were already angry with the media coverage on their 'very personal matter'. Wrapped in these apprehensions, I initially steered my research towards engaging with the more prominent faces of the debate—the anti-*khatna* activists—whom I had personally been in touch with over the years. I also reached out to the community's public relations office, explaining to them my affiliation and wish to interview senior female members defending the practice. Their unexpected response to participate in the project altered the course of the enquiry, which now began to centre the relationship between feminism and Islam to add nuance to the polarised debate on female *khatna* in India. Thus, this study uses Bohra women's stories, which span varied perspectives, as a source of insight into how they have positioned themselves within the public fight against female *khatna*. I consciously put language, rhetoric, power and history to use to disrupt the dominant discourses by listening to their voices (Griffith and Smith, 1987; Jamil, 2016). These stories do not represent the insights and experiences of all women, but they may be indicative of some common experiences and challenges. I conducted semi-structured interviews between March and June 2017 with twenty-two community members. I used my social networks within anti-*khatna* groups like Sahiyo and We Speak Out to speak with protesters, including Idah (45, filmmaker), Asiya (30, journalist), Suhana (21, writer), Mariyam (48, reformist, publisher) and Shirin (28, researcher). Meanwhile, a senior male

community spokesperson thoroughly vetted my research before granting me access to interview *khatna* defenders. I then used a snowball sampling method to interview Khadija (52, children's author), Rukhsar (48, lawyer), Dr Salma (55, gynaecologist), Dr Sadiya (65, homeopathy doctor), Meher (38, fashion designer), Nusrat (42, educator) and Zareen (46, PhD scholar).[12]

The interviews were conducted in the cities of Mumbai and Udaipur in western India, which are home to a significant percentage of the 500,000-strong population of the community that reportedly lives in India. Four conversations were also facilitated online. In addition, I interviewed three non-Bohras, including the assistant editor of a leading Indian newspaper who had published several articles on the anti-*khatna* protests in India, a PhD scholar in India researching the community and a medical practitioner working in a community-run hospital in Mumbai. The interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Hindi, which are languages I speak. They were held in venues chosen by the participants, such as their own drawing rooms, cafes or fast-food joints. Most preferred to be interviewed alone. There were two group interviews: one included a group of three college-goers from the community in Mumbai and another, a family of four living in Udaipur. In my pilot interviews, I did not open with the full import or awareness of how I could utilise my identity of an 'outsider' for enhancing my interactions. Soon enough I realised that the very polarised nature of the contestation on the ground between the promoters of female *khatna* and protesters within the community rendered my identity of an 'outsider' to be an advantageous one. I took care of the need to be sensitive to the sensibilities of the women in the words I chose and the questions I asked. Rather than focusing on grand, abstract narratives of religion and the ritual, I emphasised their 'particular, personal trajectories' (Abu-Lughod, 1991 [1989], p. 474). I asked about their personal ideas of religion, religiosity and notions of modernity. These exchanges helped us to gradually turn to more particular discussions on *khatna*, which included their understanding of its origins, the stories they had heard and passed on, the absence of men, their thoughts and feelings on the public debate and their own motivations to promote or protest against the tradition. I did not pose any direct question on the actual experience of undergoing *khatna*. However, the exchange would sometimes end up at a point where the women would either outright reject the idea of having any memory of that day, or clearly recollect the ceiling fan, the long table and the dark dingy room.

During the interviews, most participants asked me questions to test my own intentions behind pursuing this research. It often appeared that my affiliation with an international university as a 'non-threatening' research scholar also somehow made the interaction important for the Bohra women (most of whom held postgraduate degrees) and threw open many sites of interactions that had not been accessible to me previously in my role as a journalist.

It is against this backdrop that I now analyse how Bohra women experience and express themselves as modern-yet-traditional Bohra women to defend the practice of female *khatna*. In the absence of widely accessible documented sources, I first examine how *khatna* has been preserved and promoted intergenerationally through oral histories, cultural association and mandatory repetition.

[12] From the larger pool of community members I interviewed, I have only named those who have been quoted in this article. Names of all the participants have been altered to protect their identities.

reinventing histories

When activist Asiya was first quoted in a news story in 2012, speaking out against female *khatna*, her aunt 'disowned' her, arguing that the 'Prophet had said that those who are not circumcised would become prostitutes'. In Suhana's case, on her family WhatsApp group, her cousin responded to her 'anti-*khatna*' message with a long explanation that had mentions of 'holy texts', 'purity' and the 'promise of a good marriage'. Meanwhile, Shirin remembers being told to accompany her grandmother to an 'old aunty's house' in the early 1990s, under the pretext of removing a 'bug in the stomach'.

