



**MIGRATION COMMUNITY AND THE ENIGMA OF IDENTITIES:  
READING THE NOVELS OF M. G. VASSANJI**

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**ABSTRACT**

*We are here, not there, in the region of our birth. ... For to be in exile is considerably more than being in another country. It is to live with myself knowing my estrangement. ... But this estrangement goes further. It touches upon the very notion of home, the lands and places of our birth. For that land, there, that region, lives in us as memory and dream, as nostalgia, romance of reflection, that which defines us as different, that to which we think we belong but no longer do. It is thus that many of us repeatedly invent scenarios of our return but never realize them. It is thus also that those of us who do visit there return here to find that after the painful winters of our struggles a deep sense of uneasiness prevails ... [W]e are now visitors: of our past, and unwelcomed visitors here, and other places like here, where our silence and invisibility, despite our embodied conspicuousness, are the dimensions of our rejection. (Iwaru 1989 202-203)*

This consciousness of always being in exile, estrangement that *we belong but no longer do* and a compulsion to return to the point of origin (which proves to be chimera) shape the fictional world of the diasporic authors like M.G. Vassanji.<sup>1</sup> The above statement of Arnold Iwaru defines the situation of the Indo-Canadian authors from Africa and the Caribbean. M. G. Vassanji, an African-Indian, who migrated to Canada as a research associate and lecturer at the University of Toronto in 1978, too returns to his past. The reason is twofold: one is the search for home and another is to define his religious identity. Both are complex and major factors in deciding identity. His novels have been deeply affected by two experiences: the psychic tremors of indenture, a kind of banishment from India and later his exilic existence in Canada. This is what distinguishes him from so-called main stream literary aesthetic. He knows that he is not fit into the prevailing paradigm of literary theory and aesthetics. He is conscious of the fact that the dominant ideology of the West has marginalized non-white diasporic writers as “immigrants”. Thus he consciously chooses the position that belongs to those Fanon called “the wretched of the earth”. He writes about unheroic, oppressed, marginalized, and the people of hyphenated category. He writes and recreates the history of those who are dislocated, neither here nor there. Vassanji’s novels, the main concern of this paper, deal with diasporic Indians living in East Africa and their further migration to other places. His novels are concerned with how these migrations affect



the life and identity of such dislocated lives. As a secondary theme, members of his community of Indian Muslims of the esoteric Shamsi sect (like himself) later undergo a second migration to Europe, Canada, or the United States. Vassanji explores the impact of these migrations on these characters who are installed as a buffer zone between the indigenous Africans and colonial administration. The most important factor about him is that the presence of the mythical homeland India looms large. Not only for the characters but also for the writer himself India is a spiritual issue. Vassanji writes,

I grew up in Dar es Salaam, on the coast of East Africa; the memory and sight of that city, of that continent, evoke in me a deep nostalgia and love of place. India, on the other hand, seemed to do something to the soul; give it a certain ease, a sense of homecoming, quite another kind of nostalgia. (2009 vii)

This nostalgia serves as a pull factor for diasporic writers. Vassanji returns to his roots and this is what gives him an impetus to describe the people of his community, which is a minority within minority. India is important because she bears the ancestral mythical memory of his community. Vassanji feels a deep obligation to write about the identity of his community of which he is a part. Emphasis is on the collective experience. Community and kinship relationship are more important factors than the individual. He belongs to the community of Gujrati Khojas<sup>2</sup>, the beliefs of which are partly drawn from Hinduism and partly from Islam. Vassanji writes

That syncretism, a happy combination of mystical and devotional Hinduism and Islam, without a thought to internal contradiction or to the mainstream traditions, inevitably defined my relationship with India. The existence of such inclusive systems of belief was proof of an essential historical quality of India, that of tolerance and flexibility, a certain *laissez faire* in matters of the spirit, at least at the local level far away from the watchful eyes of orthodoxy. (2009 ix)

Thus India, along with Africa, not only gives an identity but also provides aesthetics as opposed to the Western aesthetics of exclusivism in the name of race, gender and colour. Vassanji corroborates with what Arun Mukherjee defines as “oppositional aesthetics”, (1994 vii) that means Vassanji continues to be oppositional to the dominant ideologies of literary and cultural analysis in Euro-America. He feels compelled to return to his past. He feels compelled to investigate the history of his community; about the generations of oppressions. In an essay entitled “Community as a Fictional Character” Vassanji says:

