

# Traditional costumes of women from Bohra community in Udaipur, Rajasthan

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■ **ABSTRACT :** Clothing is a representation of cultures and beliefs. They portray an identity and conform to a social group. The styles uphold varies from castes to tribes and religions. In Islam, women conceal their bodies and wear a 'hijab' or veil called 'burqa'. They believe that adherence to hijab is a manifestation for chastity and modesty. The burqa comes in various styles and varies from country to country. The one worn by the Bohras is completely different from the ones worn by the other Muslim communities as these are rather colourful than black. Besides covering oneself, they comparatively enjoy greater access to colours and designs.

■ **KEY WORDS:** Traditional costumes, Women, Bohra community

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India is a land of cultures. It is an amalgamation of various races, languages, customs and religions. Dawoodi Bohra, a sub sect to Shia Islam which hailed from Yemen centuries ago is a trader community and resides majorly in western India. In Rajasthan, the Bohra live in the districts of Udaipur, Dungarpur, Chittorgarh, Banswara, Jaipur, Kota, Bundi and Ajmer. In Udaipur, a sizable population of around 12,000 to 13000 of the Dawoodi Bohras resides. In terms of population, the city ranks third after Mumbai (Engineer, 2013). The term "Bohra" applies most commonly to Dawoodi Bohras, who are reputed to be the best organized and wealthiest of all Bohras. Bohra (also spelled Bohora or Vohra) is derived from the Gujarati word "vohorvu" or "vyavahar", meaning "to trade" in reference to their traditional profession while the term "Dawoodi" refers to their support for 27<sup>th</sup> dai al-Mutlaq (the spiritual leader)

Dawood Bin Qutubshah.

At present, Dawoodi Bohras are spread all over the world with a population of about one million, making a majority proportion of adherents in India. They are largely into trading and business. It was from the orders of the previous spiritual leader that in 1970 the dresses of the women of the community were modified so as to mark a distinction from the reformist group. The "rida", a distinctive form of the commonly known burqa was introduced which is distinguished from other forms of the veil due to the variations in colour and decorations with patterns and laces. The rida additionally differs from the burqa in that the rida does not call for covering of women's faces like the traditional veil. It has a flap called the pardi that is usually folded to one side to facilitate visibility, but can also be worn over the face if so desired. Their distinct way of dressing differentiates them from

the other Muslim communities in the country. This uniform way of appearance of the community members makes them recognizable the world over and has become a symbol of their religious identity. Thus, in this view, the present study was conducted with the objective of exploring the traditional costumes and accessories of the Dawoodi Bohras females.

## ■ RESEARCH METHODS

### Locale of the study:

The locale of the study was selected purposively. Based on the preliminary survey, regions of higher population concentration were chosen so that greater variation in sample population could be available for selection and also easy accessibility to the respondents be made. The regions chosen were Bohrwadi, Fatehpura, Hathipole, Loha bazaar, Khanjipeer and Ashwini Bazar. Besides these, the community school was also contacted.

### Sample size and its selection :

The selection of samples was done randomly. The total number of respondents selected were 180 (90 males and 90 females), who were divided equally among the three different age groups 13- 20 years, 21-30 years and 31-40 years, thus, allotting 30 males and 30 females for each category.

### Development of tool:

A structured interview schedule was developed to collect the information. It comprised of both open ended and close ended questions which were based on the general information of the respondents and detail information about their traditional costumes, coiffures and accessories.

### Data collection :

As per the objectives of the study, the data was collected from the areas with high Bohra population. Every respondent in each age group were contacted

personally and information was documented accordingly. On an average, it took an hour in conducting a single interview.

### Data analysis :

The data obtained from the survey was coded, tabulated and expressed in frequency and percentage.

## ■ RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the present investigation are presented in Table 1 to 3 and Fig. 1 to 4.



