

Bahai Religious Faith and Tradition in Bangladesh

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Abstract: In just over 150 years, the adherents to Bahai faith have grown from an obscure movement in the Middle East to a widespread independent world religious tradition. The global scope of Bahai faith is mirrored in the composition of its membership. Representing a cross-section of humanity, Bahais come from virtually every nation, ethnic group, culture, profession, and social and economic background. About six million followers of the faith reside in more than 100,000 localities around the world and represent more than 2,100 different ethnic groups. This essay reviews the history of how Bahai faith came to be accepted in eastern Bengal and provides a sketch of current distribution, organization and activities of Bahais in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, a large number of people of different communities and indigenous groups, being inspired with that same spirit have become Bahais. Let me here acknowledge the main sources from which I have drawn the information on Bahais in Bangladesh. I conducted interviews and consulted written documents provided by individuals whom I met and consulted in their Bahai Centre located at Shantinagar, Dhaka, and where I made my own observations. I am especially indebted to those who have helped me with some rare and important unpublished written documents and other valuable information. I may specially acknowledge Mahmudul Haq, Abdullah Brooks (an American scientist with the ICDDR, who has been living in Bangladesh for over twelve years), Rahim Sarwar, Mr. M¹ilon and Mr. Rashidunnabi. All of them are knowledgeable Bahais.

Bahai tradition in Bangladesh: early contacts:

Bahai contacts with the Indian subcontinent may be dated from the very inception of the propagation of this new religious movement. This contact was predominantly commercial. Some early disciples, including relatives of the Bab (forerunner of the Bahauallah, founder of Bahai faith) had business offices in Bombay, India. The first converts in India were from the Parsee community in Bombay. More organized efforts to propagate the faith in India started at the time of Bahauallah, when in 1872 he sent a learned Persian, Sulaiman

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Khan Tunukabani, better known as Jamal Effendi, to India. This Jamal Effendi was an influential figure in the cultural life of the Indian subcontinent. He visited almost all the major cities of India and arrived in Kolkata in 1878. In the course of his travels in India he met a young man, Siyyid Mustafa Roumi, in Madras. Impressed by the great spiritual personality of Effendi, Roumi accepted the new religious faith and accompanied him on his journey to Bengal and Burma. Jamal Effendi was an influential preacher and had a large following of learned Bahai missionaries. They sought out great Muslim religious and other notables and discussed with them the advent of a new message from God. By their religious fervor, missionary zeal, exemplary character and humanitarian activities, they could greatly influence the minds of the masses and attract them to Bahai faith. On their way to Burma Jamal Effendi and Roumi stopped in Dhaka and Chittagong for a few days and met notables of both cities. There is no doubt that under the guidance of Effendi Mustafa Roumi played a vital role in introduction of Bahai faith in Bangladesh.

In the late eighteen-nineties and early thirties Bahais from the West had a large share in the spread of Bahai Faith among the great scholars and leaders. These Persian and Western Bahais had detailed discussions with Indian Intelligentsia that included poet Sir Mohammad Iqbal, Sarojiono Naidu, Annie Besant, Rabindranath Tagore and rulers of the Indian native states and their prime ministers. Miss Martha Root, an American Bahai, who met Tagore on Feb. 13 & 14, 1938, remarks in her published memories he talked about his deep love and appreciation of Abdul Baha. There was an excellent collection of Bahai books in the library of Santiniketan. Tagore expressed hope that there would be a Bahai chair at Santiniketan. Those Bahais created a good impression on their listeners with their vast knowledge, modesty and tolerance of and respect for the views of others.

