

Baha'ism in Iran

Ashaq Hussain

Centre of Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, Hazratbal-190006

Abstract : During the early 19th century, a religious movement called Babism flourished in Persia though for a short period, i.e., 1844-1852. Its founder Mirza Ali Mohammad Shirazi proclaimed his station as that of the Mehdi to the Muslims. Afterwards Bab claimed Prophetic status. He abrogated Islamic law and instead promulgated a system of Babi law in his (Persian) Bayan. Although the Babi movement successfully established its network both in rural and urban settlements of Iran, and after the execution of Bab he became a prominent figure among Babis. Most of the Babis were exiled by the Qachar government to the Sunni Ottoman area in Iraq. It was in Iraq that Baha'u'llah proclaimed himself the Prophet Promised by Bab. Majority of the Babis believed him and entered into the new faith and became Baha'is. This happened in 1863 after a decade of Bab's execution. He stated his own dispensation and wrote letters to many kings instigating them to establish peace. He tried a lot to make his laws compatible with the modern globalized world. To him "World is but one country and humankind its citizens". So far as the relevance of the present study is concerned, its pros and cons need to be analyzed and evaluated objectively. Study of religion usually influences common people in so far as the legitimate force that operates behind the principles and ideals of religion are concerned. The objective of this article is to give the reader a sense of Baha'i history and also the Iranian response. It is in this context the present paper has been analyzed.

Keywords- Babi, Baha'i, Mehdi, Bah'u'llah, Bayan

I. INTRODUCTION

Few countries can rival Iran in the length and the variety of her history. One has only to look at a map of the Middle East to see why history has been so eventful. The country is situated for the most part between the depressions of the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and its territory has, therefore, often served in the past as a bridge for peoples and tribes migrating westwards from the vast areas of Central Asia and beyond, and sometimes in the reverse directions. [1] Religious beliefs and doctrines in Iran have passed under many names and appeared in many different and sometimes violently opposed forms. But throughout the whole periods of Iranian history there has been both continuity and consistency of ideas, and a steady progress and evolution. [2] The founder of Baha'ism, Mirza Ali Mohammed, who afterwards assume the title of Bab (i.e Gate), was born at Shiraz in the south of Persia, on the 20th October, 1819 A.D. He was a Sayyid, that is, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). His father, a well known merchant died soon after his birth, and He was then placed under the care of maternal uncle, a merchant of Shiraz, who brought Him up. [3] Shaykhi school became the precursor of the Babi movement that later developed into a truly autonomous religion. This school was founded by Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa (1753-1826), a pious *Shi'a* theologian from Al-Ahsa (Arabia), the name of the movement coming from his title of Shaykh. The Shaykhis believed that a Bab or gate must always be present as an intermediary between the people and the Imam. To some Shaykhis Bab is an abstract concept and to some it is referred to a real person. He educated in Bahrain and the theological centers in Najf and Karbala in Iraq. He spends his last twenty years of life in Iran. [4]

Shaykh Ahmad at the age of 40 began to study in earnest in the *Shi'a* centers of religious scholarship such as Karbala and Najf. He attained sufficient recognition in such circles to be declared as a *Mujadid*, an interpreter of Islamic law. He declared that all knowledge and sciences were contained (in the essential form) within the Quran, and that to excel in the sciences, all knowledge must be gleaned from the Quran. He saw himself as a mainstream *Shi'a*, not as a sectarian leader. Yet he clearly innovated in *Shi'a* thought in many ways that towards the end of his life sparked the controversy. He lived at a time when his brand of Islam was deeply divided on the role of the Muslim learned man. After the death of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsai in 1826 Sayyid Kazim Rashti became the head of this movement and was designated as the leader of the Shaykhis.