Fig. 1 : Bohra



Fig. 2 : Lehenga

Table 1 : Distribution of respondents according to their clothes for daily use					(n=90)
Sr. No.	Variable	Age groups (in years)			Total f (%)
		13-20 f (%)	21-30 f (%)	31-40 f (%)	
1.	Only traditional costumes	-	4 (13.33)	18 (60)	22 (24.44)
2.	Only kurta salwar	22 (73.33)	16 (53.34)	3 (10)	41 (45.55)
3.	Both	5 (16.67)	10 (33.33)	9 (30)	24 (26.68)
4.	Other garments	3 (10)	-	-	3 (3.33)



Fig. 3 : A woman wearing rida



Fig. 4 : Scarf and Topi



The costumes of a female Dawoodi Bohra are such that there is minimum exposure of the body parts, like face, hands and feet so as to maintain modesty in appearance. The traditional costumes worn by Dawoodi Bohra women in Udaipur is Lehenga, blouse and chunni (collectively called Jodi). Lehenga is a full length skirt like lower garment, blouse is the bodice and chunni is a veil covering head and the upper trunk. It is a compulsory garment for every Dawoodi Bohra woman. Younger girls wear Jabla (knee length tunic) and izar (trousers) with scarves and caps as headdress. Besides this, some women also wear Kurta-salwar and chunni (or dupatta). During winters, they substitute the chunni with warm stoles. In occasions, girls opt for a variation like Anarkali suits and angarakhi styles with churidaar pyjamas. The Table 1 describes the type of garments worn by the females.

Critical examination of the table reveals that majority (73.33%) of the adolescents wear Kurta salwar on daily basis. More than half (53.34%) of the respondents of the age group 21-30 years preferred Kurta salwar for

daily use whereas, 60 per cent of the adults wear traditional costumes as daily wear. None of the respondents of age 21-40 years wear garments other than kurta salwar and traditional costumes.

The data obtained is basically for day to day wear, else there was no such respondent who had never worn the traditional attire.

**Other garments :**

When asked about any type of modern clothes used, it was found that 10 per cent respondents from 13-20 years of also wear jeans, tops, kurtis and leggings etc. The different headings under which the female costumes dealt are :

- Upper garments
- Lower garments
- Outer garments
- Coiffure.

**Upper garment :**

The upper garment for the female Bohra is “blouse”

Sr. No.	Variable	Age groups (in years)			Total f (%)
		13-20 f (%)	21-30 f (%)	31-40 f (%)	
1.	Gathered	6 (20)	9 (30)	13 (43.33)	28 (31.11)
2.	Pleated	12 (40)	10 (33.33)	14 (46.67)	36 (40)
3.	A-Line	12 (40)	11 (36.67)	3 (10)	26 (28.89)

(choli), a bodice reaching upto the waist. Its fit is usually loose but may vary according to personal preferences.

The neckline of the blouse may vary, but for daily wear it is generally square or round in shape and medium in depth. It may or may not have an opening, but if present; it is facilitated with snap buttons and hooks. The sleeve length may vary but often kept half. There are waist darts to provide good fitness. Depending upon the wearer's choice, it may or may not have slits (1.5-2.5 inches) and side pocket on side seams. Edge finishings are done with piping and hemming, the former being more popular as it gives the costumes a more decorative effect. The average fabric required for the construction of a blouse is one metre.

Now-a-days, for daily wear, blouses are substituted with readymade knitted T-shirts. It is especially during the winter season when ladies wear full sleeve warmers as upper bodice.

#### Lower garment :

The lower garment worn by females is "lehenga", a skirt like garment which is tied on the waist and measures upto the ankle length. The upper edge of lehenga has 1-1.5 inches of fold called "nepha" to insert the draw strings for tying. The upper left side has a slit of 3-4 inches which has fasteners: hooks and zippers to secure it, while on the right there is a side pocket.

The Table 2 portrays that in totality maximum percentage (40%) of respondents from prefer wearing pleated lehenga. The A-line style was found more popular among the adolescents (40%). The flares in the Lehenga are produced either by gathers or pleats. Either one or both (side pleats and box pleats) are applied to it. The fit of the garment is loose. The average fabric required for the construction of the garment is two and a half to three metres.

