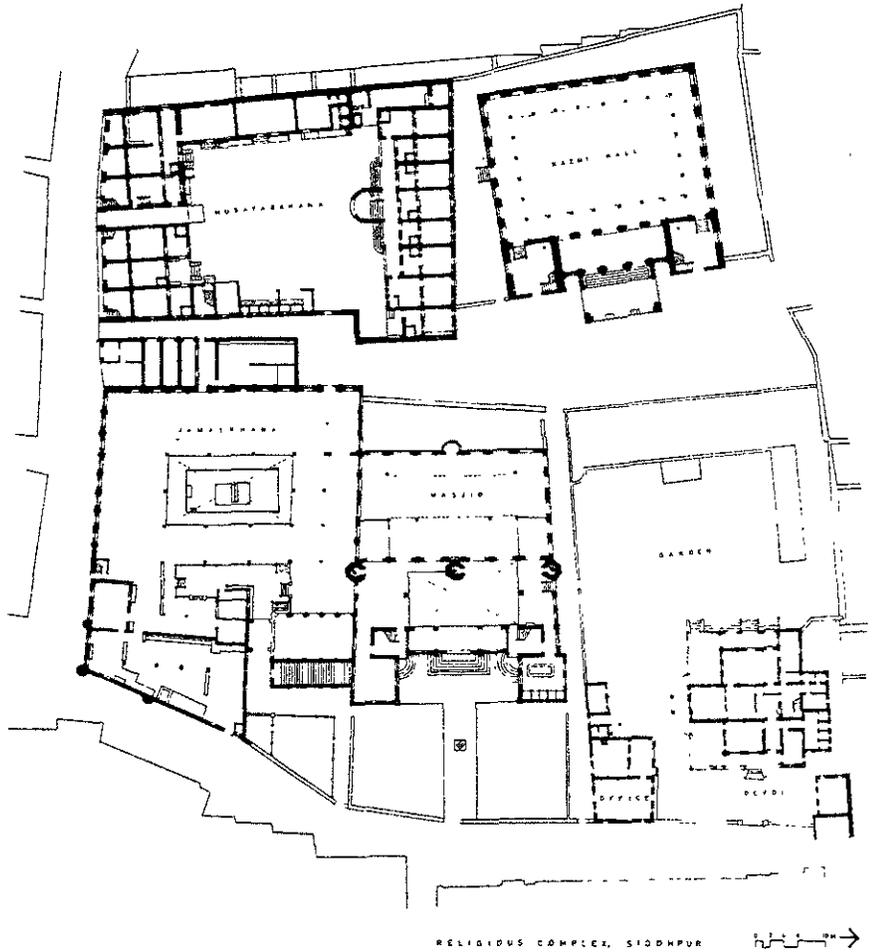


## VOHRA HOUSES IN GUJARAT

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Dawoodi Vohras are Shia's of the Mustalian division of Islamic sect, numbering more than a million in India and abroad. As early as 765 A.D., upon the death of Jaafar Sadik, the sixth Imam, dispute arose regarding the successor. Among them the majority supported Musi Kazim, the second son of Jaafar and become known as Isna-Ashari. Later, the supporters of Musi's nephew started a distinct Ismaili group in Egypt, rose to great power and flourished until 1094 A.D..

There are two differing beliefs regarding the origin of the Vohras in India. According to some historians, the eighteenth Imam, Al Mustansir Billah, sent his Dai-ul-Mutlaq, Maulai Ahmed to India in Hijari 467 (1047 A.D.) to propagate



*This religious complex is located between the old and the new Vohrwards at Siddhpur. Among the twenty settlements visited for this study, it is only at Siddhpur that all the community buildings occur as a group.*

*The complex comprises a mosque, a lecture hall for religious discourses, a hall for community gatherings on social occasions, a travellers lodge and the local priests house with an administrative office for community institutions. The buildings have come up at intervals and therefore, the complex does not show attempt at any kind of organization. The following is a brief note on the buildings in the complex.*

*The mosque is approached through a gate in the eastern wall of the complex. The gate is situated along the central axis of the mosque which remains constantly in view as one approaches it. The approach terminates into a flight of steps leading to the high plinth of the court. Beyond this court is the spacious prayer hall. The ground floor of the prayer hall is used by men and a mezzanine level is used by women. Earlier the mosque had two minaret on either sides. A third minarete of similar design has been recently added in the centre.*