Sayyid Kazim urged the Shyakhis to travel far off lands after his death in search of the goal of their desire. "Preserve till the time when He, who is your true Guide and Master, will graciously aid you and enable you to recognize him. Be firm till the day when He will choose you as the companions and the heroic supporters of the promised Qaim. Well is it with every one of you who will quaff the cup of martyrdom in His path". [5] Mullas Husayn was the first shaykhi and the student of Sayyid Kazim Rashti who recognized Sayyid Ali Mohammad as Bab. Gradually Bab proclaimed himself as a harbinger of a new dispensation or *Shariah* and

became an independent Prophet with a new religion and a set of new laws. He also categorically claimed to be the Imam Mahdi awaited by Muslims. Bab claimed his authority in 1844 and was executed in 1850. According to Babi and Baha'i sources Bab used to predict the advent of a great manifestation or Messenger of God after him. But the Bab didn't stop and adopted the sacred title of '*Nuqtīy-i-ula*' or primal point. On assuming this title, the Bab claimed to rank, like Muhammad, in the series of great founders of religion, and for this reason, in the eyes of *Shi'a*. He even inaugurated a new calendar, restoring the solar year, and beginning the commencement of the New Era from the year of his own declaration. [6]

The first eighteen disciples of the Bab (with Himself as nineteenth) became the known as "Letters of the Living". These disciples he sent to different parts of Persia and Turkistan to spread the news of His advent. At the same time, he went to Mecca for pilgrimage and clearly announced his claim as Babhood. [7] In consequences of the announcement of new dispensation, he meted out a severe opposition from *Shi'a*. Houses were destroyed. Women were seized and carried off. Many were beheaded, hanged and burnt alive. Despite all these attempts the movement progressed, because some believe that the Prophecies concerning the coming of *Mahdi* were literally fulfilled. [8]

On July 1850, Bab fell a victim and his follower Aqa Muhammad Ali who begged to be allowed to share his martyrdom. But there happened a strange episode, when Bab and his disciple were hung with ropes from a pillar. The disciple's head rested against the Bab's breast and his last words were: "Master, are you pleased with me?" When a regiment of soldiers was drawn up and received the order to fire, it was found that Bab and his disciple were still alive. The first firing squad refused to fire again, and a new regiment had been brought on the scene, which fired when ordered. This time Bab and his disciple were dead and the enemies of the Bab enjoyed a guilty thrill of triumph thinking. After the Bab's martyrdom, His remains were thrown on the edge of the most outside wall of the city. After that it was secretly taken by some of the Babis, and after being concealed for several years in Persia, was ultimately brought, with great danger and difficulty, to the Holy land Mount Carmel at Akka, and only a few miles where Baha'u'llah spent his last years and where his remains now lie. [9]

However Bab's many works were almost preserved in manuscript form such as *Qayyum-al-Asma* or commentary on Surah Joseph consisting over well 9300 "short verses" in 111 chapters. It opens with a revolutionary address to the kings of the earth: "O kings! O sons of kings! Don't take possession of what belongs to God!" it was written in Arabic but later was translated in Persian by famous Babi, Qurat-ul-Ain Tahira. The *Sahih Baina'l-Harmain*, "The Book written between the two sanctuaries, in which he gave further meaning of his mission. Dalai 'il-I sab'eh (The seven Proofs), which is the most important of the Bab's polemic works. [10]

II. BAHU'LLAH

Mirza Hussain Ali Nuri (from Nur to Mazandaran, the place of origin of his family) was born in Tehran on the second of Muharram 1233 A.H. (November 12, 1817, two years before the Bab) to a high ranking family which gave several dignitaries to the Persian court, although he attend no school. He showed wonderful wisdom and knowledge in his early childhood. [11]

When the Bab declared his mission in 1844, Baha'u'llah was then in his twenty-seventh year, boldly espoused the cause of the new faith, of which he soon became recognized as one of the most powerful and fearless exponents. He had already suffered twice imprisonment for being as a Babi follower, but Baha'u'llah and his companions remained zealous and enthusiastic, in the greatest happiness. Almost everyday one or more of them was tortured or put to death and the others reminded that their turn might come next. About a year after coming to Baghdad, He departed alone into the wilderness of Sulaymaniyah, taking with him nothing but a change of clothes. Regarding this period he writes in the Book of Iqan as follows:-