Spanning stories rooted in religious history, to the emancipatory promises of a good future and using metaphors alike, the specific markers of female *khatna* continue to be obtained from diverse sources that are all justified as the 'real truth' (Shirin). Even without any universally accepted and accessible texts, the tradition has traversed centuries, scaling various geographies and histories to remain relevant to the tightly knit community, even today. Referred to as a 'ladies' matter' (Dr Salma), it is the community women who are responsible for ensuring the continuity of the practice by conforming to the traditional culture and socialising the young accordingly. In this section, I tease out some of the 'alternative, non-identical histories' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 16) that have come to form the basis of contemporary debates on the practice and trace the ways in which the Bohra women partake in the 'invention' of female *khatna* (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Narayan, 1997a). Through intergenerational governance, I argue that the devout Bohra women actively participate in the communal processes 'to establish continuity with a suitable historic past' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, pp. 1–2; Najmabadi, 1993) to keep the tradition alive.

Following the legal trial in Australia[13] and the global backlash against *khatna* in 2016, the community's governing body issued a public statement for the first time, instituting the practice in history. The statement read: 'Male and female circumcision are religious rites that have been practiced by Dawoodi Bohras throughout their history. Religious books, written over a thousand years ago, specify the requirements for both males and females as *acts of religious purity*' (Das, 2016, emphasis mine). This act of 'religious purity', that is estimated to have been practised for more than 1,400 years, however, neither finds a mention in the Qur'an nor is practised in all Islamic countries, including Saudi Arabia (Ghadially, 1991, p. 17; Anantnarayan, Diler and Menon, 2018). In fact, Taher Fakhruddin, the Syedna of the breakaway Dawoodi Bohra faction in India, also called female *khatna* 'an un-Islamic and horrific practice' (Das, 2016).[14] Male circumcision, on the other hand, is mandated by all Islamic sects, as it is seen as one of the five *sunnah-al-fitrah* (the obligatory customs of nature) that the Prophet preached, which also include 'cutting the nails, trimming the moustache, plucking pubic hair, and plucking armpit hair' (Johari, 2017). Referring to female *khatna* as a 'religious recommendation', the community spokesperson said that there is a reference to it in the *Da'aim-al-Islam*, a religious text from the tenth century written by Syedna al-Qadi al-Numan that lists the religious practices to be followed by community men and women. The text, the spokesperson said, draws on the hadith, the

[13] *Supra* note 4.

[14] Taher Fakhruddin further specified the practice to be performed for women who 'attain legal adulthood', at which time they can make their own decision to pursue a 'medically, legally, and religiously sanctioned' procedure (Scroll Staff, 2016).

narratives of deeds and sayings attributed to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam: 'These books specify that female *khatna* should be done. We believe that all these rules stem either from the Qur'an or the Prophet's words. There were certain things that the Prophet said which were not a part of the Qur'an because they were not the words of God'. This reference to female *khatna* in the hadith is apparently described in an incident when the Prophet came across a woman performing the act of female circumcision in Medina. In an article elucidating the hadith, Aarefa Johari (2017) writes: 'The Prophet is said to have told her not to cut severely as that is better for a woman and more desirable for a husband'. She also quotes late Bohra reformist leader Dr Asghar Ali Engineer, alleging that the said hadith is 'considered weak by many Muslims'.

For Rukhsar, however, a 'religious recommendation' makes it no different from a 'religious ritual', and hence a 'requirement'. 'Given that it has been recommended by the community means that it is for our own good', she said. Nearly all the Bohra women I interacted with also made a reference to this hadith, even as they did not know the specific details. Other Bohra scholars also believe that the cultural tradition was passed on from Yemen, to which the community traces its roots and where female genital cutting is widely practised in several provinces. As the Bohras have migrated to other parts of the world, 'this tradition has migrated with them and continues to be performed behind closed doors' (Taher, 2017, p. 8).