*Jamatkhana - Community hall is located along the southern wall of the mosque. It is generally used for community dinners. A large court in the middle houses a drinking water place. The kitchen is situated along the eastern wall. This hall is frequently used on social, religious as well as cultural occasions. the practice of community dinners indicates the strong ties of unity in Vohra community. (Fig. 68).*

*Vohrwad entrance gate. (Fig. 69).*





the religion in the eastern countries. The Dai landed at Khambhat, then a prosperous port town of Gujarat. He stayed here for a long time and studied the local language, culture and religion. Influenced by his wisdom, Balamnath and Rupnath, two Hindu boys travelled to Missr (Egypt) with him on his return journey. There they were converted to the Islamic faith and baptised as Abdullah and Nuruddin respectively; and educated to propogate Islam in India. According to another be-



*Street facade, Ahmedabad. (Fig. 72).*

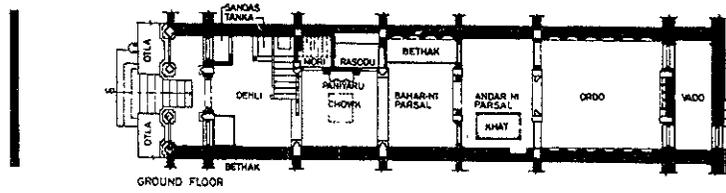
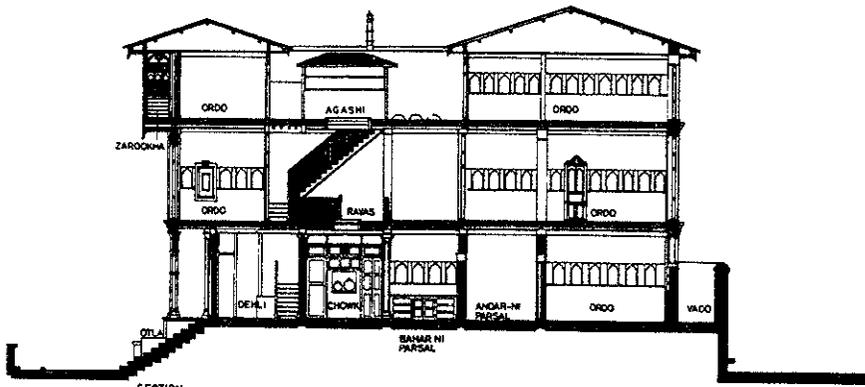
*Entrance portico, Siddhpur. (Fig. 73).*

*Facade detail, Siddhpur. (Fig. 74).*

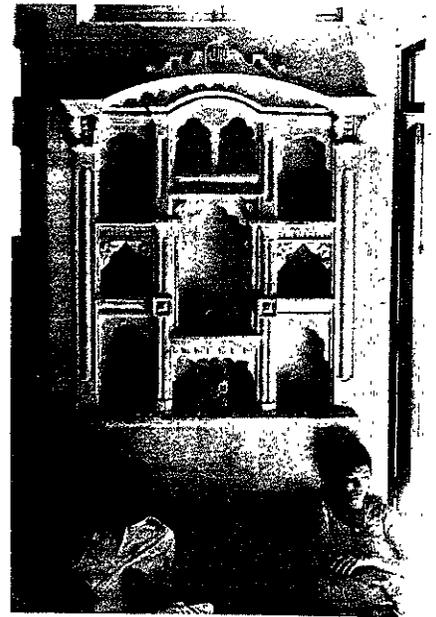
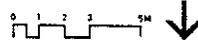
*This 80 years old house is an archetypal example of the space divisions evolved by Vohras within a row house system. Note the use of screen and a shifted entrance axis to the inner domain from dehli and light wooden screens to divide the spaces. (Fig. 75).*

*A navkhand, niche of nine squares always found in a Vhora family room. (Fig. 76).*