In the early days of our arrival in this land, when We discerned the signs of impending events, We decided, ere they happened, to retire. We betook ourselves to the wilderness, and there, separated and alone, led for two years a life of complete solitude. From Our eyes there rained tears of anguish, and in our bleeding heart there surged an ocean of agonizing pain. Many a night we had no food for sustenance, and many a day Our body found no rest. By Him who hath my being between His hands! Notwithstanding these showers of afflictions and unceasing calamities, our soul was wrapt in blissful joy, and our whole being evinced an ineffable gladness. For in Our solitude we were unaware of the harm or benefit, the health or ailment, of any soul. Alone, we communed with our spirit, oblivious of the world, and all that is therein. We knew not, however, that the mesh of divine destiny exceedth the vastest of mortal conceptions, and the dart of His decree transcendeth the boldest of human designs. None can escape the snares He setteth, and no soul can find release except through submission to His will. By the righteousness of God! Our withdrawal contemplated no return, and our separation hoped for no reunion. The one subject of our retirement was to avoid becoming a subject of discord among the faithful, a source of disturbance unto our companions, the means of injury to any soul, or the cause of sorrow of heart. Beyond these, we cherished no other intention, and apart from them, we had no end in view. And yet, each

person schemed after his own desire, and pursued his own idle fancy, until the hour when, from the Mystic source, there came the summons bidding us return whence We came. Surrendering our will to His, We submitted to His injunction.

"What pen can recount the things we behold upon our return? Two years have elapsed during which our enemies have ceaselessly and assiduously contrived to exterminate us, whereunto all witness" [12]

After his return from this retirement, his fame became greater than ever and people flocked to Baghdad. The Mullahs (Muslim doctors), however, took up a hostile and persistently plotted to effect his overthrow. The General of Persia in Baghdad came to their assistance and sent repeated messages to the Shah to the effect that Baha'u'llah was injuring Muslim sentiments more than ever, still exerting a malign influence in Persia, and that he ought therefore to be banished to some more distant place. It was character of Baha'u'llah that, at the crisis, when at the instigation of the Muslim Mullahs the Persian and Turkish Governments were combining their efforts to eradicate the Movement, He remained steadfast, calm and serene, encouraging and inspiring his followers and writing imperishable words of consolation and guidance. Within a short period of time, Government of Turkey summoning Baha'u'llah to Constantinople along with his followers, and encamped in the Garden of Najib Pasha outside the town for twelve days, while the Caravan was being prepared for the long journey. It was during these twelve days (April 22 to May 3 1863, i.e nineteen years after the Bab's declaration) that Baha'u'llah announced to several of his followers the glad tidings that he was the one whose coming had been foretold by the Bab –the chosen of God, the Promised One of all the Prophets. This garden became famous where Baha'u'llah made his declaration known to Baha'is as the "Garden of Ridvan" and the days Baha'u'llah spent there is commemorated in the "feast of Ridvan" which is held annually on the anniversary of those twelve days. [13]