My literary project... has been to trace the origins of a community, its development in a British colony, and finally its dispersal in the postcolonial era. In this way I look at the present century from the perspective of a simple



community as it evolves and arrives at a metropolitan consciousness and loses a large part of its traditional identity. One could say that such a community is acted upon by history, and thus enters historical consciousness. In all of this, however, the individual within the community is of central concern. And in a final reversal, even as my novels make the community historical—paralleling what the modern world has done to it—by fictionalizing the community, they have mythologized it. (1994 13-18)

The characters of Vassanji are caught in the labyrinth of identity because the long history of multiple migrations makes them doubly alienated and twice removed from their roots. Vassanji tries to capture these experiences with a sense of alienation and their attachment to homeland. Vassanji's characters return to their places of origin, be it Kenya, Zanzibar, Tanzania, Kilwa or India, in order to find their affiliations, which turns to be ambivalent. They find that they are always an in-between situation. More they delve deeper, more enigmatic the identity becomes. This enigma of identity is not only at physical and material level but also at a spiritual level.

*The Gunny Sack* (1989), Vassanji's first novel, celebrates the spirit of early Asian migrants from India who moved to East Africa in the early 1900s. In this novel, Vassanji focuses on the problematic union of East Africa and South Asia. It is this quest for new homes that we see in most of the Asian-African characters such as Dhanji Govindji and his descendant Salim Juma in this novel. A spirited saga of alliances, rivalries, successes and failures, it is a story of the survival of the Shamsi community amid dislocation, fragmentation, racial subjugation, marginalization and oppression. The novel interconnects and interweaves stories and memories of family life and the decisive public events of nearly a century. About this exhilarating story and the technique, Frank Birbalsingh makes a very significant analysis that "Vassanji combines an encyclopedic memory with magisterial literary technique in his first novel *The Gunny Sack*" and "presents a comprehensive view of its history," while objectively showing "the Shamsis — as the Ishmaelis are called in *The Gunny Sack*—to be preoccupied mainly with survival, and therefore not greatly concerned with moral niceties." (1995 165)

*The Gunny Sack* begins with the narrator's address to the gunny sack as an icon of origin fraught with the questions of identity. It is compared with 'Shehrazade' of *The Arabian Nights*, which tells endless stories. These endless stories lead towards various in-between situations of migrants. Vassanji has described the Gunny Sack as Shehru because it parallels Vassanji's own story as a migrant writer in an alien world struggling for identity and cultural survival. As the fear of impending death enforces Shehrazade to weave various tales in order to postpone the menace of death in *The Arabian Nights*, in the same way the awesome possibilities of



marginalization and the horror of losing the self compels the migrant to produce narratives in large quantities for social and cultural survival.

M.G. Vassani, through the character of Salim Juma meditates the great genealogical tree that starts from Dhanji Govindji and ends with the detached and lonely life of the narrator himself. Dhanji Govindji is his great grand-father and an Indian by origin, who migrated to Zanzibar to avail better business opportunities and eventually established himself as a successful and opulent businessman and the Mukhi (head) of the Shamsi community. The origins of the primogenitor Govindji, signifying the absence of caste, village and professional antecedents, are rendered vague. His only claim for self-identity is that he is a Shamsi, a half Hindu; and half-Muslim, a hyphenated entity in terms of religious practice and culture. The enigma of identity is visible in case of Dhanji's first son Huseni by his kept, who is marginalized 'half-caste' and cannot claim his ancestry. Huseni symbolizes the union of a colonizer (Govindji) and the colonized (Bibi Taratibu, a discarded African slave) one. This one branch of family tree of half-caste children never bears any religious and social sanction and their identity is dubious and questionable.

Salim Juma (the narrator) also carries a hybridized identity. He is burdened with a troubled self-consciousness and an organized collective memory of the search of selfhood that continues down the generations. He agonizes on his dark complexion and an African name Salim Juma. Due to his skin colour, he is sent to the farthest National service camp in Northern Tanzania, where he is the only Asian African amidst many indigenous African colleagues. His colour and ruptured identity causes him constant skin humiliation and indignation. The ghettoization on the basis of colour exposes the truth of the colonial ideology which had played significantly to colonize the mind of the natives for the sake of imperialism. Juma's life is also the part of this discrimination whose identity is permanently stamped by the feeling of alienation and discrimination. Juma fails to resolve the enigma of identity and he could never search his belongingness within the communitarian fold. Thus the genealogical tree of family saga, related to Dhanji Govindji signifies the notion of discontinuity and indeterminacy.