HOUSE OF  
NAJIMUDDIN PANCHMARIWALA, SIDDPUR

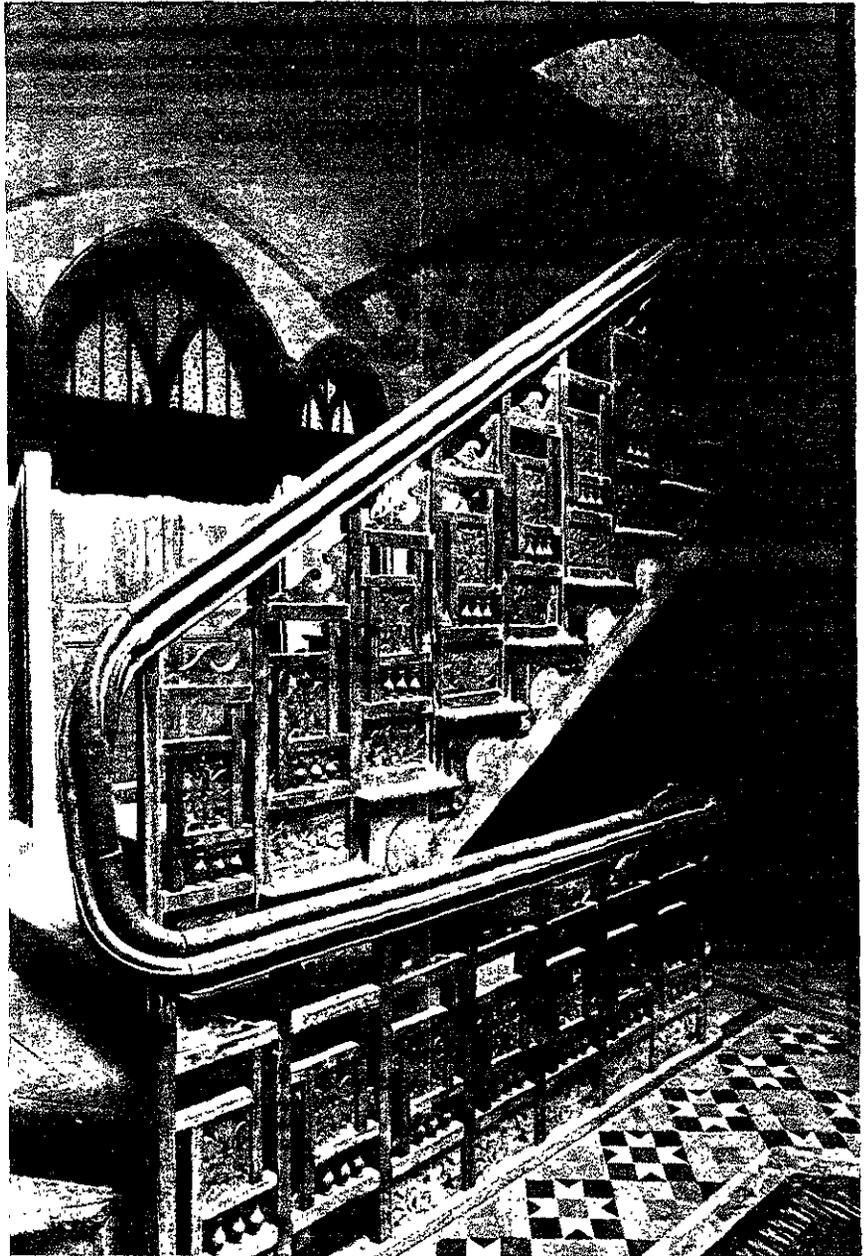


lief, during the reign of Al Mustansir Billah, it was decided to send missionaries beyond the valley of Sindu and two eminent Dais, Maulai Abdullah, were sent to India from Egypt via Yemen. Their tombs at Khambhat are visited by the Dawoodis even today as places of pilgrimage.

Maulai Abdullah subsequently settled at Khambhat, learnt the local language and acquired the knowledge about lifestyles, culture and religions of the native Hindus. In those days, a Hindu saint was the object of general faith. Opposing him was dangerous, so, Abdullah became his disciple. His wisdom impressed the saint and he was allowed to refer holy books on Hinduism. Through his study of Hinduism, Abdullah prevailed upon the saint on religious premise, and converted him to Islam. Following this, many of the saint's followers adopted the new faith. Later, witnessing more miracles, even the ministers of the king, and the king himself adopted Islam. This, accelerated the rate of conversion. As observed by Satish Misra, in his book 'Muslim communities in India', 'the first penetration of Islam in India was peaceful and the rise of this new community was imperceptible'.

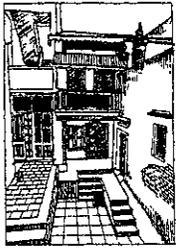
It is difficult to establish correctly the actual number of early converts in Gujarat. According to Mausami-Bahar, on a single day at Patan, 260 pounds of (Janoi) sacred threads worn by Hindus were taken off upon their embracing Islam. The number of new converts kept rising continuously for the next 250 years, until about 1380 A.D..