At the same time, he wrote letters to the Sultan of Turkey, many of the crowned heads of Europe, the Pope, and the Shah of Persia. In these letters he announces his mission and called upon them to bend their energies to the establishment of true religion, just government and international peace. He tried a lot to make his laws compatible with the modernized global world. To him *"World is but one country and humankind its citizens"*. He also powerfully pleaded the case of the oppressed Babis and asked to be brought face to face with those who had instigated their persecution. But unfortunately this letter was seized and devoted Baha'i who delivered the letter was martyred with fearful tortures hot bricks being pressed on his flesh! Even when the imprisonment was at its worst, the Baha'is were not dismayed, and their serene confidence was never shaken. While in the barracks at Akka, Baha'u'llah wrote to some friends: - *"Fear not. These doors shall be opened. My tent shall be pitched on Mount Carmel, and the utmost joy shall be realized"*. This declaration was a great source of consolation to his followers, and in due course it was literally fulfilled. Baha'u'llah was warmly accepted by the Babis and the Bab had already indicated it as the title of *"He whom God will manifest"*. The conflict with the minority followers of Subh-i-Azal who kept to the letter of Babism and are now only a few of thousands in the East, where they have mostly reabsorbed by the Shi'a Islam to Akka (Palestine) and the Azalis, including their leader, to Cyprus. In 1868 he and his family reached Akka where he wrote the fundamental Book of laws of his religion, The Most Holy Book (Kitab al-Aqdas) in Arabic. Baha'u'llah pass the evening of his life on earth until, after an attack of fever, He passed away on the 20th May 1892 at the age of seventy-five, and his last wish was that his son became representative and expounder of His teachings, and the family and relatives of Baha'u'llah and all believers were instructed to turn to him and obey him. [14]

III. 'ABDUL BAHÁ

Abbas Effendi, better known as 'Abdul Baha (i.e Servant of Baha), was the eldest son of Baha'u'llah, born in Tehran on 23 May 1844, the same day in which Bab declared his mission. During the early childhood in Adrianople, 'Abdu'l-Baha endeared himself to everyone. He taught much, and became generally known as the "Master". Baha'u'llah indicated in many ways that 'Abdul Baha was to direct the cause after his own ascension. He declared this in a veiled manner in his Kitab al-Aqdas. He referred to 'Abdul Baha on many occasions as "The Centre of My covenant," "The Most Great Branch," "The Branch from the Ancient Root". During the early period, 'Abdul Baha was opposed by his half-brother, Mírzá Muhammad 'Alí. But this was made clear by Baha'u'llah in The Book of My Covenant in which 'Abdul Baha's appointment was made, but this small group eventually died out. [15]

During his period, Baha'ism reached the pinnacle of its glory mostly in the Asia, Europe and America. Mr. Horace Holley writes of this period as follows:-

"To Abdul Baha, as a teacher and friend, came men and women from every race, religion and nation, to sit at His table like favored guests, questioning Him about the social, spiritual or moral programme each had most at heart; and after a stay lasting from a few hours to many months, returning home, inspired, renewed and enlightened. The world surely never possessed such a guest-house as this.

"Within its doors the rigid castes of India melted away, the racial prejudice of Jew, Christians and Muslim became less than a memory; and every convention save the essential law of warm hearts and aspiring minds broke down banned and forbidden by the unifying sympathy of the master of the house. It was like a King Arthur

and the Round Table...but an Arthur who knighted women as well as men, and sent them away not with the sword but with the Word" [16]

It was 'Abdul Baha who made this faith at global level and without him; Baha'u'llah's revelation could not have been transmitted to humanity. He was truly a master and real architect of a rapidly expanding Baha'i community. During the early years of 'Abdul Baha's ministry, the Baha'i Faith was taken to North America. During his tours to the west, 'Abdul Baha met men of every shade of opinion amply fulfilled the command of Baha'u'llah to "Consort with all the people with joy and fragrance". He reached London early in September 1911, and spent a month there, and daily talks with inquirers and many other activities. He then proceeded to Paris, where his time was occupied in giving daily addresses and talks to eager listeners of many nationalities and types. [17] During his next visit to America, where he met all sections of the society including university students, and in December 5th left for Great Britain visiting Liverpool, London, Bristol and Edinburg. In Edinburg, He gave a notable address to Esperanto society in which he announced that he encouraged the Baha'i of the East to study the Esperanto society in order to further understanding the East and the West. He spoke and gave much importance on the issues regarding peace, women's rights, racial equality, labor relations, etc. He met many prominent politicians, philosophers, artists, scientists, and leaders of thought and was the centre of a great deal of attention from newspapers and magazines. His early statements testify to the special importance attached to the Baha'i consolidation there:

"The continent of America... is, in the eyes of the one true God, the land wherein the splendors of his light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His faith shall be unveiled, where the righteous shall abide and the free assemble. The American continent...giveth signs of very great advancement. Its future is even more promising for its influence and illumination are far reaching. It will lead all nations spiritually.