The experience of *khatna* is further suffixed by a metonymic and metaphoric progression of 'essential knowledge' of sexuality. Rukhsar claimed that she 'felt equal to her husband' on account of their shared experience of *khatna*, while Khadija said that the experience has ensured that they are 'not just physically, but even spiritually connected'. While the protesters within the community have called out this line of argument as 'ridiculous' when sharing their own experiences of pain and trauma and difficulties in 'experiencing pleasure' (Suhana), the women promoting the practice continue to use these tropes to uphold their right to *khatna*.[15] In addition, the age at *khatna* has emerged as a serious bone of contention in this debate. As per the religious norm among the Bohras, the male child is circumcised within the first few months of his birth. The female child, however, is circumcised around the age of seven. Rehana Ghadially suggests that performing circumcision for males and females at different ages was a concerted attempt to reproduce the tradition:

> At the age of seven, the girl is considered "*nadan*" (innocent) and "*nasamaj*" (not capable of understanding). She is considered not capable of understanding what is being done to her and at the same time is considered sufficiently mature to continue the tradition when she has a daughter of her own. (Ghadially, 1991, p. 17)

However, Dr Salma and Rukhsar completely quash these claims. 'Our religion is just so beautiful that it has different ages for the practice based on the biological design of our bodies', said Rukhsar. 'In the way our bodies are made, a girl's private parts begin to develop only by the time she is around six years old. Touching it any time before that would damage her permanently'.

[15] DBWRF: Dawoodi Bohra Women's Association for Religious Freedom, https://dbwrf.org/#:~:text=DBWRF%20is%20a%20movement%20to,objects%20and%20mission%20of%20DBWRF [last accessed 30 September 2023].

When read using postcolonial feminist theory of ethnicity and nationalism, I argue that by making claims for 'equality' between men and women through *khatna* and situating pleasure as a component strictly within the confines of marriage, as 'pure', the Bohra women find a public audience only after they have been 'disciplined'; the sexual markers are 'attenuated and sanitised' out of the modern discourse (Najmabadi, 1993, p. 489). In addition, the 'symbolic shield' (Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 283) provided by *khatna* provides the Bohra women with a platform to reimagine their subjectivities in the public sphere. Here, the 'sphere of the intimate' (Chatterjee, 1993, p.149), their *deen*, I find, remains unthreatened since promiscuity does not feature in this reinvention. By subverting seemingly 'Western' tropes of equality, autonomy and subjectivity, the Bohra women advocating *khatna* make it difficult to talk about pleasure and sexual violence as something 'solely biological and dependent on the women's anatomy' (Dellenborg, 2004, p. 88). Instead, female *khatna*, which has no clear scriptural sanctions and whose Islamic roots have been questioned, has been 'modified, ritualised and institutionalised' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983, p. 6) by the Bohra women defending the practice through 'cultural association and mandatory repetition'.

I now move to a detailed discussion of how *khatna*, as a practice propagated as a 'ladies' ritual', 'of, by and for women' and a 'marker of Bohra sisterhood', is influenced by and contributes to multiple patriarchies.

reinventing patriarchies

An expanding body of scholarship has contributed to an understanding of how gender is implicated in ethnic and national processes (Yuval-Davis, 1993; Gal and Kligman, 2000; Kim-Puri, 2005). According to this literature, women are seen as 'culture carriers' of the group because of their reproductive capacities. These discourses around women's sexuality, particularly in respect to the transformation of the womb from 'vessel to school' (Najmabadi, 1998, p. 102; Chaudhuri, 1999, p. 27), are central to notions of what it is to be a good and loyal member of a collective. The 'spiritual sphere' (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 117), or the 'sacred interior' (Sullivan, 1998, p. 228), is enlarged to mean 'national service' (Najmabadi, 1998, p. 114), which in the case of the Bohra women translates into their standing in the *deen* and the *duniya*. Bohra women are charged with the continuity of social norms, the socialising of young children and the preservation of the *izzat* (reputation, honour) of the family. Performed as a tradition of 'sex socialisation' to 'prevent promiscuity', Ghadially (1991, p. 17) says that 'any deviance from the codes of morality prescribed for women threaten the *izzat* of her kin group'. S. Srinivasan (1991, cited in Bootwala, 2019a, p. 222) further gives compelling evidence that older women and men 'influence the perpetuation of *khatna* in the *mohalla*, neighbourhood'. Similarly, siblings who live within joint families are also more likely to continue *khatna* versus those who live separately from the elders. Multiple testimonies from a 2008 study published by the anti-FGC group We Speak Out (Anantnarayan, Diler and Menon, 2018), documented nearly two decades after Ghadially's and Srinivasan's 1991 studies, also corroborate this familial pressure. Carrying on the practice is the 'shared responsibility of community women' (Anantnarayan, Diler and Menon, 2018). In fact, as an important marker of both religious authority and religious identity, *khatna* is also looked at as a 'boundary' demarcating Bohra woman from non-Bohra women.[16] 'If a Bohra man