Most of these converts were from the poor and middle class strata of the society. The democratic premise of Islam with an emphasis on equality among people had a greater ap-



*Detail of stair railing. (Fig. 77).*

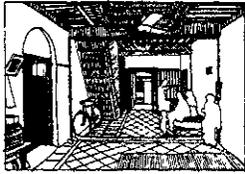
*Right above. House of shamsuddin adenwala, vadodara, 1880. This two bay wide house shows a definite improvement in the plan organization: at the ground floor the spaces are constrained by the heavy masonry walls; however at first floors the use of wooden partitions allows to make large and small rooms as specifically required. (Fig. 78).*



AN ENTRANCE TO THE HOUSE FROM SHADED COURTYARD



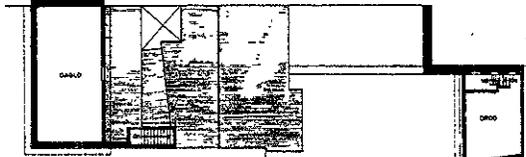
THE ENTRANCE



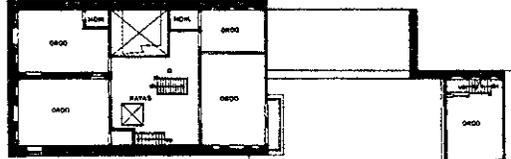
AN INFORMAL USE OF 'DAHL'



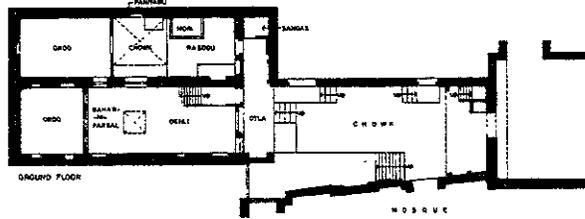
SECTION



SECOND FLOOR

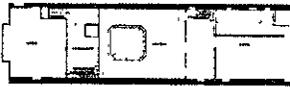
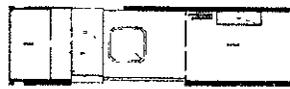
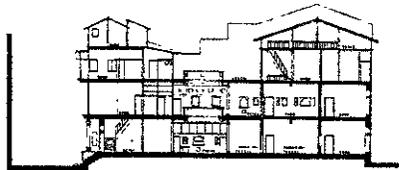
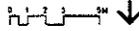


FIRST FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR

HOUSE OF SHAMSUDDIN ADENWALA, VADODARA



HOUSE OF SHABBIR JILAL, SURAT

Right. House of Shabbir Jilal, Surat, 1864. Among the one bay houses this is the largest one. Its extra width has allowed location of several additional stairs independent of the rooms. This has facilitated undisturbed use of rooms and easy linkage between the floors. (Fig. 79).

peal to the lower castes and other subcastes, of the Hindus. Since Islam had originated among the prefeudal trading classes of Mecca and other desert nomads of Arabia, matured in feudal environment of Persia, the Islamic sect imbibed many a progressive element of the religious and cultural outlook of these regions. While in India, the Hindu traders were having conflicts not only with the feudal lords but also with those who were lower in the caste hierarchy, like the untouchables. As a result, the traders were more inclined to adopt Islam with its strong sense of equality. This could be the main reason for conversions mainly among the trading castes. To transact or to trade in the local language means 'Vohru' and, people engaged in trade became to be known as Vohras, also written as Bohras. From the scrutiny of some of the social practices of this community and from Mirat-i-Ahmadi, a book written in the 17th century, it is found that the Brahmin and bania traders were also converted to this new faith.

### Habitat characteristics.

The residential zones in traditional Indian settlements comprise distinct neighbourhoods linked by the city's thorough-fares. These neighbourhoods are characterised by an introvert organization with an entrance gate. Religious and other community buildings, large and small open spaces for festive occasions are located within the neighbourhood to enable a full social life within it.

Such an introvert, physical layout evolved as a response to the general insecurity in the mediaeval times. Amongst the Hindus these neighbourhoods were formed on the ba-



*As above, court-well from the ravas on the first floor. (Fig. 80).*

sis of castes and sub-castes. This meant, that in each neighbourhood, the inhabitants would be pursuing the same occupation, as well as the social and religious practices peculiar to that sub-caste or occupation. Physically, these neighbourhoods are a closed system of streets approached through a gate from the city thoroughfares. Two to three storeyed houses open directly into the meandering narrow streets which widen at intervals to form spaces for the community activities and the community buildings.

It was natural for the Vohras to form their own neighbourhoods, known as a Vohrwad, in such a context. Distinct Vohrwads were obser-

ved in all the settlements visited for this study in the Gujarat state.