...this American nation is equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world, and be blest in both the east and the west for the triumph of its people. May this American democracy be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the unity of mankind. May it be the first to unfurl the standard of the greatest peace."[18]

His prime concern and responsibility was the expansion of the Baha'i faith and he did that in a most wonderful manner. 'Abdul Baha's contribution was unforgettable towards the growth and expansion of Baha'i faith. According to Moojan Momen, "During his period the largest Baha'i community was that of Iran. He strictly made his efforts towards strengthening the Baha'i community and made his best possible effort to expand and develop. He gave much importance towards social development of the community and encouraged the Baha'is to establish schools and medical facilities, and promoted the role of community. He also guided the institutional development of the community, directing the Hands of the Cause and advising on the setting up of assemblies and committees. In addition, he gave instructions for the refurbishment of the House of the Báb in Shiraz. 'Abdul Baha around 1906 urged Baha'is to attempt to elect two Ayadi or Amir i-Allah "Hands of the Cause" to parliament. He later became disillusioned with the Majlis and urged Baha'is to disassociate themselves from politics, a policy which gradually became frozen into a Baha'i principle. Anti-Baha'i attacks increased at times of political unrest, and the early 1920's, prelude to Reza Khan's coup also saw numerous pogroms.

'Abdul Baha further refined the Baha'i administrative apparatus, calling for election for local Houses of Justices or spiritual Assemblies by majority vote, and preparing for the election of an international House of Justice. Also in his will and testament, Shoghi Effendi, his grandson, was appointed the leader of the Baha'i faith after him as Guardian of the Cause of God. He stipulated that Shoghi Effendi should appoint the next guardian from among his children or close cousins. Some Baha'is like Ruth while refused to accept Shoghi Effendi, others, like Ahmad Sohrab thought him too authoritarian. Only a minuscule number of Baha'is, however, followed them, and Shoghi Effendi's vigorous leadership and administrative abilities led to a great expansion in the number of Baha'is worldwide. [19]

In Ashkhabad, Baha'is were directed by 'Abdul Baha to set up a number of institutions: schools, a clinic, a traveler's hospice, library and reading room, and public baths. The first ever Mashriqu'l-Adhkar was established in Ashkhabad. In other parts of the Middle East, he also encouraged the promotion of the Baha'i Faith, especially in Egypt where Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpáygání was teaching at Al-Azhar University.

Shoghi Effendi establishes 'Abdul Bahá as the "Perfect Exemplar" of Baha'u'llah's teachings; and the important task of becoming the exponent of the Revelation, the Doer of the word, and the Great Exemplar of the Baha'i life in actual contact of the World of today, in the most of its myriad activities. The writings of 'Abdul Baha are very numerous and are mostly in the form of letters to believers and inquiries. A great many of His talks have also been recorded and many have been published. This great soul passed away on November 28th so peacefully that the two daughters watching by His bedside, it seemed as if He had gone quietly to sleep. [20]

IV. THE GUARDIAN OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

After the passing of 'Abdul Baha in 1921, the leadership of the *Baha'i* community came into the hands of Shoghi Effendi, (Grandson of Abdul Baha). He also worked hard for the betterment of the Baha'i community and his primary focus was to strengthen the administrative order as was originally envisaged by Baha'u'llah in his Book of Laws. He clearly envisaged the work of raising the administrative structure, the Baha'is, at the time, only dimly understood the task before them. [21]

