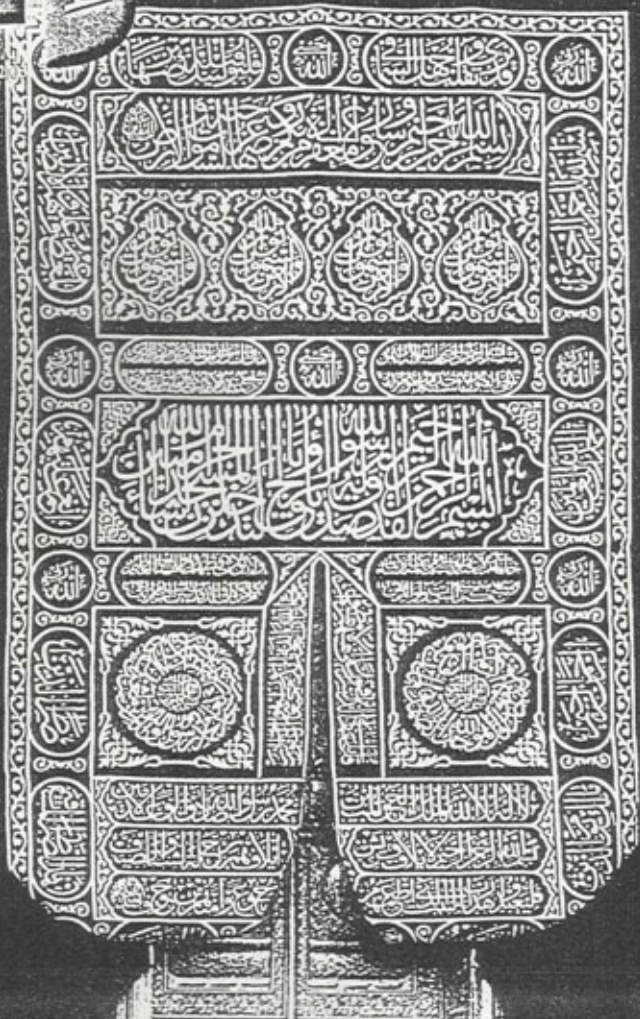




**Al-Hajj**  
 MONTHLY PUBLISHED BY MINISTRY OF Hajj  
 Volume 7, Issue 1, March 1974, February 2

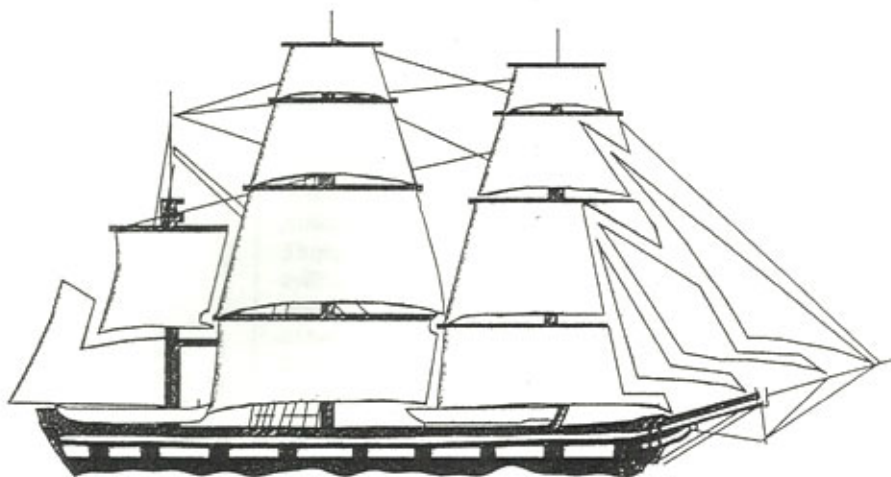
UMRA

**MAKKAH  
 IS READY  
 FOR ITS  
 HOLY  
 DAYS**



**Methods  
 of Haj  
 & the  
 Prophet's  
 way**





# From Riches to Rags

By M. A. Straj

**S**aga of an Indian family that introduced Haj voyages by sea between Bombay and Jeddah and brought the first car to the Holy Land.