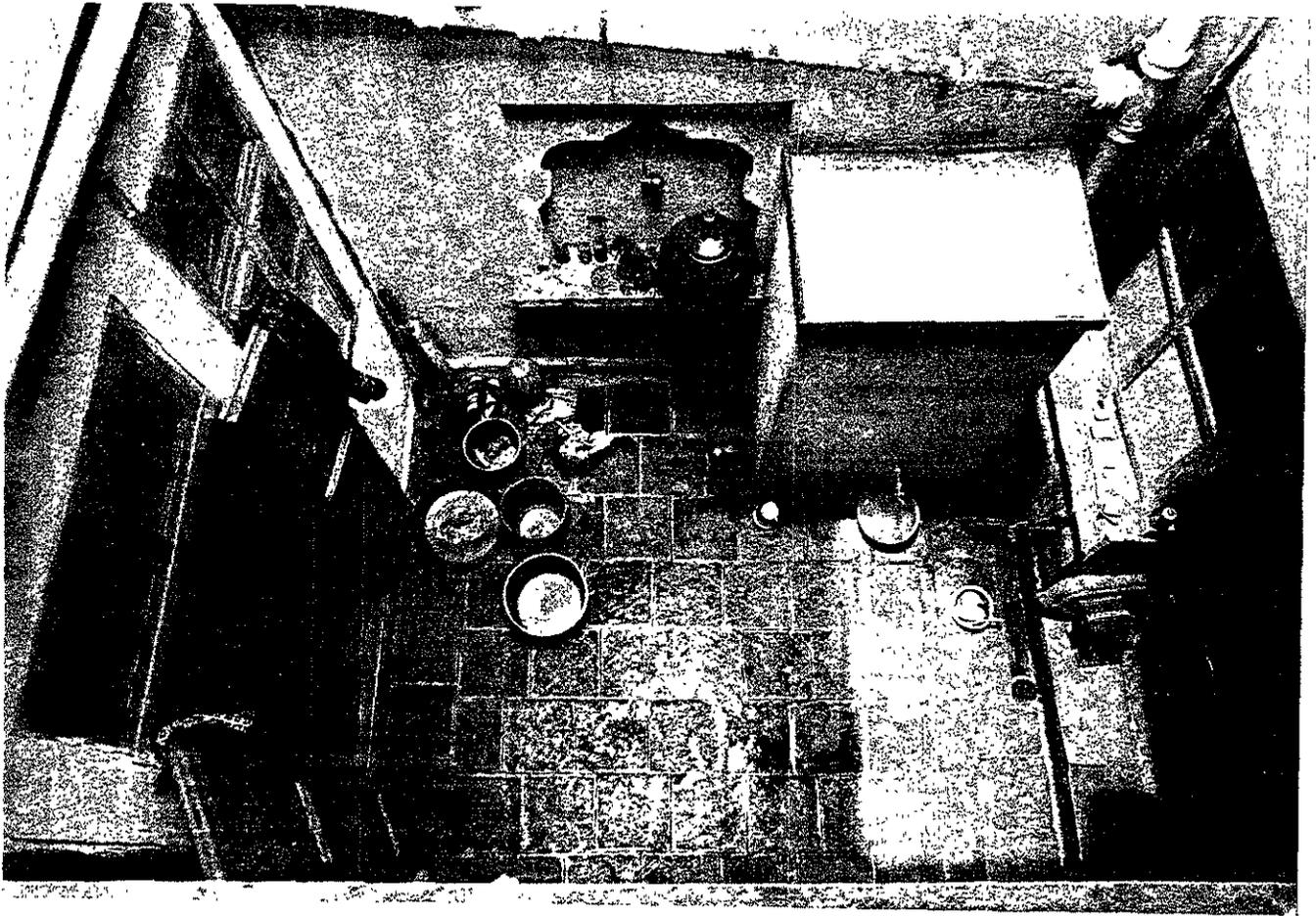
The Vohras are a minority community in India and the need for security is strongly felt by them. Their socio-cultural and religious practices also demand the location of their houses in the close vicinity of their priest's residence, the mosque and the community hall. As most of them are traders, and frequently travel to other towns for business, they prefer that their family members should stay amongst members of their community. All these factors gave rise to the 'Vohrwad' as a distinct sector of a town. It was observed during the study that the Vohrwads from different settle-

ments fall in two categories based on their physical layout.

One, an organic development characteristic of the traditional city pattern and, the other, a gridiron layout based on the right angle geometry. However, both the developments still maintain a closed-system of streets, substreets and small open spaces accessible only through a gate linking the city thoroughfares and the over all urban fabric.

Almost all the Vohrawads which are more than 100 years old, evolved organically within the confines of the available land in the fortified city.