Shoghi Effendi patiently outlined the manner in which local and national Assemblies should be elected and function, as well as the spiritual qualities which their members would need in order to assure success. He stressed the loving, frank spirit of consultation that must underlie every effort. Before the close of his second year as Guardian he sent detailed guidelines on building the Mother Temple of the west in Wilmette, Illinois; stressed the importance of the Baha'i fund; given standards for publishing activities; encouraged the holding of summer schools; and outlined the pattern of committee work. He paid great attention towards raising and guiding the Assemblies for sixteen years. But he never let the Baha'is to loose sight of the main goal; "to bury our cares and teach the cause, delivering far and wide this Message of salvation to a sorely-stricken world". [22] During his leadership the Baha'i religion developed into a global faith. As was above stated that he paid great attention towards the administrative structure and within a short span of time, he not only systemized the Baha'i community but extended the Baha'i administration throughout the world where there existed Baha'i communities; because the *Baha'i* community was relatively small and undeveloped. Under Shoghi Effendi's direction, National Spiritual Assemblies were formed, and many thousands of Local spiritual Assemblies sprang up as the Baha'i Faith spread around the globe. Shoghi Effendi has summarized the duties of local Assemblies as follows:

"The matter of teaching (the faith), its ways and means, its extension, its extension, its consolidation, essential as they are to the interests of the Cause, constitute by no means the only issue which should receive the full attention of these Assemblies..."

"It is incumbent upon them to be vigilant and cautious, discreet and watchful, and protect at all times the Temple of the Cause from the dart of the mischief-maker and the onslaught of the enemy."

"They must endeavor to promote unity and concord amongst the friends, efface every lingering trace of distrust, coolness and estrangement from every heart, and secure in its stead an active and wholehearted co-operation for the service of the Cause."

"They must do their utmost to extend at all times the helping hand to the poor, the sick, the disabled, and the orphan, the widow, irrespective of color, caste and creed."

"They must promote by every means in their power the material as well as the spiritual enlightenment of youth, the means for the education of children, institute whenever possible Baha'i educational institutions, organize and supervise their work and provide the best means for their progress and development."

"They must make an effort to maintain official, regular and frequent correspondence with the various Baha'i centre's throughout the world, report to them their activities, and share the glad tidings they receive with all their fellow-workers in the cause"

"They must encourage and stimulate by every means at their command, through subscription, reports and articles, the development of the various Baha'i magazines."

"They must undertake the arrangement of the regular meetings of the friend, the feasts and the anniversaries, as well as the special gatherings designed to serve and promote the social, intellectual and spiritual interests of their fellow-men."

"They must supervise, in these days when the Cause is still in its infancy, all Baha'i publications and translations, and provide in general for a dignified and accurate presentation of all Baha'i literature and its distribution to the general public"[23]

During the 1930s, he translated many tablets of Baha'u'llah into English and also established many Baha'i communities around the world. In 1953, he launched a global campaign for the Baha'i faith, 'The Ten-Year World Crusade' (1953-1963) which sought with some success to spread the religion even to remote areas and Islands. He also started to develop the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, including the construction of the superstructure of the Shrine of the Bab and the building of the International Archives as well as beautifying the gardens at Bahji, where the Shrine of Baha'u'llah is located; these plans continued through the 1950s. In the 1950s he also continued building the Baha'i administration, establishing in 1951 the International Baha'i Council to act as a precursor to the Universal House of Justice, as well as appointing 32 living Hands of the Cause — Baha'is who achieved a distinguished rank in service to the religion and whose main function was to propagate and protect the religion. [24]

Shoghi Effendi translated many works of Bab, Baha'u'llah and Abdul Baha, into English including the Hidden Words in 1929, the *Kitab-i-Iqan* in 1931, *Gleanings* in 1935 and *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* in 1941. He also translated such historical texts as *The Dawn-breakers*. Majority of his writings were in the style

of letters and these were compiled in the form of Book. [25] His famous Book he ever wrote was *God Passes By* in which he gave the history of the Babi and Baha'i faith.