[16] In his work on the practice of male circumcision among the Ansaris of Barabanki, Deepak Mehta (1996, p. 217) shows that the ritual, in constituting the body of the male, allows it to simultaneously 'enter into the lifecycle of the domestic group and the community of Islam'. The discourse on circumcision, he adds, is 'not limited by its ritual context but is part of the everyday vocabulary of men of the community' (*ibid.*). This vocabulary does not refer to the body of the circumcised but attempts to orally constitute the boundaries of 'being Muslim' (*ibid.*). Incidentally, the Ansaris, like most other Muslim groups in India, do not practise female circumcision.

decides to marry a non-Bohra woman, I have been told that she would have to undergo *khatna* before being accepted', said Khadija (also mentioned in Ghadially, 1991, p. 19). Women who have not undergone *khatna*, but still practise the religion, claim to be socially excluded in many respects. In filmmaker Idah's case, even though she was spared the cut as a child, she was taunted by her relatives for 'not being Bohra enough'.

Meanwhile, this mandate 'to belong' has also made certain community women—standing in between their faith and their anti-*khatna* stance—devise a compromise. 'Some Bohra women have written to us saying that they wouldn't get their daughters cut but would lie to their families that they have', said anti-*khatna* activist Asiya. This in-between position or double consciousness, thus, would grant them membership of the community but they would not have to 'deal with the guilt' of cutting their daughters. Having said that, however, the way in which the community is stratified (closely knit, small in number) also makes it difficult to 'escape the practice' (Meher), particularly from the 'mothers-in-law and other senior women'. For the defenders of the tradition, however, these women are 'more of an irritant than a threat to an otherwise peaceful community' (Khadija). 'There are different categories of Bohras, including very active participants, middle-of-the-road, and those on the fringes. The last category might include women who might not want to perform *khatna* on their daughters ... that would make up for just about 1 per cent of the entire community', added Khadija. The Bohra women thus work as 'active agents' (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 148) in practising and proliferating the 'ladies' matter' to locate themselves in their *deen* and *duniya*. 'It is a form of Bohra sisterhood', said Dr Salma.

The role of Bohra men in continuing female *khatna* remains ambiguous in public discourse, as it is firmly promoted as a 'ladies' ritual'. The ideological frameworks of 'patriarchy as a system that privileges men over women' (Asiya) or that the 'religious texts prescribing *khatna* were written by men' (Idah) are immediately thrashed as 'Western feminism' (Rukhsar). Instead, the facts that within the practice 'men are unaware' or 'did not even know that it happened to the women up until the signature petition' (Khadija) are used as tropes to dismiss its patriarchal affiliations. The reason for the men's silence on the matter, emerging from either ignorance or design, continues to be rationalised in multiple ways. The spokesperson linked silence to the idea of 'good etiquette' propagated by the religion. He said, 'In the old days, if men would talk about women's genitals, they would probably fear for their lives. Gradually, the tradition became so strong that men even forgot that women were even doing this'. Rukhsar further justified this silence as a mere reflection of 'Indian culture'.

Thus, juggling between the identities of 'faithful wife', 'exemplary mother' and a 'good Bohra' in the contested terrain of tradition formation, modern-yet-traditional Bohra women play a key role in preserving and propagating *khatna*. They are not primarily concerned with political equality or the implications of gender hierarchy. Rather than view their lives and the practice through a filter of political rights, they orientate their understandings of self and role in terms of their obligations to God. By strictly conforming to and reproducing acceptable gender relations and sexuality norms, they in turn help preserve and are preserved by the patriarchal order of the community and family. For them, female *khatna* is both an 'ethical means and ends' (Mahmood, 2004).

