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## Arabic University: Pride of Surat

SURAT: very few people know that an ancient and unique institution exists in the highly congested city of Surat.

The deafening noise of men and machine and overflowing drains hardly provide a background for an institution of higher learning yet, there it is: Aljamea-Tus-Saifiah, an Arabic academy, which is the only university for over half a million Dawoodi Bohras in the country, situated at the Deodi Jhampa bazar, a busiest part of this silk city.

The Jamea (the Arabic name for academy or university), held in high esteem by the world scholars, attracts students from all over the world. Today, it has 700 students, both boys and girls, pursuing higher education on Islamic values and literature and modern sciences.

Everything is provided free of charge, the expenses being borne wholly by the head of the community, Dr. Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, the 52nd Dai of the Bohras.

The first question that arises is why on earth is a great institution kept in such a surrounding? "It is for a good reason" says Prof. Ebrahim Shaikh, a senior teacher of the academy. "It is a hallowed ground" he said and explained that nine of the Doat (Revered preachers) lived, preached and taught here. And it was here that Syedna Abdeali Saifuddin the 43rd Dai (Religious head) established the institution around 1800 A.D. (Hence the location is predestined).

The Dawoodi Bohras tradition traces its origin to the Fatimi Imams,

some of whom had ruled North Africa and Egypt. The Fatimi Imams Dynasty is renowned for its patronage to arts and literature. The Fatimi Imams, history tells us, had purity and truth as their primary objectives.

To them goes the credit for an elaborate system of education and upbringing. Al-Azhar university, said to be the oldest institution of the community, was founded in 970 A.D. In 1005 A.D. Fatimi Imam, Al-Hakim, founded the house of sciences in Cairo, which attracted many intellectuals of the world.

Two hundred years later, the headquarters of the organisation was shifted to Yemen. Later India offered a congenial atmosphere and environment for the development of Fatimi culture. Thus, about 400 years ago, the seat of the organisation came to India and received a warm welcome from the rulers of various states. With the migrants came their renowned library of manuscripts, history, literature. After a peripatetic existence, the system was institutionalised in the early 1800 in Surat.

For a community known for its religious orthodoxy it is surprising to note that the academy, in its outlook as well as in work, is a happy blend of the old and the new.

It is housed in five magnificent blocks, some of which are yet to be fully completed. It provides every conceivable facility for study and games, complete with an underground swimming pool for the girl students. On the roof of the boys hostel is a garden, a small shop where

students could buy nicknacks and a laundromat in the making.

As one enters the precincts, what strikes one most is the cleanliness. Everything about the institution is spick and span. And there is a clock-like precision in its affairs.

The institution admits students after a rigorous test. Normally students joins after he has passed the seventh standard. The duration of the entire study is 11 years divided into two phases. Arabic, English and French Languages are taught besides the modern sciences.

The most impressive is the language library where prized manuscripts and some 3,500 cassettes are available. The primary idea of developing an elaborate library is to teach the students the correct method of reciting the Quran. Discourses of 51 Dais are also stored.

True to a highly regimented community the academy is strict in discipline of the students. As the academy authorities say, the emphasis is not just intellectual training but strengthening the moral fibre so as to induce spontaneous self-discipline and cultivate human values.

Students who grow up and study here are therefore insulated against the modern vices. It is no exaggeration to say that the boys and girls who pass long years here hardly see each other for more than a couple of times.

It cuts both ways, while it can't be denied that the puritan approach help

keep the young from vices, it also stifles a bit the intellectual growth as one could learn from the history that intellectual giants of the world grew up in the most liberal atmosphere. Yet, again, when one thinks of the growing number of our youths going astray by the indiscriminate indulgence in drugs and sex one can't help a sneaking respect for the strictness of the institution.

Students who pass from here are absorbed in community works, teaching and business. The Dawoodi Bohras are predominantly business people.

The academy is recognised by the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IB) which is recognised by 85 universities in five continents.

The attempt of the academy is to make the campus a self-contained town apart. The campus is green sprinkled with fountains where tranquility reigns. The visitors on entering the campus forget that just out of carshot is the maddening crowd and one of the busiest thoroughfares in India.

Mr. Kaiser Morkas, a senior member of the community, said that the Jamea had requested the municipal authorities to ban the small by-lane passing through the campus the work to make the campus a model could begin. It is hoped that this ancient seat of learning would still grow to be a jewel in the country. Courtesy: The Times of India.