In *The Gunny Sack* M.G. Vassanji evokes the question of origins, which has no fixed coordination of time and space, but only has some imaginary, fluid locations constructed by memory. By weaving memory and myth with history, Vassanji deals with the colonial and post-colonial history of East Africa, the history of the struggle of imperial powers of Europe like Germany and England over colonies in Africa. The horrible impact of the World Wars and the decolonization of Kenya,



Tanzania, Uganda, Zanzibar and other nations constitute the troublesome destiny of the Indians of the East African coast. Vassanji negotiates communal and individual identities through the intersection of history and myth.

In *No New Land* (1991), M.G. Vassanji gives voice to the Canadian immigrant experiences of the Indian Shamsi community (migrated largely from East Africa). These immigrants are challenged and ruptured by multiplicities of ambivalent affiliations and are always confronted with a destabilizing polemical situation of the "in-betweenness". Thus, they suffer from a loss of inherited native identity in an alien environment. In this novel, Vassanji discusses the theme of identity, race, culture and tradition. It evolves around the issue of the unattainable phantasm and an enigma of identity, which the protagonist Nurdin suffers throughout his life, after he migrates to Toronto.

The protagonist of *No New Land* (1991) tries to circumscribe himself within his own world. Throughout the novel, Vassanji beautifies the characters with their ancestral peculiarities. The ambivalent conflict between traditions and cultures of homeland and diaspora is seen. Vassanji highlights the East Indian immigrants' feelings of segregation and alienation from the mainstream Canadian society.

Canada is referred as a "melting pot", where various cultural groups are combined in the population. Amidst this multicultural ethos, Vassanji elaborates the class differentiation, the racial discrimination, and the generation differences through the characters of *No New Land*. These characters have different notions about their identities. The most common factor is that all of them are led into a labyrinth multiple identities.

*No New Land* may be signified as Vassanji's personal experience, mainly his originating background in Africa, but through the character of Nurdin he exposes the hyphenated identity that the federal government of Multicultural Canada labeled on the immigrants. The novel reflects the diasporic condition of Ismailia community in Africa and Canada. Though a simple narrative, it is a remarkable novel.

Focusing on the history of Tanzania, *The Book of Secrets* (1994) starts with the collapse of the German colonial rule to the end of the 1980s. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, this part of Africa is conglomerated by African, Indian, Arab and English cultures. Depicting the events of colonial and Post-colonial era, *The Book of Secrets* explores the ambiguous identities of Indian and British migrants in East Africa. It is a story of forbidden liaisons and simmering vengeance, family secrets and cultural exiles presented by Pius Fernandes, a former Goanese school teacher.



The narrator is not only commenting on Corbin's diary; but also placing himself in Corbin's mind and presents us with his thoughts. He thinks himself closer to Corbin because both of them share an outsider status, and their identity and status remain enigmatic.

*The Book of secrets* is a complex novel. The plot has two major strands: the present in which an Indian born retired history teacher, Pius discovers a diary written by Corbin; and the past is the entries in diary, whose gaps Pius imaginatively fills with his own narrative. This novel is a story of physical and emotional displacement and one's search for home in the changing political scenario, where the borders are shifted due to political strife. With the arrival of war, Britain controlled Kenya and Germany ruled on Tanzania, so the people suffer because the boundaries between two territories are totally arbitrary to their customs and life.

The characters of *The Book of Secrets* bears contrary characteristics, yet the novel emphasizes on cross-cultural empathy (Corbin and Mukhi), cross cultural marriage (Pipa and Mariamu, Jamal and Khanoum), cross cultural breeding (Corbin and Mariamu) and homoeroticism across cultural and racial divides (Pius and Gregory). Corbin, inspite of being a British administrator, turns to be a local, Maynard goes native and becomes a savage, Gregory affiliates with the post-colonial state. Pipa is identified as a Shamsi, Pius identifies with Corbin whose story he narrates and with Gregory whom he latently loves. Thus, the novel deconstructs the very notion of borders and compartment alienations, in which identities of characters are caught in enigmatic labyrinths.