#### Specification of upper and lower garments :

A wide variety of fabrics and designs are used by women for the garments. Various decorating materials and techniques are also applied to embellish them and enhance their appeal.

#### Fabric :

The choice of the fabric depends upon the end use. For daily wear, cottons, synthetics and its blends are preferred. It was found that in the age groups 13-20 and 21-30, maximum (40% and 56.66%, respectively) respondents prefer cotton-synthetic blends. The reason given behind it was their easy care, good durability and trendy looks. Half of the respondents (50%) from 31-40 years preferred cotton due to its high comfort.

For occasions, there is a wide variety of fabrics available from fine cotton and silks to every quality of synthetics and blends like art-silk, light and heavy brocades, tissue fabrics, velvets etc.

#### Motifs and prints :

The motifs found on the fabric are floral and geometrical. In compliance to Islamic believes, no animal or human figure is ever found. Only 2.22 per cent women said that peacock, camel and horse motifs are allowed (if not in apparels then other textiles) as they are considered auspicious.

#### Embellishment :

Dawoodi women decorate the blouse or choli with colourful laces, pipings and gota on hemline, necklines and borders of sleeves. On the hemline of Lehenga, multiple laces are often applied; stripes of fabric are also applied and are called "panels". These panels could be single or multiple and could be narrow to wide. Appliqués are used to create motifs on the garments which are tucked either with machine stitches or using embroideries. Beautiful figures like *bel*, *phool-patti*, *bute* in floral and star and fruit designs are made using chain stitch, cross stitch, running stitch embellish with sequins, stones and beads. Fabric painting is also done to enrich the surface.

#### Changes according to season :

Some respondents use thicker fabrics for winters and fine cottons for summers. The changes brought in garment construction are smaller necklines and longer sleeves of the blouse; no change in Lehenga is made. In

**Table 3 : Percentage distribution of respondents according to mode of garment construction**

(n=90)

Sr. No.	Variables	Age in years			Total f (%)
		13-20 f (%)	21-30 f (%)	31-40 f (%)	
1.	Home made	11 (36.67)	8 (26.67)	16 (53.33)	35 (38.89)
2.	Tailor made	12 (40)	9 (30)	6 (20)	27 (30)
3.	Both	7 (23.33)	13 (43.33)	8 (26.67)	28 (31.11)

respect to the changes in colour, it was noticed that maximum respondents do not show any significant concern to the selection of colours. Only few choose light shades for summers and dark for winters.

From Table 3 it can be stated that the highest percentage of homemade garments is among age group 31-40 years (53.33%) and that for tailor made garments is with age group 13-20 years (40%). The group of 21-30 years scores highest for both the type of modes of garment construction (43.33%).

### Outer garment :

Traditionally, the Muslim women all over the world put on a veil, called hijab or niqaab as an outer garment while moving out of their homes. The outer garment for a Dawoodi Bohra woman is called Rida. It is two piece garment, the upper is called Pardi and the lower is called Lehenga.

Pardi is a poncho like garment which covers the head, neck, shoulders and ends at the waist line. Only the face and wrists of the wearer are visible. On the top portion of pardi, there is a flap which measures approximately one foot in length and three-fourth feet in width, and has a rounded lower edge. According to customs, the purpose of the flap is to cover the side face if needed; normally women fold it inside. On each side of the head piece which is bordering the face, strings are present, which are tied under the chin to hold the pardi in place. The head piece is extended into a somewhat "U" shape both in front and back, having a depth of six to six and a half inches. Attached to this shape is a panel which is gathered on the point of attachment.

The Lehenga of the rida measures from waist to ankle. Similar to the Lehenga of the Jodi, it has draw strings at the waist for tying, one pocket on the right side and three to four inches of slit opening on the left side seam which is fastened with zipper. It usually has pleats and has limited flare giving it an A-line appearance. Traditionally, the Lehenga is loose to prevent from revealing any silhouette, but due to fashion, younger

generations like to wear semi-fitted ones. Beneath the Lehenga, women wear trousers which are known as Izar. These days' izars of mid-calf length are quiet popular, though full length izars are also worn equally. The former have elastics on waists and are finished with matching laces on the edges. Few old age women prefer wearing petticoats instead of Izar.

