

WHAT NEXT? WHO NEXT?

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We feel most of our Sunni Surti Vohra brothers and sisters are driving their vehicles of life whilst looking at their past that is looking in their rear-view mirrors. There is very little wrong in looking in the rear-view mirrors, but we need to be careful about what we see, how we respond to it and how we relate to it. Looking in the rear-view mirror will not allow us to see what is in front of us. Looking in the rear-view is looking at what we have just gone past, what we have left behind, who is trying to overtake us or who is getting very close to us. Remembering our past is good if we can learn lessons from it and use it to see what lays in front us and how we should approach it. Looking at our past and remaining happy with it is not good as this will not help us learn from our past and use the learning to face the challenges that lay ahead. What we Surti Sunni Vohras need to do is look in front of us and whilst not forgetting the past move from our past and start participating in activities taking place around us whilst not moving away from our religious beliefs and the expectations that our religion places upon us.

Not all but we feel most of our village based Surti Sunni Vohras live in a state of self-imposed social isolation, a lot of confusion and uncertainties. Most of our people it seems simply cannot see the way ahead as followers of Islam and as citizens of India. We will not be wrong if we said our people have religious education, but our religious beliefs and religious practices remain weak as most of us simply cannot see the relationship between our religious

expectations and the religious education we have and the worldly demands we face. Many of our members have some levels of secular education. We have those with abilities to read and write and some with college degrees, but this is not being used or is seldom used to learn more and try to understand the changes taking place around us and when the opportunity arises pass on the information gathered and knowledge acquired to others so that they can also be helped to keep up with the changes taking place around them. The economic activities of our people are as we Vohras know very limited. Most of us claim to be agriculturists even when we have very little land or no land. Those who have land have very little interest in acquiring good farming skills. There are those who think that farming skills and farming practices are inherited like the land they inherited. Most spend a lot of money on purchasing fertilizers and pesticides without knowing much about their usefulness or the harm they would do to fellow human beings, to animals, the crops and to the environment. For us Vohras agriculture was our traditional occupation but is no longer so for many of our brothers and sisters. Those who have land and are interested in farming then they will have to learn about modern farming methods. It would not be wrong to say that whilst economic, social and political changes are taking place around us most of our endogamous group members are behaving as if everything of their past matters more to them. Our Vohra brothers and sisters remain content with their type of thinking.

Most feel they need big community halls in their villages for engagement and wedding celebrations, big houses with modern kitchens, bathrooms, toilets and good quality furniture. Visiting restaurants, pizza and takeaway food outlets have become a must for many and so is visiting big cities and holiday resorts. Owning and driving big, expensive and new motor cars, owning expensive motor cycles, have big engagement parties, big and expensive weddings, expensive mobile phones, expensive clothes, good food and big birthday parties for their children and grandchildren with expensive and well decorated birthday cakes and a lot of food for the guest are symbols of progress for many.

We feel our brothers and sisters need to bring about a radical change to their thinking. What our people are engaged in may be looked upon by them as progress. Is this real progress? There is a great and urgent need to think about our present and future as Muslims and as Indians and ask the ALMIGHTY ALLAH to guide us towards a more participatory and meaningful life. We feel we cannot remain bystanders and see the world go by.

If we Surti Sunni Vohras do not act, we will not be standing still but gradually moving backwards. We come across stories of our people who till recently were not rich but relatively well-off joining the poorer ones from our endogamous group. Some of these people brought their economic downfall upon themselves. We have heard some people say that if you want to buy a relatively new car at less than its market value go to our Vohra villages where you will be able to get a very good car at a very low price. The reason for

selling their cars cheap is easy to understand. They simply cannot afford to keep it as they have no or very little money to purchase petrol for their vehicles or buy tyres if these need to be replaced. Those interested in purchasing land too turn their attention towards our Vohra villages. They know that in the Vohra villages they will find someone who is ready and willing to sell his land.

We do not want our people to lose hope but we do want them to think and bring about changes to their thinking otherwise as a Halpati woman who worked for my grand parents' family said to my grand mother over a hundred years ago that 'a day will come when your children will take our people's domestic animals for grazing and your menfolk and womenfolk will work for my people'. Like me, she said, 'your women folk will fetch water from the well for my people, clean the domestic animal stables, wash clothes, sweep the house and your menfolk and womenfolk will help with planting and harvesting the crops grown by my people'.

Are we Vohras heading in the direction the Hapati woman predicted? We feel from what we can observe in our Vohra villages and the stories we come across if not all most of our people are sliding down the social and economic slope. We can rescue ourselves by trying to halt our sliding down the slope if we start looking at the changes taking place around us and learning from what we see. Can we Vohras not see that the children and grand children of those who worked for us Vohras as farm labourers are now engaged in hundreds of non-traditional occupations? Why can our young men and women not join them and like them learn about non-traditional work or train to do non-traditional work? ■