In the second half on 19th century, the Britishers consolidated their



*As above, the kitchen court from above. (Fig. 81).*

hold in India and relatively peaceful environment prevailed. The Vohras' contacts with Britishers, and exposure through travel abroad, must have led to the creation of the second category of Vohrwads. These newer Vohrwads generally occur adjacent to an old Vohrwad on the fringe of the settlements. Not constrained by the shape and size of the land, Vohras could lay out these clusters in a gridiron pattern.

The main buildings include; a mosque, the assembly hall for religious discourses, the local priests' house, a travellers' lodge and community hall for ceremonial occasions especially the commensal dinners on various occasions such as the birthday

of the local priest, the first ten days of Mahorram or the anniversary of a saint etc..

### **The House**

A typical Vohra house is distinguished by its facade decoration, the treatment of the openings and rich materials of construction. Apart from a typical space use pattern discriminating between the private and semi-public domain, the basic plan of a Vohra house is found to be very much similar to that of Hindu house which, conforms to the general pattern of a mediaeval town houses in a row, sharing two walls with the adjoining units. In a Vohra

dwelling the typical space organization is as described below.

At the ground level one enters the house through a portico raised about 75 cms above the street level. Through the main door, one steps into an anteroom, known as 'Delhi' separated by a light screen from the inner court to ensure privacy inside the house. This space usually houses a stair which directly leads to the upper floors. Visitors are directly led upto the formal sitting room on the first floor from here. Next the open to sky court houses all the services on its side walls.

The space immediately after the court is fully open on the courtyardside and referred to as 'baharni parsal',

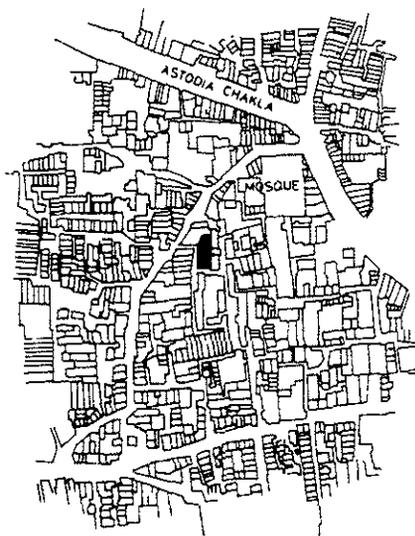
meaning external portico. This is followed by a room known as 'andarni parsal', meaning internal portico. Such a seemingly incongruous designation of these space is with reference to last room of the house, known as 'ordo' which is the sanctum of Vohra family's life.

For all practical purposes on the ground floor, the Vohra family only uses the spaces which are after the inner court. And, with this as reference, the space immediately following the court becomes an external portico, followed by an inner portico and then the family room-or-do.

The upper floors are normally organized as independent rooms on either sides of the court around which the services are located. In case of a house with more than one upper floors the stair is also found to be located in the area around the court. This space is known as 'ravas'. On the top floor, the ravas area becomes a terrace separating the rooms in the front and at the back. A double lean-to roof over both these rooms allows an attic space underneath which is known as 'daglo'.

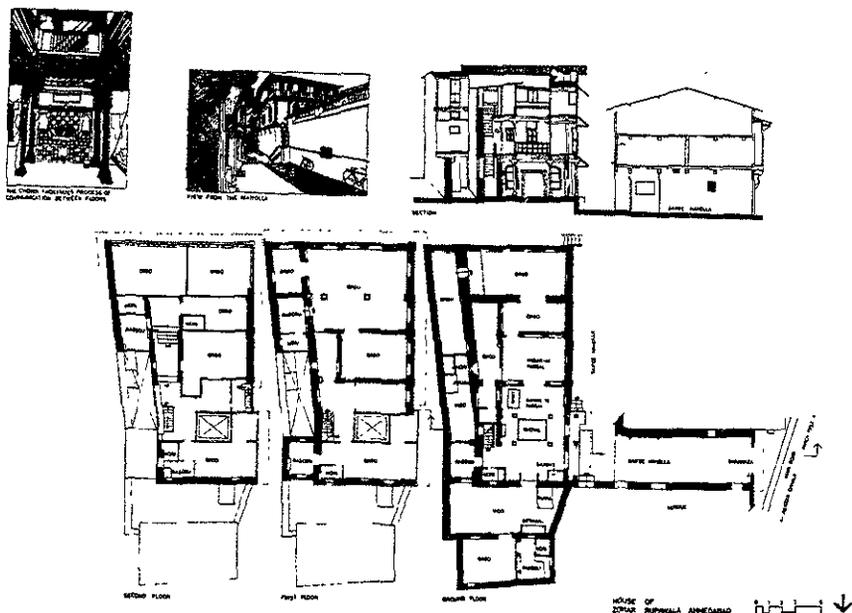
Contrary to the other communities, the Vohras rarely use the raised, street side portico. While it is used extensively by other communities for various activities like by elders to while away their time and the children to play, the Vohras desist from this. This may be due to greater confinement of the women folk in the social set up of Vohras.