Cacophony reigns supreme in Mahim, the erstwhile quiet neighbourhood of Bombay, capital of western India's Maharashtra state. Its bustling bazars, ever streaming visitors at the ancient mausoleum, yells from the flower-sellers and costermongers, prayers at the over-

sized mosque ensure that the din never dies down. The discernible strands of aroma of foods from its Mughlai hotels, oven fresh bread from bakeries, oriental spices from its bazars and the fish yards waft across. Amid its maze of labyrinthine streets sits a snug, seaside bungalow with

a spacious forecourt. Behind its high walls and wrought iron gates live the members of the remnants of the illustrious Khandwani clan whose ships once upon a time ruled the waves of the Arabian Sea and bridged the distance between the Arabian peninsula and Bombay. The

clan divided between the holy land and India is though clearly past its prime, a senior member of the current generation is a top Constitutional functionary in the Government of Maharashtra. (This is a reference to Mohammad Amin Khandwani who is the chairman of Maharashtra Minorities Commission and was previously the chairman of India's Central Haj Committee).

Few in Bombay as well as in India, however, know that Khandwani family was the first to take a motor car to the Holy Land and introduced the first bus service between Makkah Al-Mukarrama and Madinah Al-Munawwara and were pioneers in organizing sea voyages for Haj pilgrims. With the

*The family's fortunes took a sharp dip in 1922 when its ship S. S. Belvedere sank in the Arabian Sea. The telegram carrying the message came as a thunderbolt exactly when the family members had gathered at Poona for the housewarming ceremony. Ships being uninsured, liabilities to be paid were huge. Six years later another ship sank off Bombay coast only adding to the mountain of liabilities. All the family's 76 properties had to be auctioned off to pay off liabilities.*

Khandwani clan long been dismembered between the Holy Land and Bombay, and their shipping business now merely a forlorn memory, Khandwanis are today a scattered lot. But the imprints left by the veterans of the enterprising family in 1920s and 30s survive the vagaries of time.

They were four brothers from Bombay and they set out to set up what may be recalled as the first ever shipping company making sea voyages for Haj to Jeddah in the early part of the 20th century. Success came rolling at their feet. They expanded into commercial shipping and built up an empire. The family grew intimate with the Sheriff

of Makkah. A few of the senior Khandwanis settled down in Taif, Makkah and Madinah, cultivated matrimonies with the Arab nobles and built up ties that survived the periods of trials and tribulations.

Khandwanis were four brothers, Abdullah, Dada, Mohammad and Abba Mian Khandwani. Merchants as they were, based in the commercial hub of Bombay (now Mumbai), they set out to purchase Ballard Estate, the property of the Bombay Port Trust in 1914. The fuse had just been lit for the First World War. Economy had taken a severe beating with the first flush of the war. Commercial shipping was badly hit. The sight of the three German ships standing in the placid waters of the Ballard Estate attracted the notice of the brothers who were on an inspection tour of the Ballard Estate riding a horse carriage. Discreet enquiries revealed that the ships were up for sale. They were S. S. Vergemer, S. S. Belvedere and S. S. Lava. The deal was struck and the family ended up buying the ships for Indian rupees 980,000 instead of the Ballard Estate. It was then a princely sum.

Thus began the riches to rags story of the Khandwani family. From 1914 onwards, the Khandwani Steam Navigation Company embarked upon ferrying the pilgrims during the Haj season and cargo, mainly foodgrain, for rest of the year, for the Hejaz region. Fares would peak up to Rs 210 and ebb down to Rs 10 for passengers who could not spare more. But booking manager had instructions to insist on people paying according to their status, more in line with the



Russian rubles paid for fare by some unknown passenger (bearing dates of 1898 and 1910) that were found in the company's office at Ballard Estate in Bombay.



spirit of the Haj. Sans passports and visas, pilgrims flocked to the ships as company's heralds went beating drums around the Muslim localities of Bombay. The voyages took 10 days to reach Jeddah. The Company did not insure the ships.

Says Mohammad Amin Khandwani, the senior among the two third generation Khandwanis surviving in Bombay, recalling the halcyon days of the family: "My grandfather Abba Mian Khandwani would tie a talisman on the mast and sail off for Jeddah."

It was not too long ago that a former porter of the Bombay dockyard, Abdul Jabbar approached Amin while he was chairman of India's Central Haj Committee (during 1982-89). The still quiet robust looking Jabbar told him that he (Jabbar) travelled in the Company's ship by paying just Rs 5. Jabbar recalled that the heavy discount though owed itself to munificence of the family. Amin's grandfather would not let him board the ship free, lest Jabbar's pilgrimage suffer from a defi-

ciency in the sight of Allah.