*Amriika* (2001) is a far less complex novel than *The Book of Secrets*. However the problem of identity and the role of past is equally significant to form the narrative of the novel. Ramji, the protagonist of the novel laments on his present situation, when his beloved Rubina has gone anywhere by leaving him alone. By delineating glorious condition of past, Ramji deplors the present as he leads the life of obscurity, living in a rented room near a beach and is writing these memories. The three college students, whose parents had belonged to Ramji's generations, are regular visitors of him. They often discuss on the matters of "sex and aids, religion and intermarriage, the hang-ups of their immigrant parents; and their own impending futures." (2) Their discussion related to their age, reminds Ramji of his own historical past age.

Ramji reminds his ancestral past history concerned with his identity. He says that his ancestors were Hindus and later on converted to a sect of Islam as Vassanji has



described this sect as Shamsis in *The Gunny Sack*. He further remembers the time 60<sup>s</sup>, when he decided to go to America for his future study, but was greatly shocked after hearing the news of the treacherous murder of Kennedy. In America he suffers a stunning reality of radicalism, fanaticism, racial discrimination and a loss of his identity. The land of his dream, like his search for an identity, turns to be a chimera.

There is a thematic departure in *The In-between World of Vikram Lall*. (2003) While earlier novels raise concerns of the Shamsis, much of the story of the novel takes place in Kenya among Punjabi Asians, as they experience the beginning of the end of Colonial rule. It revolves around the theme of love, passion, commitment, betrayal and more conspicuously identity. This novel is a good example of post-colonial novel. It is based on the sub-theme of identity crisis. During the colonial period, the white settlers ruled over the entire country and all the native Africans suffered. The Africans show their rebellion through Mau Mau Independence movement, but the Asians suffer as they are "in-between" situation, neither colonists nor African, neither white nor black, but sandwiched between the two.

Narrated from present day Canada by an exiled and regretful Vikram, Vassanji's novel is very successful at depicting the In-Between World of the title, the specific cultural experience of being an Indian living in colonial Africa, of being torn between the traditions of one continent and the customs of another. Vikram Lall inhabits an 'in-between world': between the full of his ancestral home in India and the Kenya he loves passionately; between escape from political terror and a seemingly inevitable return to home, a return that may cost him dearly.

The novel is an account not only of Kenya's colonial past, but also its post-colonial and neo-colonial present; it is about three races- Indian, European and African, whose intersection in that place and at that time shape the present reality.

Vikram's ancestors are indentured labourers, who fall in love with the beautiful Kenya and decide to make it his home. Due to migration, their identities are marginalized, and the narrator ponders: "What makes a man leave the land of his birth, the home of those childhood memories that will haunt him till his deathbed...?" (18) These are critical questions which Vikram Lall strives to find out. He realizes that he has become a victim of this migration. When he hides himself in Canada, he feels that and unlike his grandfather, his home is not India but Kenya. He leaves his home not as an economic migrant as his grandfather, but as a fugitive as "one of Africa's most corrupt men."



Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song*, (2006) the only novel set in Indian background, explores the conflict between ancient loyalties and Modern desires, between legacy and discovery, between filial obligations and personal yearnings. This novel portrays the complexities of an individual conscience torn between responsibilities to uphold tradition and desire to pursue ambition. It is a shining study of one man's painful struggle to hold the earthly desires and spirituality in balance. *The Assassin's Song* conspicuously depicts the horrific real-life communal killing in 2002 Gujarat riot, which destroys the lives of a thousand human beings.

*The Assasian's Song*, written in backdrop of the 2002 Gujarat communal violence, conspicuously depicts the in-betweenness of the protagonist Karsan Dargawalla. Karsan's in-betweenness underlies his entire life as he is pulled between tradition of faith and his own intellectual curiosity and adventurous spirit. He wants to lead a common man's life but his father keeps him reminding his position. Karsan is caught between two identities one is worldly; a cricket player who wants to pursue his career in cricket; an agent of National Patriotic youth party; an aspirant who goes to Harvard for higher education; a professor in a foreign land and a man with a changed name to forge his identity. Another identity is spiritual as he is the gaddi varas. But finally both the identities prove to be chimera for him as the communal riots have changed everything. Even of the riots would not have taken place Karsan could not have chosen any stable identity. He is a typical product of postcolonial world though something of his family culture is deeply ingrained in his mind. Whereas his brother chooses to be a rigid Muslim, because of the impressions of the Gujarat riots, it is impossible for Karsan to be purely one thing. He stands in a complex relationship with history.