Once inside, the anteroom serves as the second buffer between the inner domain and external domain. Generally light wooden screens are placed to avoid a clear view into the house from the street. This also serves as brief meeting point between the men folk and the casual visitors.



Neighbourhood showing house of Rupawala. (Fig. 82).

House of Zohar Rupawala, Ahmedabad, 1730. Located next to a mosque in a cluster of Vohra houses known as Saifee mohalla the plan exhibits an interesting solution to the site conditions. The entrance gate to the cluster has on its upper level a house belonging to the mosque. (Fig. 83).



Staircase to the first floor is located here which directly leads the guests to first floor sitting room. On the ground floor, beyond the anteroom, is the family domain into which only the close relatives and family friends are invited.

Open to sky court situated next, helps ventilate the whole house besides letting in light on all floors. The kitchen and other services are located around the court. The court as

well as the baharni parsal are used for dining and lounging. All domestic activities are also carried out here. 'Bethak', a large wooden platform with storage underneath and a soft cushion on the top is a dominant piece of furniture in this space. Family's elders while away their time here in the midst of the domestic activities. These spaces actually are the hub of the family world and used throughout the day. Next, the

andarni parsal, being covered, extends the use in monsoon when the court is unusable.

Andarni parsal often has a swing which is a popular device in hot climates to keep cool. This space is used predominantly as a family lounging space during the hot afternoons. Beyond the andarni parsal, the house ends in a room, which is the family's living room. Known as 'ordo', this room is richly decorated with seating arrangements in traditional style on the floor. The cupboard on the extreme rear wall of this 'room' is always designed in Islamic traditions representing the concept of nine squares known as 'navkhand'. Such a cupboard with intricate carvings is an inseparable component of a Dawoodi's house. This space is generally used to entertain close relatives, and family friends and for sleeping.

Generally a service lane separates the next parallel row of houses. This barely ensures ventilation. The level of natural illumination is extremely low in this room on the ground floor. In case of a house with a back yard, the light in the room is satisfactory.

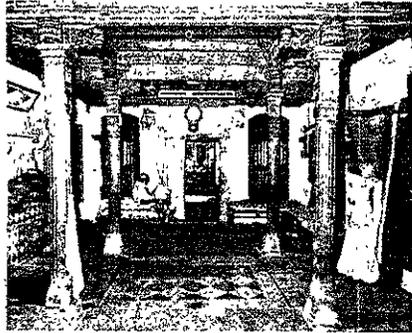
The first floor is reached by a stair from the anteroom at ground floor. From the first floor upwards, the stair is often provided near the court, allowing for an independent use of the rooms on its either sides. A large room at the back on this level is generally used as a formal living area and guests are entertained here. The windows generally have double shutters, one of wood and the other of stained glass. The room in the front is generally used as a multi-purpose space and sometimes has a covered balcony.

It is in facades that the Vohra houses built early this century largely differ from the Hindu houses as

well as of the initial converts. In these facades variations of European styles are dominant.

The first converts continued to occupy the Hindu houses with marginal changes within, hardly affecting the facades. As their trade flourished their dwellings and particularly the facade manifested their prosperity. At that stage, the model available for the Vohras was the dwellings of rich Hindus. Predominant use of wood and finely carved elements of facades; columns, brackets, railings, window frames etc. can be observed in the house more than 150 years old at Surat, Kapadvanj and for example, in case of Rupwala house at Ahmedabad, where the decoration is very much Hindu.

However, this only helped the Vohras to distinguish themselves from the poorer households but, not a community following a different religion; being a minority communi-



*As above, view of the court and baharni parsal from Dehli. (Fig. 84).*

ty, an urge for such manifestation must have been very strong for them.