Shoghi Effendi was truly a great administrator and gave a perfect administrative order to the Baha'i faith. He passed away in 1957 during a stay in London. Unfortunately, he died childless and the actions of eligible relatives had forced him to excommunicate them, he found it impossible to appoint a 'Guardian' to succeed him. In 1963 there was a global congress of the Baha'is which elected the first Universal House of Justice. Almost all Baha'is accepted its authority, though a small number followed 'Hands of the Cause' Mason Remey who declared himself the Guardian despite Abdul Baha's stipulation of descent from Baha'u'llah. The seat of the Universal House of Justice is in Haifa, Israel near the shrines of the Bab and Baha'u'llah. [26]

V. UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

This body is at the apex of the Baha'i administrative hierarchy. It directs, coordinates and safeguards the Baha'i world community. This body has executive, Judicial and legislative function. Baha'u'llah had given the fundamental laws and teachings but, he also recognized the need of other social rules that will be gradually decided according to the changing needs. These social rules and regulations, Baha'u'llah said must be ordained by Universal House of Justice. Abdul Baha says:-

"...if it be established under the necessary conditions with members elected from all the people that House of Justice will be under the protection and the unerring guidance of God. If the House of Justice shall decide unanimously, or by a majority, upon any question not mentioned in the Book that decision and command will be guarded from mistake". [27]

As a legislative body, as mentioned above, it may institute new laws for the Baha'i world communities which are in keeping with the spirit and principles laid down in the writings. As an executive body it draws up the long range plans for the growth and development of the Baha'i faith and it allocates goals in these plans to various National Spiritual Assemblies (NSA'S). Other executive functions include administration of the Baha'i properties at the world centre at Haifa, and contact with the government of Israel. It is also in contact with the United Nations. The Baha'i international community is an accredited NGO with consultative status to the Economic and social council body the Universal House of Justice is the final court of appeal in the faith. It lays down boundaries for the jurisdiction of National Spiritual Assemblies and has sole authority to recognize new National Assemblies.

The Universal House of Justice has the assistance of groups of men and women chosen for their dedication and distinguished services to the Baha'i cause. Those who were appointed by Shoghi Effendi during the period of his guardianship of the faith (1921-57) are known as "Hands of the Cause" and they are held in high esteem by the Baha'i community because of their personal qualities and the services they have rendered individually, and also because of the critical part they played collectively in the evaluation of the Administrative order following the death of Shoghi Effendi. The others are counselors appointed by the Universal House of Justice. [28]

Although the influence of the *Baha'i* faith has expanded steadily since its birth, exhibiting no significant periods, of noticeable contraction, [29] growth has been most impressive during the era of carefully planned expansion. The question, of course, arises as to whether there recent acceleration in growth has been a consequence of planning or is merely coincident with it and actually the outcome of changing world conditions that have revolutionized the technology of transportation and communication, lowered the cultural and political barriers separating countries and regions, and modified the beliefs and values of humanity to the point where the Baha'is message is more acceptable.

In so far as the Iranian response is considered, Iran never proved a hostile atmosphere for the Baha'is from the emergence until the present day. The Bab's declaration of his mission constituted, therefore, a challenge to the central pillar of this theological system. Throughout Persia, the followers of the new faith were denounced by the clergy as enemies of God. During the Qajar period, the Baha'is were persecuted because of their un-Islamic practices and activities. When the resulting mob attacks failed to halt the rapid spread of the Bab's message, the government moved with armed force against the principle centre's of Babi influence. [30] The Bab was executed in 1890 after a trial by an ecclesiastical court. This action participated an attack on the Qajar ruler, Nasiri'd-Din Shah, in retaliation for the execution of their Prophet, but failed, in response, the Shah ordered a nation wide witch hunt for Babis hundreds of whom were tortured and put to death.