With *The Assassin's Song*, Vassanji's completes the circle. The ethnic social and cultural consciousness, which informs his earlier world of fiction, evolves into a broader paradigm of post-colonial migrations, racial migrations at *no new lands*, cultural pluralism, new ethnic ghettos, and a renewed search for roots. The search for origin ultimately brings Vassanji to India and the circuitous journey is complete with *The Assassin's Song*. His narratives give him chance to immerse himself imaginatively in the multiple worlds of his own origin. The theme of return to origin further provides impetus for a new start, which Vassanji makes with *The Magic of Saida*.(2012)



*The Magic of Saida* encompasses partly the history of slavery, the process of indenture and migration of Indian community to Africa in search of employment. Embedded in it is the history of colonial resistance and the Mau Mau upheaval in the continent. It also chronicles the racial conflict between black and white and also between black and brown (the people of Asian origin) which compels the Afro-Asian to flee to new lands. The history of the sexual exploitation of African women by Indians in Africa is also explored. These different strands of the story are knitted neatly around the beginning of love between Kamal Punja, an Indian-African, and Saida, an African girl of Swahili ancestry. This love later culminates into an illicit physical relationship between them. After several years when Kamal comes to know that she gave birth to his child and once she had come to his uncle's place to inquire about him, he decides to return (leaving behind a flourishing career of a doctor and a family) Africa in search of Saida. The climactic revelation of the role of magic in fetching Kamal back to Africa fills in with a sense of wonder and awe.

This complex novel is also about the intense identity crisis of Kamal, an Afro-Indian, who is rejected by both: Africans do not accept him as African and Indians reject him because of his black colour. He is in love with Africa, Saida and his mother. His mother orders him to be an Indian and leaves him forever; Saida is left behind because of the circumstances, and Africa compels him to leave the continent as he is an India. But magic of Africa fetches him back, but only to send him in a delirium, which blurs everything; history, memory and identity. Asma Syed, in her review of *The Magic of Saida* observes:

In his return to his origins, Kamal's personal history unfolds in the context of other histories, including the ugly legacy of colonization, slavery, and personal deceits. Vassanji's prodigious research provides insight into certain details of the German occupation of East Africa, the Maji Maji rebellion in Tanzania (War of the Waters), the slavery of East Africans and sexual exploitation of African concubines by Indians in Africa, the export of African slaves to India, the resulting African communities in India known as Sidis, and Idi Amin's atrocities against Asians in Uganda forcing the exodus of Asians to global destinations, including Canada. The narration of the history of Kilwa and German colonization is thrice removed, reminding readers of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. (2014)

Vassanji writes carefully about the experiences of African Indians. Through the minutest details of history, he explicitly explores ethnic and religious histories and tensions. Charu Sheela rightly states that, "Histories of individuals, communities and nations fascinate Vassanji. He feels history helps the writer to liberate himself to write about the present and



the past helps to create a space. Vassanji believes present can be understood better by unraveling the past.” (2012)

Vassanji makes local politics and historical events his exclusive concerns. His works are not individual centered, though there is analysis of individual lives getting affected by colonial and post colonial conditions. There is a labyrinth approach to human relationship and identity. There is an unavoidable social context, which deals with intercommunity relationship and simultaneously casts light on Indian-African relations. At the same time Vassanji faces history squarely and analyses the situation closely. For example he informs that India and Africa had a somewhat colonizer-colonized relationship. Arun Mukerjee makes a very significant remark about this aspect which Vassanji records in his works.

Vassanji uses two temporalities, the mythic and the calendrical. The mythic time scheme suggests that Indians had been going to the east coast of Africa for centuries. They were there before colonial powers got interested in Africa. They were there to trade in slaves, ivory, cloves and hides. ... India imported slaves from Africa and continued to import them right up to the nineteenth century. (1994 174)

She analyses the purchasing of sexual services and concludes that “India’s relationship with East Africa is seen in terms of sexual domination”. (1994 175) Reading *The Gunny Sack* she brings our attention to an unknown and yet a very important chapter of history that “there was an influential lobby in India that wanted East Africa to become an Indian colony.” (1994 177)

