

ESBLEMONT'S SURVEY OF THE BAHĀ'Ī COMMUNITY IN 1919-1920: PART IV. India by Mīrzā Maḥmūd Zarqānī.

Moojan Momen (Ed).

The section on India in Esslemont's proposed chapter was supplied to him by one of the most prominent of the early Bahā'ī teachers in India, Mīrzā Maḥmūd Zarqānī who is perhaps best known as the author of a diary of 'Abdu'l-Bahā's journeys in the West.

Mīrzā Maḥmūd's account certainly differs in many details from the standard Bahā'ī accounts of the early history of the Bahā'ī Faith in India. Most of the accounts which we have of the early history of the Faith in India are based on Siyyid Muṣṭafā Rūmī's writings and those certainly give a very different impression of Sulayman Khān (Jamāl Effendi). Since Siyyid Muṣṭafā had been converted by Sulayman Khān and had accompanied the latter on some of his travels, it would seem that the accounts based on his recollections would be a more accurate representation (see for example, W. Garlington in *Bahā'ī News*, March 1975, pp.17-21) than this account by Mīrzā Maḥmūd who did not arrive in India until 1901.

□ INDIA¹

The first messenger to carry the Bahai Revelation to India was an old Persian named Suleyman Khan, who was known among the friends as Jamal Effendi ¹ In order to distinguish him from Suleyman Khan the Martyr. About 40 years ago ² he visited Baha'u'llah at Acca, and received permission to make a tour in India. His intention was not to go as a Bahai teacher, but Baha'u'llah told him he ought to take the opportunity of spreading the teachings. He visited the principal cities of India and Burmah and made the acquaintance of many of the nobles and distinguished men. He went in the character of a Dervish leader (Sufi), and when he found that people were attracted he would read to them some of the Tablets, such as "Hidden Words". He printed and published "Seven Valleys" as if he himself were the author. Little by little he introduced more of the teachings, telling some of his most intimate friends that they should

¹ [Note. The following account of the progress of the Cause in India was kindly supplied to me by Mirza Mahmood Zarquani (Esslemont)].

repeat the name: "Allah'o'Abha", and finally showing them the book of Ighan. Occasionally he spoke about one higher than himself, whose representative he was, but he made no specific mention of Baha'u'llah, and it was usually supposed among his followers that he was himself the head of the cult he represented.

After spending some five years in India, he returned to the Holy Land. Baha'u'llah reproved him for having published "Seven Valleys" in his own name,³ but the work he had done was followed up by others and turned to good account. Most of his teaching had been in the towns of Mandalay and Rangoon. In the latter city there lived a Bahai from Shiraz, named Seyed Mehdi,⁴ who after the departure of Jamal Effendi, began to teach the Cause publicly. He was joined by one of the friends of Jamal Effendi, named Seyed Mostafa,⁵ who is still an active teacher.

Not long before the ascension of Baha'u'llah, a relative of the Bab, named Haji Mirza Mohammed Ali,⁶ went to settle in Bombay. He was a great merchant, but a firm Bahai, and taught some of the Zoroastrians, who were numerous in that city. Other Baha'is from Persia soon followed him, and about the same time Baha'u'llah sent to Bombay two famous teachers, Jenab-i-Andalib and Haji Mirza Haydar Ali, whose visit aroused great interest in the Movement. They were followed, about 1895, by a Persian named Mirza Mahram, who continued to teach with success in Bombay, Burmah and many of the cities of India until he passed away about eight years ago.

In 1901, Abdul Baha sent another Persian teacher named Mirza Mahmood,⁷ who has, since that time been one of the most active servants of the Cause in India. Taking with him an interpreter who spoke Hindustani, he visited all the large cities of India. From this time onward, many Persian-European and American teachers visited India and greatly helped the progress of the Cause. In 1906 Abdul Baha sent Mirza Mahmood with another Persian named Ebn Abhar⁸ and two American teachers, Messrs Harris and Ober, to make a tour of the various Bahai Centres and chief cities of India. They visited Bombay where there was a strong group of about a hundred Bahais. At Lahore, they found Pritem Singh, the first Brahman to accept the Bahai Faith, and two or three other believers. They lectured at a conference of the Arya Somaj at Vazirabad. At Calcutta they found a small group which had been started some years before, and now became firm and strong. At Rangoon they found the Cause very active. Only some ten or

twenty believers resided permanently in Rangoon, but many were converted there and went to spread the truth elsewhere. In Mandalay, the Bahais had a hall and regular meetings in which men and women met together in a great spiritual power. At that time this was the only meeting of that kind in India.

Shortly after this, an old Burmese teacher, Abdul Karim, went to Konjangoon⁹ a district of Burmah near Rangoon, and taught the villagers. These spread the message to others, and in this district there are now two adjacent villages in which the whole population, about three hundred in all, have become Bahai. They have started a Mashrekol-Askar, and a Bahai school for boys and girls which has met with the cordial approval of the Government. In Konjangoon, as in Mandalay, men and women now meet together regularly.

In recent years the Bahai Cause in India has been progressing by leaps and bounds, and its adherents have been displaying great devotion and zeal. So far, it has spread mainly among the educated middle class of the community, although in Konjangoon as in Ratnagari a district near Bombay, it has also spread to the poor people among whom there are many devoted believers. In Ratnagari also men and women meet together.

Among the members of the Brahma Somaj, a society which is endeavouring to revive the deep spiritual truths of the ancient religion of India, the Bahai movement has made a few firm friends, but among Brahmans as a whole the number of converts is as yet small. Several members of the Theosophical Society, in Lahore and elsewhere have cordially accepted the Bahai teachings. Among the Buddhists in Burmah a few converts have been made, but it is among the Mohammedans in Burmah and the Zoroastrians in Bombay, that, up to the present, the greatest progress has been made.