### Fabric :

All types of fabrics like cotton, silk and their blends, man-made and synthetics like rayon, polyester, art-silk etc. and different blends are used for ridas. Not only the basic weave forms but the decorative and fancy ones like brocade, dobby, velvets, nets etc. are also bring to use.

### Motifs and prints :

Following to the Islamic norms, no animal and human figure is ever used. Floral motifs (in natural, stylized and contemporary styles) like flowers, creepers, cherries and grapes as well as geometrical prints like polka dots, stripes and checks are preferred.

### Embellishment :

These days appliques are used immensely for decorating the garment. In the hem line of Lehenga, panels are attached in the same way as in the Lehenga for the jodi. Appliqués of flower motifs are not only created in two dimensions but with three-dimensional effect too. Use of varied and colourful ribbons and laces right from simple net laces to sequined and shimmering ones, is in vogue. Sequins, stones and bead work are liked enormously specially during the festive time. Ladies at homes decorate embellish the borders of the garments with the traditional style of crochet known as "Makki" work. Different forms of embroidery like cross stitch, chain stitch are also done; zardosi is famous for the occasional wears.

The Table 4 concludes that 47.78 per cent of females prefer garments made by tailors.

Sr. No.	Variables	Age in years			Total f (%)
		13-20 f (%)	21-30 f (%)	31-40 f (%)	
1.	Home made	6 (20)	9 (30)	10 (33.33)	25 (27.78)
2.	Tailor made	18 (60)	12 (40)	13 (43.34)	43 (47.78)
3.	Both	6 (20)	9 (30)	7 (23.33)	22 (24.44)

**Coiffure :**

The headgear for the woman is called the chunni or duppatta. The length varies from 2.25 to 2.5 metres with a width from 1 to 1.15 metres. The chunni comes along with the set of Lehenga and blouse. It is generally of cotton fabric, could be of georgette and other materials too. The main feature of dupatta is that they must not be a see through fabric but opaque enough to cover the underlying body part. The colours of the dupatta are matching to the colours of the Lehenga.

In order to embellish them, women apply colourful and golden-silver laces in the borders and edges of chunni and call it “Koran” or “kinari”. They also do the fine crochet instead of Koran. It is must for every woman to cover their heads in front of guests, while eating food and during Namaaz (offering prayers). The style of draping the dupatta is quiet simple. By holding the chunni (at back) from both the hands, it is kept on the head disproportionately so that the edge on the left shoulder is smaller than the right. Now the right part is loosely draped over the left shoulders such that it covers the breasts. The young girls put on scarves and colourful caps (or topi) not only while dining and praying but also while moving out of the house (for which the elder girls and women put on the outer garments).

**Accessories :**

The Dawoodi Bohra females wear jewellerys made of gold and silver only as these are considered pure and sacred. No other metal, glass, plastics or artificial jewellery, which is so much in trend, are allowed to be used. Even the materials like ivory and lac which are quiet popular in the state of Rajasthan are not worn.

The list of the jewellerys with the concerned body parts are- chains and necklace on neck, chudi, kade and

bracelets on wrists and rings on fingers, tops, bali, jhumke, latkan and bunde on ears. Tika on forehead and Baajuband on arms are worn only by the bride; no ornament is worn on waist, legs and feet. Except for the occassions, no artificial jewellery is worn.

In footwears, women wear fancy slippers, sandals and bellies and shoes (for winters). High heels are not followed, but with the changing fashion, youngsters are opting for them. For occasions like marriages and festivals, they wear the traditional footwear of Rajasthan, the mojaris.

**Taboos :**

The wearing of black colour is prohibited among the community members. Furthermore, after the husband’s death, the woman has to wear only white clothes for four months and twenty days. This period is called “iddat”. Not only the clothes are white but the entire linens, draperies and other textiles are also of the same colour. After the completion of iddat, the woman can put on the coloured attire.

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