First conversion to the new religion among the masses by Jamal Effendi's and Mustafa Roumi's efforts occurred in Burma. Missionary zeal and ideal life of Jamal Effendi's companion Mustafa Roumi gained a large number of converts particularly from the villages. He served the cause of Bahai Faith in many ways and due to his good efforts in Barma drew the attention of a sizeable Bengali community there. One Sultan Gazi is considered to be the first person to accept the new religion from among the Bengalis. By the mid-1930s there was a small Bahai group in Chittagong. Small Bahai group belonging to Satkania, Panchlaish and Putia of Chittagong were brought into the faith by Mustafa Roumi, Sultan Gazi and some other Burmese Bahais. At the time of the partition of India in 1947 there were about nine Bahais in what became East Pakistan, all of them living in Chittagong.

In December 1948, Amjad Ali of Bihar, India settled down in Dhaka with the aim of developing the Bahai community in East Pakistan. He was followed by his relatives and some other Bahais from West Bengal. Taking advantage of the peaceful atmosphere he was able to establish a local governing body (local spiritual assembly) in Dhaka in 1952. It was the first local council to be elected in the eastern part of Pakistan. Later on with gradual increase in the number of Bahais another local assembly was elected in Chittagong in 1955 and a third one in Mymensingha in 1961.

Hundreds of Bahai preachers subsequently came to then East Pakistan in different times from Iran, India, the USA, and other countries to help locally settled Bahais in promoting the Bahai Faith. Some of those pioneers even settled down in Bangladesh for the sake of their religion (a person who settles in a foreign country for the sake of promoting religion is called by the Bahais a 'pioneer'). In 1965 a great initiative was taken to spread the message of Baha Faith among the rural people. By 1971 there were about ten local assemblies in the province. To make the efforts more dynamic a Bahai centre was established at Shanti Nagar in Dhaka.

With emergence of independent Bangladesh, Bahais also formed their own National Spiritual Assembly, which was elected in April 1972. This assembly and thirteen local assemblies were incorporated on June 2, 1972. Soon after the independence of Bangladesh, a delegation of Bahai representatives which included a Bahai dignitary from India (Shirin Boman, Counselor) met the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Prime Minister assured the delegation that all religious minorities were free to practice their religions in the independent, sovereign and secular Bangladesh. Bahais have continued this practice of meeting with President, Prime Minister, Ministers, Police Chiefs, Justices and other relevant authorities. At the end of the first decade of independence there were Bahais in 465 localities and 83 local assemblies. Bahai religion was also taken to minority ethnic groups particularly in Chittagong and Rajshahi.

Ethnic and Religious Background:

Bahai Faith came with the Iranian Indian and Western Bahais. The missionary works of pioneers and preachers and the acceptance of Bahai faith by the Muslims, Hindus, and different ethnic groups—who were attracted by its religious simplicity and social equality and justice—resulted in the growth of the Bahai population and development of the Bahai Society of Bangladesh. I talked to some learned and lay converted Bahais in their Centre in Shanti Nagar, Dhaka and asked them why and how you have been attracted to

a new faith? All of them gave a more or less uniform answer: "Bahai vision of unity." Let me share with you a view of a learned Bahai on this point.

During the late seventies, I was serving in a Bank in Karachi, Pakistan. I came of a Muslim family but had lost my faith due to prejudices among Muslims. One day I found a book about the Bahai faith entitled *Bahau'llah and New Era* and I immediately picked it up. I read the book and was immediately attracted to the Bahai vision of Unity. When I learned about the Bahai concept of the unity of mankind, I was much excited. I was inspired by the Bahai teachings, because they were free of prejudice.

In 1989, after becoming a Bahai, he migrated (as a pioneer) to Bangladesh, to help with Bahai projects in and outside Dhaka and to promote development among Bahai community in Bangladesh. Finally he settled down in Dhaka.