In the next section, I examine how Bohra women have honed their modern-yet-traditional subjectivities, informed by the community's cultural revivalism project and call for exclusivity, to preserve and perpetuate female *khatna*.

reinventing the other

In early 2000, Dr Salma adopted the *rida*, the traditional attire designated for Bohra women, for the first time. While previously she used to wear it periodically, she has now incorporated it into her 'public image'. 'My son was being felicitated by a senior government official. It was at that point I felt the need to showcase myself as a Dawoodi Bohra', said Dr Salma, adding, 'otherwise the world wouldn't know of our achievements because we are such a tight-knit community'.

Dr Salma's remarks stand at the core of the community's cultural revivalism project driven by the former Syedna in the 1970s, when the *rida* was first introduced. Every effort was made to consolidate the 'modern public image' of the community (Blank, 2001). Unlike the conventional, black-coloured burqa worn by most Muslim women in India, the *rida* allowed the community women to experiment with colours, prints, patterns and lace (*ibid.,* p. 187).[17] The Bohra women also stood out in their *ridas* and became easily identifiable in public spaces. 'Bohra women are very fashionable and modern. We make it a point to stay up to date with the colours of the season', said Meher, a Mumbai-based fashion designer from the community.

Challenges to the traditional representations of women yielded new possibilities for identities and contestations for the community in its pursuit of establishing a 'modern' community (*ibid.*). In various ways, by regulating the Bohra women's public attire, the community leadership sought to instil in its women a specific subjectivity. In addition to the *rida*, there was an additional push for secular, graduate education. Accordingly, women were encouraged to take up professional degrees such as law, medicine and business, and even to enrol in international universities. 'When I told my father that I wanted to study law, he supported me wholeheartedly. There was no need to negotiate', said Nusrat. 'I know of Muslim women [non-Bohras] who are not allowed to use a mobile phone, attend school or for that matter even wear denims … we are not like them'.

Nearly all the Bohra women I interviewed identified themselves as 'modern', by describing particular aspects of their lives, including their education, training and participation in public life, as being definitely 'not like them'. 'Being modern' in the world of Bohra women, however, was different than for other women's groups in India and the West. A more specific distinction was made from the anti-*khatna* feminists from the community, who Khadija alleged had been 'brainwashed by the West'. 'They were American modern', the children's storywriter concluded.

Modernity is situated within distinct subject positions in postcolonial scholarship (as cited in Jamal, 2005), including its association with 'secularisation' as a way to define religious legitimacy (Asad, 2003); the formulation of subjectivities through individualising and totalising discourses (Foucault, 1982); the discursive construction of the West and its Others (Hall and Du Gay, 1996); a particular configuration of homogeneous, empty time-space associated with the nation state (Anderson, 1992); and the multiple locations of culture (Bhabha, 1994). However, when read through the prism of gender and religion, defining the already complex construct of 'modernity' becomes a challenge (Jamal, 2005,

[17] The Dawoodi Bohras, https://www.thedawoodibohras.com/ [last accessed 30 September 2023].

p. 12). Both, Islam and modernity, Turkish sociologist Nilufer Göle (2000, p. 94) contends, are ongoing, interlinked processes scrutinised continuously by 'human interpretation and agency'. They are accessed simultaneously through 'notions of what constitutes the gendered subject' (Khurshid, 2015, p. 118). Göle (2000, p. 91) suggests the idea of 'multiple modernities', which challenges the mono-civilisational, hegemonic narrative of Western modernity. Drawing on this conceptualisation of non-Western modernities, Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati (cited in Sullivan, 1998, p. 218) argues that the modern Muslim woman's subjectivities are woven out of 'inherited traditions of conservatism, patriarchy, and ignorance'. It is from and within the confinement of women within the home, the gendered split of the private and public and the exclusion of women from the public sphere (Sullivan, 1998, p. 218) that 'modernities' shall unfold. This form of 'forbidden modernity' (Göle, 2000, p. 102) sets women as boundary markers of Islamic difference.

It is a form of 'forbidden modernity', I argue, that is employed by the modern-yet-traditional Bohra women to suppress local dissension, to include or exclude particular voices, to ensure social cohesion and to structure social relations. Bohra modernity, I argue, has been crafted through a process of 'alienation' (Najmabadi, 1993, p. 508) from both other Muslim women as well as the 'brainwashed' Bohra women.