Vassanji is interested in the history of his community. He feels a strong obligation to write about the historical and religious background of his community. Bakeel Rizq Ahmed Battah opines that for Vassanji, “the suffering of his people due to the global emigration becomes a motivating force for his attempt of reconstructing the concept of the diasporic identity”. (2014 64) Battah further opines that Vassanji writes with a sense of religious urgency for affirmation of the religious identity and preservation of ethnic history. Battah emphasizes that:

In his seven novels, Vassanji is obsessed with the religious historic urgency. For example, in his first novel, *The Gunny Sack* (1989), Vassanji demonstrates the diasporic religious history of Dhanji’s family for four generations. The narrator, Salim Juma, unfolds the shocking experiences and activities of his family with their loss and disappearance. In *No New Land* (1992) he shows his rejection of Canadian as well as African policy of discrimination and exploitation against his people (Asians). *The Book of Secrets* (1994) deals with



South Asians and their history in Africa, pinpointing the negative impacts of the colonizers. *Amriika* (1999) expounds the scars of dislocation and disappointment in the host land and the trauma of the immigrants there. *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) depicts the entire history of Kenya and the in-betweenness of his ethnicity. *The Assassin's Song* (2007) presents the history of Sufism in India and their catastrophe of being involved in the conflict and dispute of Hindus and Muslims. *The Magic of Saida* (2012) crowns his views on the concepts of diaspora and religious history. (2014 65)

Surely Vassanji writes about his religious roots, but such “attempts to pigeonhole him along communal [religious] or other lines ... he considers narrow-minded, malicious and oppressive.” (Barber: 2012) He is much more complex and sophisticated writer. He is more interested in the history of origin, paradox of return, ambivalent affiliations, ruptured identities, sexual domination and the shifting paradigm of the relationship between East Asians and Africans. Vassanji rejects the mainstream culture and policy that discards, marginalizes, subjugates and erases one's history, culture and identity. His projection of the diasporic condition of Indians in Africa and elsewhere creates a new understanding of history and the complex never-to-be-resolved problem of identity crisis faced by those in exile.

Notes:

1. M.G. Vassanji, whose forefathers were migrated from India under indenture system in colonial rule, was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1950. His family left for Dar es Salaam in Tanzania at the end of the Mau Mau period. The United Republic of Tanzania came into being in 1964. Those were the times of economical setback and political unrest of the entire African continent. The indigenous Africans had a very hostile attitude towards Indians whose situation was like a "colonial sandwich", with the European at the top and Africans at the bottom. Amid increasing resentment of the Africans many Indians fled to England, Europe and North America to avoid racial and political discriminations. Vassanji, at the age of 19, left the University of Nairobi on a scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After earning a doctorate in Physics from the University of Pennsylvania and working as a writer- in-residence at the University of Iowa in the International Writing Program, he migrated to Canada and worked at the Chalk River Power Station for some time. Finally he came to Toronto in 1980 and accepted Canadian Citizenship in 1983. In 1989 his first novel *The Gunny Sack* was published. That year he, with his wife Nurjehan Aziz founded and edited the first issue of The Toronto South Asian Review (TSAR). Apart from *The Gunny Sack* Vassanji has penned six more novels; *No New Land* (1991), *The Book of Secrets* (1994) (which won the very first Scotiabank Giller Prize), *Amriika* (1999), *In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003)(which also received the Scotiabank Giller Prize) *The Assassin's Song* (2007) and *The magic of Saida* (2012).

2. — “**Khōjā**, Persian **Khvājeh**, caste of Indian Muslims converted from Hinduism to Islām in the 14th century by the Persian *pīr* (religious leader, or teacher) Saḍr-ud-Dīn and adopted as members of the Nizārī Ismāʿīlī sect of the Shīʿites (see Ismāʿīlīte). Forced to feign Hinduism, Sunnite Islām, or Ithnā ʿAsharīyah in order to preserve themselves from persecution, some Khōjās, in time, became followers of those faiths.

The term Khōjā is not a religious designation but a purely caste distinction that was carried over from the Hindu background of the group. Thus, there are Sunnite Khōjās and Shīʿite Khōjās. Other Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs share the same beliefs, practices, and even language with the Khōjās; however, one cannot enter the caste except by birth.

Khōjās live primarily in India and East Africa. Every province with large numbers of them has an Ismāili council, the decisions of which are recognized as legal by the state. As Nizārī Ismāīlīs, Khōjās are followers of the Aga Khan".

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