Discovery of European and British facade treatment during their travels abroad, as well as in the colonial architecture in India, provided them an opportunity to further distinguish their dwellings from the

rich Hindus in the region and, the Vohras adopted in en masse. By the mid 19th century, the Britishers had consolidated their political and economic hold over large parts of India and as partners in trade, Vohras identified themselves with the Britishers and broke the Hindu roots of their habitat. Eclectic adoption of various European styles of facades at the new Vohrwad, Siddhpur built between AD 1890's to AD 1930's is a clear evidence of this process. It was learnt during the survey for this study, that they even had Britishers advising them during the design and construction of these houses. This probably affected the choice of material which is no longer wood, but brick masonry with stucco.

In conclusion, our study shows that the Vohra houses have naturally evolved in the context of the region and its traditional habitat pattern. Being Hindu converts, this evolution appears to have been a slow process of modifying the space organization and objects, and elements of daily use, within the social values and religious beliefs of their new religion.

This process of evolution has been more of an additive nature, particularly in the basic plan of the house and the arrangement of the decoration and elements of interior spaces and furniture which acquired sophistication in design and detailing. This is easily noticeable in the later day house facades, furniture and fixtures, treatment of openings, internal partitions and false ceilings. This superimposition of external and internal changes on the basic plan can be attributed to the British influence on the Vohra community due to their trade relationship and an exposure to the British life style in Europe.

In the planning of the neighbour-

hoods the introvert, security conscious make up of the Vohra community and its Hindu origin are explicitly manifested. Unlike the British colonial neighbourhoods, one house per a large plot on the outskirts of existing mediaeval towns in India, the Vohras always built houses in close-knit clusters in a row house system. These were often, physically integrated with the existing random patterns of the old Vohra neighbourhoods to obtain a socio-economic interdependence and the social security. The Vohra neighbourhood is found to be similar to Hindu ones rather than the British, indicating the lack of any major change in their outlook to life and living. It is also an indication, that the British influence was perhaps superficial.

For example, due to their exposure to the outside world Vohras laid new residential development on a rectilinear basis. In few instances the row houses even had controlled street facades. With the exception of few erstwhile princely rulers who planned their towns on European models, these Vohrwards were then the only neighbourhoods in Gujarat laid out geometrically.

The British house was large in size and its verandahs adjoining the peripheral rooms opened towards the garden. The Vohra or the Hindu house on the other hand was inward looking, towards the small internal court. They had limited external openings confined by the two thick party walls.

By and large, independent use of several rooms is possible in case of the colonial house, whereas in the Vohra houses similar to the Hindu house, all rooms occur along a single axis of movement, leaving only the last room free of the general movement which can be used without di-



Four houses in kutbi mohalla, Ahmedabad, 1750. (Fig. 85).

sturbance. This indicates the low priority given to degree of privacy within the family unlike the colonial house. Since privacy vis-a-vis outsiders is of greater concern to Vohras than Hindus. And this is indicated by a screen between the internal court and ante room, from where the visitors are directly led upstairs to the formal sitting room. Apart from these minor, localized additions, the basic plan organization remains the same as it's Hindu origins.

Even when opportunities were available, as in the case of house of Taherbhai Madraswala at Siddhpur, there is no effort at evolving a more sophisticated plan organization in-

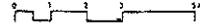
spite of its larger width and location facilitating three open sides. As a result even such a large house becomes 'twice' the traditional house. It appears that the strong colonial influence is only manifested in the decoration of the interiors and the furniture for identity purpose only to express their contact with the external world, which dealt in business and economic status. Yet, basically the inner beings of the Vohras remained the same.

As observed in the chart, the Hindus and the Vohras, being situated in congested old city fabric, had to build houses with several storeys to meet the area requirements. For light and ventilation, these houses



STREET FACADE

- HOUSES OF  
 1 MIYANBHAI  
 2 ATTARWALA  
 3 LATIF  
 4 CINEMAWALA, AHMEDABAD



Street facade of Dawoodi Vohra dwellings at Ahmedabad. (Fig. 86).

employed an open to sky court through all the floors similar to old Hindu houses. On the other hand, the Britishers spread their houses on the vast plot available to them and eliminated the internal court yards. However, there are examples of colonial houses where, by differing the ceiling heights, better ventilation and light have been achieved to satisfy the need for greater ventila-

tion in a hot humid climate. It can be said that over the centuries, Vohras have definitely evolved a house character which is largely distinct from that of other houses in the region. The space use pattern, the treatment of the facades and the decorations are characteristically different from a Hindu house. That Vohras, in their search for a separate identity, judiciously utilized ele-

ments of European architecture via the British influence. However, the influences have only been skin deep. No radical changes took place in the Vohra's social values and religious beliefs and, this is reflected in their habitat which basically remains very much the same as the Hindu one of their origin, reflecting the strong adherence to their traditional way of life and thought.