For instance, in the case of anti-*khatna* activist Mariyam, the childhood memory of the experience of *khatna* continues to haunt her even after four decades. Her emphasis on referring to the practice as 'mutilation', however, has sparked a serious debate in the community. While the United Nations recognises female *khatna* as 'Type 1 of FGM/C', the women defending the practice vehemently deny any connection, and use the rhetoric of 'exclusivity' to do so. 'We are one of the most highly educated communities in the country. We wouldn't practise *khatna* if it was going to cause even an ounce of harm', said Zareen, adding, 'Do any of the so-called activists *look mutilated*?'. Incidentally, in May 2017, the former Union minister of women and child development Maneka Gandhi publicly condemned *khatna* as a 'criminal office' and called for its ban (Nair, 2017). In response, members of DBWRF published an open letter on their blog alleging that the 'voice of the majority' was under attack by 'the hidden agendas and personal motivations of a few' (DBWRF, 2017). To further incriminate the women calling out the practice, the DBWRF signatories asked: 'Have the women [the anti-*khatna* activists] been independently examined before they were allowed to demand legislation against an Indian community?'.

Interestingly, even though pro-*khatna* advocates continue to clearly distinguish themselves from other non-Bohra Muslim women, anti-*khatna* activists have often invoked the trope of being 'Muslim women' to condemn the practice of *khatna*. The activists accused the government of doublespeak for criminalising *triple talaq*, an instant divorce practice in the Muslim community, while making no headway in their pleas for a legal ban on *khatna* practised primarily by the Bohras Muslims (Dhingra, 2018). Members of We Speak Out said: 'This government has been deeply interested in issues of the Muslim women. We are also Muslim women. Why have our pleas not been heard?' (PTI, 2018). Pro-*khatna* advocates such as Zareen, meanwhile, actively refrained from drawing such parallels. '*Khatna* has specific relevance to the Bohra community. Comparisons with other practices are desperate and baseless', Zareen said.[18]

[18] In spite of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's anti-Muslim, far-right politics being openly condemned, Dawoodi Bohra leaders remain fierce supporters of the party. Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi has attended several community events and publicly lauded them for their pursuit of 'development' (Saiyed, 2023).

Thus, anchored in the distinction between the *deen* and *duniya* that continues to be glorified as the ultimate foundation of all human relationships, the image of the Bohra woman as 'educated, fashionable and technologically savvy', yet 'religious and ritualistic', continues to be pushed forward by the community. Incidentally, it is in this very pursuit to forge an exclusive 'Bohra modernity'—a form of forbidden modernity—to counter public campaigns against the practice that Bohra women are blurring the boundaries between autonomy and exploitation.

Here, I gesture briefly towards the practices affecting women that involve a significant measure of 'spectacular' and 'hiddenness', which have been studied by Uma Narayan (1997b) in the context of the contemporary discourses on *sati*.[19] According to Narayan (*ibid.*, p. 68), several segments of the media coverage and public outcry from those opposed to *sati* were critical of the practice on the grounds that it was 'traditional, religious and barbaric'. The reportage, she argues, was 'challenging the practice without challenging the terms in which the practice was represented' (*ibid.*). In the case of the Bohra women, similarly, the news stories often drew direct comparisons with the cutting traditions prevalent among indigenous communities in Africa without taking into consideration the 'local motivations and interests' (Naryan,1997a, p. 45) of the practice of female *khatna*.[20] 'Do I look like I belong to a random African tribe where I would cut my daughter in a hut out in the sun?', asked Rukhsar. Dr Sadiya, too, a homeopathy doctor, expressed anger over the 'media circus' around the practice; the *rida* she wears makes her hyper-visible in public. 'When I walk on the street, I feel like people look at me like I am a victim. It is terrible how my genitals are now a part of the public imagination', she said, adding, 'These activists have caused me more irreparable pain than even what my *khatna* allegedly did'. Bohra women such as Rukhsar and Dr Sadiya at no point consider the physical ritual of female *khatna* to be exploitative or an invasion of their sexual rights and body. The public resistance and conversations, instead, they claim are 'more damaging'.