Bahai people of Bangladesh come from different religious communities and ethnic groups. The immigrant Bahais belong mainly to the stock of the Persians, Indian and Western countries. Till now no accurate statistical surveys, sociological studies or population projection have been made to determine the number of followers. But a conservative estimate by the early 1990s says that there are around 60,000 Bahais in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi Bahais are serving in various important elected and appointed positions of the country. Bahais are thinly spread all over the country. Socially it is difficult to categorize Bangladeshi Bahais, but the majority of them lives in villages and generally belong to the lower middle class. Bahais of both urban and village areas are engaged apart from agriculture, in small business, government and private employment and technical jobs. Bangladeshi Bahais have achieved about 95 percent literacy rate in contrast to a national literacy rate of less than 50%.

Bahai literature in Bengali:

The first Bahai book to be translated into Bengali was *Bahau'llah and the New Era*, written by Dr. J.E. Esslemont, an English Bahai. It was translated by Amirul Islam, a dedicated Bengali Bahai. This translation was published in 1936 in Kolkata. This book is considered to be the authoritative introduction to the Bahai faith. This book is very important because it is followed by translations of Bahai holy scriptures like the *Hidden Words* and the *Kitab-i-Iqan* (Book of Certitude). These two books were translated by Safdar Ahmed, a Bahai from Chittagong. Presently there are about 60 titles in Bengali language, ranging in subjects from the writings of the central figures of the religion to its history, administrative system, introduction to religion and textbooks for Bahai students. It should be mentioned that all of these books have been translated from English versions. There are also many Bahai booklets and pamphlets in Bengali. These too are translations of English versions. Some periodicals are also published, though not very regularly. One such periodical

is *Nobo Dibosh*, which is being published since July 1987. The most sacred and important scripture of Bahais is the *Kitab-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book)*. Revealed during the dark days of Bahau'llah's imprisonment in Acre, it is the chief repository of the laws and institutions which Bahau'llah designed for the world order he conceived. It was written in Arabic and is characterized by a wide range of styles. The *Most Holy Book* was translated into Bengali from its authorized English version for publication in 1998. Bahais keep their library opened to all. Therefore anyone can visit their library and collect pamphlets and periodicals.

Social Work:

Let me start this section with a quotation, "Let your vision be world embracing, rather than confined to your own self." Therefore around the globe, Bahais are united by a common outlook that holds to high moral standards, a modern worldview, and a commitment to serving the wider community. As a result Bahais consider spreading the message of religious tolerance, cooperation, unity, consultation and village-based decision-making as laying the foundation of a new society which will solve social ills more comprehensively and more effectively. Bahais believe that the purpose of earthly life is to acquire spiritual qualities, such as love, faith, and self-service. They seek to fulfill this purpose through a variety of personal, family, and community actions. They undertake public projects as important means for the training of the soul. In the same way with growing numbers plus increasing resources and experience, Bahais in Bangladesh are taking up more and more projects of social work like medical camps, vocational training and the like. In 1983 the National Bahai Development Institute was established to train teachers for village tutorial schools, as well as for running clinics for poor women and children. Since 1994 annual courses are held to train rural health workers. Conscious efforts are made to involve women in all community affairs. Women are serving in important Bahai administrative posts. They have served as secretary of National Spiritual Assembly in Bangladesh.

Propagation of the faith:

Giving the message of Bahai religion to others is called 'teaching the Cause' by the Bahais. In the absence of a clergy this is an obligation of every individual Bahai. In Bangladesh the method usually adopted is that Bahais go to a village where there is already a Bahai or a sympathizer who helps in meeting people interested to hear about the Bahai religion. They keep many pamphlets, booklets, newsletters; periodicals etc.

on the shelves of their centers' libraries by which interested non-Bahais can easily know about the faith.

Concluding comment: Bahai impact on society:

The total number of Bahais in Bangladesh is too small for them to have any major direct impact on society at large. But by bringing together people from different religious, cultural and social backgrounds, especially at the village level, and by their systematic efforts to overcome religious sectarianism, promote education of children and better concepts about women they can attract the attention of others and through them expect to have positive influence upon the wider society. Till now they have been able to maintain a peaceful co-existence with others and live a happy life in Bangladesh.

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