There are now some five or six hundred Bahais in Konjangoon, about the same number in Rangoon and Mandalay and the neighbouring villages, about four hundred in Bombay and small groups in Calcutta, Poona, Allahabad, Kurachee, Surat and Punjab. In Madras, no centre has yet been established. The total number of believers is nearly two thousand, and is rapidly growing. Several are highly educated and influential people. Many of the Tablets of Baha'u'llah have now been translated into Hindustani, and many other books dealing with the Movement have been published in this language. Mr. Heshmatullah¹⁰ has written a valuable book on the History and teachings of the Movement. Mr. Shirazi has published an account of his visit to the

Holy Land. A translation of "The Traveller's Narrative" has been published by Mirza Mahmood and Syed Mostafa, and several other books and pamphlets have been issued.

One of the recent converts to the Movement, a Mohammedan Khojeh named Jousef Shett, is showing great zeal and organizing ability. Largely through his efforts, a meeting of pioneers of the Cause was held at Poona, near Bombay, and it has now been decided, in accordance with instructions received from Abdul Baha, to hold an Annual Conference to meet at different important centres in rotation, for the purpose of discussing methods of promoting and spreading the Cause, the establishment of new centres, the organization of meetings and teaching work, etc.

A noteworthy effect of the adoption of the Bahai teachings is the disappearance of all caste prejudices. For instance, Hindu friends meet freely with Parsee and Moslem friends and partake of the same food.

□ Editor's Notes

1. Sulaymān Khān-i Tunukābunī, known as Jamāl Effendi, see 'Abdu'l-Bahā, Memorials of the Faithful (Wilmette, Illinois: BPT., 1975), 134-8.
2. Sulaymān Khān was in 'Akkā' in 1871 and arrived in India in 1872.
3. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahā' (Memorials.. 136), the ascension of Bahā'u'llāh had already occurred by the time Sulaymān Khān returned to 'Akkā'
4. Hajī Siyyid Mihdī Shīrāzī had moved to Rangoon from Shīrāz and married into an Iranian-Burmese family.
5. Siyyid Mustafā Rūmī was converted to the Bahā'ī Faith in 1875 in Madras by Sulaymān Khān. He belonged to an Iraqi family that had also settled in Madras. He accompanied Sulaymān Khān to Burma in 1878 where he settled and built the nucleus of the Burmese Bahā'ī community. He was killed during the second World War and was posthumously hailed by Shoghi Effendi a Hand of the Cause.
6. Hajī Mīrzā Muhammad 'Alī Afnān, see 'Abdu'l-Bahā', Memorials.. 16-21.
7. i.e. the author of this article Mīrzā Mahmūd-i Zarqānī.
8. One of the 'Hands of the Cause' appointed by Bahā'u'llāh.
9. This village is now known as Daidanaw. The name seems to have changed in about 1933.
10. Resident of Karachi and later the first secretary of the Indian NSA.

□ ADDITIONAL NOTE

Attached to Zarqānī's article among Esslemont's papers is a newspaper clipping relating to the All-India Bahā'ī Convention that was held in Bombay during December 27th-29th 1920. It is from an unnamed newspaper of December 29th 1920:

...[WE]DNESDAY, DECEMBER 29, 1920

THE BEHAI CONVENTION.

Prophecies for Behaism Discussed

The first All-India Behai Convention was held last evening in the Behai Hall, Forbes Street, amidst a very large audience of ladies, and gentlemen of the Parsi, Mahomedan and Hindu communities. Dr. Mazharali presided. A series of lectures have been arranged to discuss the Behai movement and to explain its aims and objects and the first of them commenced yesterday with a lecture on "The need of Divine Education" by Prof. Shirazi.

The president at the outset explained at length in Urdu the prophecies that were written in the various scriptures and described the coming of the Imam Mehdi supported by hadis which, he said, were weak. He then called upon Prof. Shirazi to deliver his lecture. The proceedings were partly in Urdu and partly in English.

Prof. Shirazi said he would tell them in a logical manner that they needed divine education and unless they had education they could not know anything that would prove useful to the human being. Education only could make them what they ought to be and this was of three kinds, viz, spiritual, physical and human; spiritual because they would know their Creator and their duties towards him; physical because it would help them to live an honourable life in the world, and human because it would teach them how to behave in society. He then described their past history and said it was a problem for them as to how they should bring the few of them to form friendship. Divine education was needed to lead all nations to arbitration instead of war and this could be brought about by a universal language. There must be a religion for the world, not the existing religions. The only thing that must be inaugurated was the New Gospel which must be instructive not destructive. The speaker said he had tried to impress upon them that there was need for a divine education on earth in order to bring glory to the world and glory to all races, to bring them into unity.

Mr N.R. Vakil then delivered a lecture on "Universal Religion" saying that there was something very high for a man to achieve, and that was to know God and achieve perfection. For this education was necessary. He referred to the various traditions and scriptures bearing on the subject at length and explained the principles of Behaism and described the life of Abdullah Behai [sic] and his vicissitudes for the furtherance of the movement. They wanted the League of Nations, as they did not want to go to war, whether they were Behais or non-Behais. Their belonging to one community or the other made no difference in the light of God. He emphasised the need of a universal language to attain this object and cited Esperanto as the probable one.

Messrs. Jamshed Khedadad and Aqa Syed Mustafa Rumi also spoke, the former on the fulfilment of the Zoroastrian prophecies leading to the manifestation of Behaism and the latter on the "New Dispensation, its proofs from Jewish and Christian Scriptures", quoting hadis in support of his arguments. The Convention then adjourned till to-day.