The next section discusses the many ways in which the community leadership, through its modern-yet-traditional women, is countering public backlash against the harmful effects of *khatna* by promoting the medicalisation of the practice. In doing so, the community strives to preserve *khatna*, while advocating its modern, scientific subjectivities.

reinventing the notions of harm

In a public discourse fuelled by memories of trauma and experiences of abuse, from 2011 onwards *khatna* began to be associated with images of a 'rusted blade', a 'dingy room' and an 'untrained, old

[19] *Sati* ('good woman' or 'chaste wife') is the Indian custom of a wife immolating herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. Although currently abolished, in several Hindu caste communities, *sati* was viewed as the ideal of femininity (Narayan, 1997b, p. 203) and womanly devotion. The *sati* of a young widow named Roop Kanwar sparked widespread debate in 1987; to learn more about the contestations, see among others, Hawley, 1994; Narayan 1997b; Mani, 1998.

[20] Studies of female genital cutting in North African and Middle Eastern countries have found that the religious and culturally embedded tradition is performed to preserve virginity, assure chastity, enrich childbirth, increase marriageability chances, reduce stillbirths and, most importantly, enhance male sexual pleasure (Allam *et al.*, 2001; Ismail *et al.*, 2017; Wahlberg *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, studies (Almroth *et al.*, 2001; Toubia and Sharief, 2003; Gele, Bø and Sundby, 2013) show that community women actively participate in the tradition for various reasons, such as to improve their honourable status and social identity, as well as to reduce stigma and economic hardship. In spite of the global backlash, in practising communities FGC is seen as 'in the best interests for the [girl] child', according to Costello *et al.* (2015).

woman' (Baweja, 2016). According to a survey undertaken by Sahiyo, a collective of Bohra women established to end the practice, 98 per cent of those who had been cut described experiencing pain immediately after undergoing *khatna*, and 74 per cent said that they were cut by an untrained traditional cutter (Taher, 2017). These representations portrayed in the media severely damaged the reputation of the 'modern' and 'educated' Bohra woman. Furthermore, according to Lakshmi Anantnarayan, Shabana Diler and Natasha Menon (2018, p. 41), one sentiment that echoed consistently in their qualitative research on the prevalence and experiences of *khatna* is that all community members (both those who challenge and those who defend the practice) are 'concerned about the safety and well-being of the girl children subjected to the practice'. As and when they brought the topic up during our interactions, the Bohra women defending the practice did not completely refute these reported experiences of a 'bad *khatna*'. Yet, calling for the practice to end was 'not even an option'. 'Just because you meet with an accident, would you stop driving? Similarly, just because there have been a few cases of bad *khatna*, how can we end a tradition?', asked Dr Salma. The rhetoric in Dr Salma's tone was representative of the voices of most women defending the tradition, including Meher, who pitted 'ten good *khatnas*' against 'one bad *khatna*'.

To cleanse the public image of the community and the ritual, the Bohra leadership has resorted to its modern, scientific public image by frantically advocating for the medicalisation of the practice. According to the spokesperson, there were a few, particularly from the upper-class families in the big cities, who had made the shift to medical intervention. The procedure that previously involved 'a razor, stone, paper and medicinal powder' (Ghadially, 1991, p. 19) is gradually being replaced with surgical equipment, sterilising aids and local anaesthesia. 'As a community, we have always made a conscious attempt to accommodate modern technologies. It was already painless even previously. Medical supervision will ensure that nobody can complain', said Rukhsar. This move involves a day procedure, wherein the 7-year old will be wheeled into an operation theatre in a Bohra community-run hospital, given local anaesthesia, cut by a female doctor and discharged within a couple of hours. The trend is now also spreading to smaller cities and towns (Johari, 2017).

While the community leaders and senior female members have openly welcomed this move to 'scientifically validate' the practice, not everyone has been supportive of it. For some women, the 'secrecy' that accompanied the practice must be forfeited to accept this 'modern' *khatna*. Moreover, the absence of an accessible scriptural sanction has been a source of confusion for women who are not fully clear about 'how much [of the clitoris] should be cut' (Idah). According to the spokesperson, the religious books did not have clear instructions: 'They tell us the principle that it ought to be done, but don't tell us how much, and in what way …'. Yasmin Bootwala (2019b) makes a mention of a guidebook by Amatullah Burhanuddin, the wife of Mohammed Burhanuddin, the 52nd Da'i of the Dawoodi Bohras. The guidebook comprises four volumes for orthodox Bohra religious practices. In the third volume, 'circumcision of both sexes is sanctioned' (*ibid.*, p. 231). According to the spokesperson, several older women, known as *dai ma* (midwives), have been specifically trained for the practice by the senior female members of the Syedna's family. They know exactly 'how much to cut' (Nusrat). 'Going to the hospital and being placed on the surgery table would certainly be a scary experience for a child. Plus, the doctors might end up cutting more than required', said Nusrat. She also added that 'it is a religious act, not a medical problem'. Apart from safety, 'surveillance' was another key reason to reject the medical cut. The *dai ma* remained central to the continuation of the tradition as the 'community gatekeeper' (Anantnarayan,