Years passed by. The four brothers grew in fame and riches. The eldest of the Khandwani brothers, Abdullah Mian was a good marksman, an expert swimmer, an excellent equestrian and had a command over almost eight languages. He married an extremely beautiful lady from Istanbul. Dada Mian, whose real name was Habeeb, studied at Makkah. One of his batchmates, Abul Kalam Azad, later rose to become the leading light of the national freedom struggle in India and became the first Education minister of free India after 1947. Dada Mian had an unquenchable thirst for books. Third in line, Mohammad Mian resembled the British monarch, George V, wore Fez cap and rubbed shoulders with the members of the Bombay elite during evenings at the West Indian Club. Fourth of the Khandwani clan, Abba Mian, grandfather of Amin Khandwani, was in-charge of the family at Bombay.

Khandwani ships were key suppliers of foodgrain to mer-

chants of Hejaz. They were awaited eagerly at Jeddah. Often the Sheriff and his men would show up at the Jeddah dockyard. It was in 1918 that the Khandwanis carried a car and a generator to be gifted to the Sheriff of Makkah. A large sedan which had a collapsible canvas hood. Wonderstruck Bedouins chased it wherever it went. Dubbed "Satan", it was burnt down when the opportunity presented itself. They could not stand the sight of something that moved but did not consume fodder. As Amin recalls the accounts from his elders, the car could not survive beyond 40 days.

The family also introduced the first bus service between Makkah and Madinah. It was Jan Mohammad Khandwani, son of the eldest of the clan, Abdullah Mian, who took the initiative. Says Badrunissa Khandwani, Makkah-based daughter of Jan Mohammad, "after the launch of this bus service the Kandwanis became a household name in Makkah. Though the family was already well-known to the then ruling elite, it became a sort of a celebrity locally. The Bedouins would yell afrit, afrit (meaning ghost) at the very sight of the bus because it was something unusual for them."

The journey took 14 nights for the bus to cover the distance to Madina. A dirt track in the sand was all that constituted the highway to the Prophet's City. During the day time the bus would halt at designated halts to stave off searing heat. Frequently, the bus would get stuck into the sands. Pilgrims would then be asked to get down, slip

wooden planks beneath the wheels and push the vehicle out. The family ran the services till late in the 30s.

Later on Jan Mohammad Khandwani handed over the buses to the government in return for shares of the company which ran the bus service. Jan Mohammad held those shares till 1960s then he sold these to pursue his other business interests, says Badrunnisa.

As the family riches grew, its fortunes soared. The family's house in Makkah was situated at Bab Al-Safa near the Haram. It was a house rented from the Sheriff of Makkah. It used to host Arab nobles and diplomats specially those belonging to India and Pakistan. According to



Jan Mohammad Khandwani

*It was not too long ago that a former porter of the Bombay dockyard, Abdul Jabbar approached Amin while he was chairman of India's Central Haj Committee (during 1982-89). The still quiet robust looking Jabbar told him that he (Jabbar) travelled in the Company's ship by paying just Rs 5. Jabbar recalled that the heavy discount though owed itself to munificence of the family, Amin's grandfather would not let him board the ship free, lest Jabbar's pilgrimage suffer from a deficiency in the sight of Allah.*

Badrunnisa, the family vacated the house when the expansion of the Haram started.

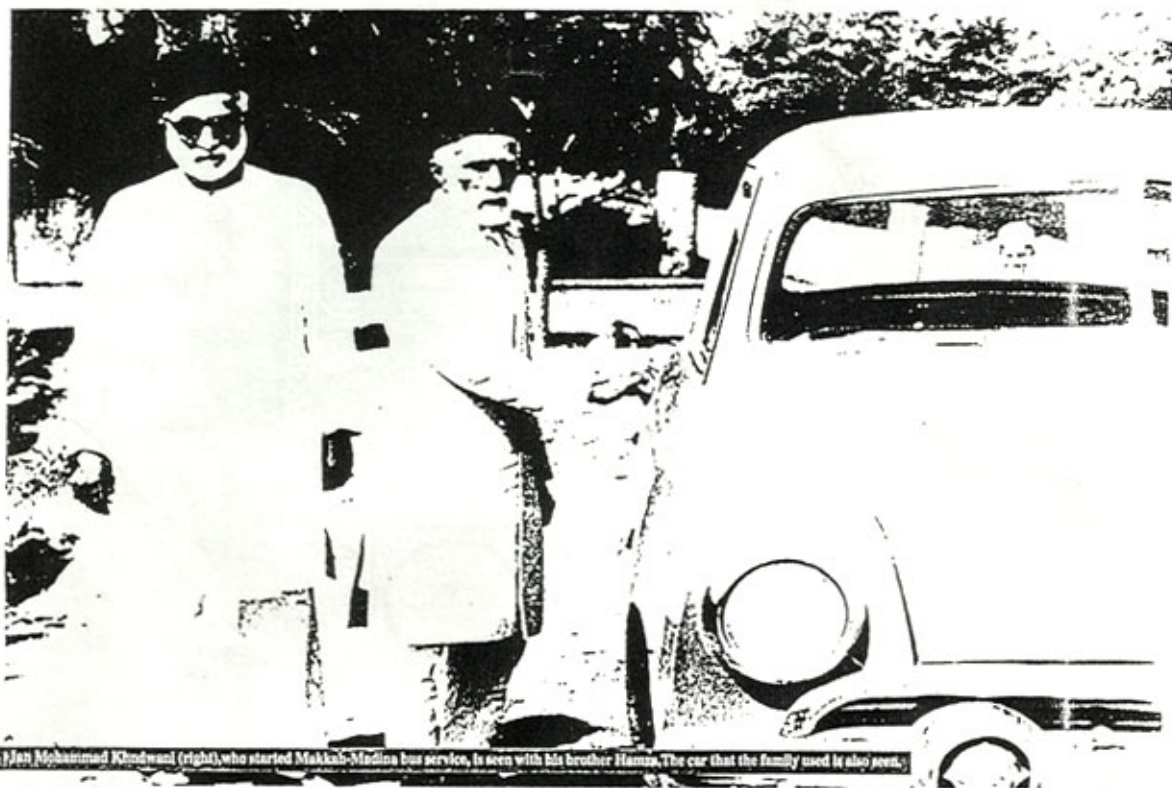
The family acquired enormous properties in and around Bombay and Poona (now Pune). The Pune bungalow was constructed at a cost of Rs 2.5 million, a fabulous sum for the 1920s when Rs 100,000 was sufficient to build a grand mansion. Its dining table could seat 76 persons around. Another building of heritage value was the Zariwala Orphanage in Mahim, which was demolished only last year. It sheltered 3,000 riot victims in 1993 in the aftermath of the anti-Muslim violence.

But then the family's fortunes took a sharp dip in 1922 when its ship S. S. Belvedere sank in the Arabian Sea. The telegram carrying the message came as a thunderbolt exactly when the family members had gathered at Poona for the

housewarming ceremony at their new, sprawling bungalow.

Ships being uninsured, liabilities to be paid were huge. Six years later another ship sank off Bombay coast only adding to the mountain of liabilities. All the family's 76 properties, recorded on a single document, had to be auctioned off to pay off liabilities. Fortunes took a dip, never to rise for several decades. Family women were asked to gather their jewellery on the large dining table. The pile that formed was huge enough to obscure the sight of people on the other side of the table.

Amin was born to one of the four sons of Abba Mian Khandwani in 1932 just after the economic decline had set in. It did not take much time for the illustrious family to get dispersed. Family silver and heirloom went up for sale. Amin recalls that he had to dispose off a large table sized compass, several cupboards full of books, expensive silver cutlery used on board and countless pieces of ornate furniture from time to time. But a bundle of roubles paid for fare by some unknown passenger (bearing dates of 1898 and 1910) and still carrying the pictures of Czarina were



Mian Mohaimud Khandwani (right), who started Makkah-Madina bus service, is seen with his brother Hamza. The car that the family used is also seen.

found stacked in a cupboard in the company's office at Ballard Estate. A book titled Life of Mohammad: The Prophet of Allah by E. Dinet and Sliman ben Ibrahim and illustrated by E. Dinet (and pages ornamented by Mohammad Racim) survived the squandering of the heritage.

Heartbroken with the economic downswing, Amin's grandfather, Abba Mian Khandwani set sail for Makkah. Hit by a sunstroke, he died there in 1935 on 18th Muharram and was buried in the graveyard of Ma'alat. The scion of the family Abdullah Mian Khandwani was shot dead in 1935 in Taif after a court intrigue and was buried there.

Decades later, Amin Khandwani was appointed the Chairman of India's Central Haj Committee and erected the Bombay's 21-storey Haj House, recognisably the most impressive building to be built by Muslims in independent India. He did it without a single farthing coming in aid from the official sources. Nor did he go for public donations. All resources were generated from within the Haj operations. Amin also represented Mahim in the Bombay Municipal Corporation for 27 years and was also elected a member of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly. He also recalls that

some 20 years ago, he received a letter from a British firm informing him of the shipwreck of S. S. Belvedere being located in the Arabian Sea. But then, the cost of rescue operations outweighed the cost the metal would yield. The family did not pursue the matter.

Today Mohammad Amin Khandwani and his younger brother, Yakub still live in their seaside bungalow in Mahim. Recalling from his subdued glow of memory, he says, the bungalow was just a guest house and remained from being auctioned off.

with input from Juddah Bureau