Diler and Menon, 2018, p. 41). Some Bohra women feared that the 'involvement of medical doctors means families may no longer know the *khatna* status of the girls' (*ibid.*).

In addition to the medicalisation of the practice, there is a growing section of pro-*khatna* advocates from the community, who claim that the practice is merely a form of 'clitoral unhooding', a surgical procedure that 'a number of doctors in Western countries perform on adult women to enhance sexual pleasure' (Johari, 2017). '*Khatna* actually improves a woman's sexual drive. It is similar to clitoral unhooding, but with religious sanction and more marital benefits', said Rukhsar. The fact that clitoral unhooding involves a degree of 'consent' and is 'performed on adult women' who are 'aware of the risks' (Chambers, 2007, p. 177) remains unexplained.

The community has run into fresh protests from activists, who claim that the long-term psychological impacts of the cut involving 'frigidity' (Asiya), 'low self-esteem' and 'emotional vulnerability' (Idah) have been completely swept under the carpet through the promise of medicalisation. '*Khatna* is a rights-based issue and not just a health issue ... what about the child's consent?', asked activist Mariyam. In response, the women claimed that a 'child's consent rested with the mother'. 'Don't we push our toddlers to go to school on the first day even when they are crying? As a mother, we know what is best for our child ... the child has to be in school', stated Dr Salma, taking refuge in rhetoric.

Thus, in its pronounced attempt to 'salvage female *khatna*' through the embrace of the biomedical, I argue that the Bohra community is extending its neo-traditional subjectivities to modernise the practice, yet refuses to end it. Questions posed to the community on the problems of 'consent', 'harm' and 'violence' are carefully circumvented using the discourses of 'motherhood', 'community honour' and 'modern science'. It is important to note that paradoxically, with regards to the medicalisation of *khatna*, the anti-*khatna* activists and a faction of the pro-*khatna* forces within the community are in fact in agreement. Their motivations for questioning this mega modernity project steered by the community leadership, however, remain incompatible.

As illustrated above, Bohra women defending *khatna* are actively striving to preserve and perpetuate it amid growing dissent, from both within and outside of the community. By reinventing communal histories, reworking patriarchies, reimagining the 'other' and adopting medical science, they are using the rhetoric of modernity and redefining their own traditional subjectivities to keep *khatna* alive and relevant.

call for reflection

This article examines the complicated, under-explored relationship between gender and Islam by foregrounding self-narratives of the modern-yet-traditional Bohra women who actively participate within, as opposed to fight against, patriarchal norms to preserve female *khatna*. It further juxtaposes these voices with those of anti-*khatna* activists to make visible the multiple layers that are hidden beneath the extremely polarised and relatively simplistic public discourse on this deeply emotionally charged and contested issue. Thus, in Rukhsar's cry for 'equality', Khadija's 'spiritual' conquests and Dr Salma's desire for 'sisterhood', I find that the Bohra women, backed by the community leadership, are devising multifarious ways to salvage female *khatna* and the overall

public image of the community. As active agents and symbolic markers of the centuries-old tradition, they are also revisiting their own subjectivities as modern yet traditional in order to belong to the larger ideological and religious framework of their *deen* and *duniya*. On the one hand, they are striving to regain authority over their right to *khatna* by identifying 'suitable religious knowledge' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) and criticising both 'Western' modernity and 'tribal' genital-cutting practices. On the other hand, they are also drawing from Western scientific sensibilities such as 'clitoral unhooding' and 'medicalisation' to propagate the 'harmless, essential practice' (Kotak, 2018). Thus, instead of making a simple return to religious resources and withdrawing from the 'liberal-universalist project' (Jamal, 2005, p. 13), I find that they are 'cross-fertilizing' the two (Göle, 2000, p. 98) to eventually reinvent and preserve both their Bohra modernity and the right to female genital cutting.

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