During the Pahlavi period (1925-1979), the secularization of the Reza Shah government in the late 1920s at first helped the Baha'is, who built a Baha'i centre (Hazirat al-Qudus) in Tehran. Reza Shah also appointed a number of Baha'is to important positions in the civil administration, particularly those branches of government related to finance. Although, as a salve to the Mullahs, laws were passed restricting the general employment of Baha'is in the civil service, minor improvements in the position of the Baha'is began to appear. Baha'is could count on a limited degree of protection from persecution and were eventually permitted to open schools. As these schools rapidly gained a reputation for excellence, the monarch was moved to enroll his own

children. It seemed possible that, given time, the restrictive laws might be lifted and the miasma of prejudice and hostility eventually dissipate. At the same time, Reza shah himself adept at the 'divide and rule' philosophy which was to play an important part in the perpetuation of the Pahlavi regime. [31] But later on, he formalizes a policy of discrimination which was to characterize the treatment of the Baha'i community for the next five decades. In 1933, the publication of Baha'i literature was banned; Baha'i marriage was deemed concubinage, and prison sentences were set for those who admitted to marrying to Baha'i law' a number of Baha'i cemeteries were expropriated; Baha'is in the public service were demoted or fired; attacks in the press were freely permitted; and eventually the Baha'i schools were closed. Once again the community sank to its former status as a proscribed and hated minority. Another round of persecution was undertaken in 1955, when the government allowed the nationwide broadcast of a series of incendiary sermons against the Baha'is by a leading *Shi'a* preacher in Tehran. A wave of anti-Baha'i violence swept the country, with murders, rapes and robberies reported in many areas. Government officials joined in the seizure and destruction of the national headquarters building of the Baha'i community, and the government announced it had ordered the suppression of all activities of "Baha'i sect". During the month of Ramadan 1955, a leading *Shi'a* preacher, Sheikh Muhammad Taqi Falsafi, began a series of incendiary sermons in a Tehran mosque, calling for the suppression of Baha'i faith as a "false religion" dangerous to the welfare of the nation. At the same time, the house of Bab in Shiraz, the foremost Baha'i shrine in Iran, was pillaged and severely damaged. Baha'i cemeteries were seized and handed over to mobs for desecration and corpses were dragged through the streets and burned in public. [32]

Since the Revolution of 1979, a new chapter in the persecution of the Baha'is of Iran was introduced. When the Republic's constitution was drawn up in April 1979, the rights of the Christians, Jewish and Zoroastrians minorities in Iran were specifically mentioned and protected. The rights of the Baha'i community, the largest religious minority, however, were not mentioned. In an Interview given by the Ayatollah Khomeini to Professor James Cockroft of Rutgers University in December 1978, the Ayatollah had this to say about the Baha'is:

"Will there be either religious or political freedom for the Baha'is under an Islamic government?

Khomeini: "They are a political faction; they are harmful. They will not be accepted.

"How about their freedom of religion-religious practice?

Khomeini: "No"

In March 1979, the house of the Bab the holiest Baha'i shrine in Iran was turned over by the Government to a Muslim cleric known for his anti-Baha'i activities. Then, in September, the house was destroyed by a mob led by mullahs and officials of the Department of Religious Affairs. In November 1979, Baha'i teachers were not only dismissed but held them responsible for the repaying of all salaries they had previously received. In the early 1980s, the trading licenses of most Baha'i businessmen were revoked, the assets of businessmen run by Baha'is were confiscated, and bank accounts of most Baha'i businessmen were frozen. In addition, the authorities intimidated private employers into dismissing many Baha'i employees. In Tehran and other cities throughout Iran, Baha'i buildings were looted and burned. In rural areas, the authorities encouraged the plunder and destruction of the livestock and crop of Baha'i farmers. In 1981, an official decree was issued barring Baha'i students and Professors from admission to or employment at any university in Iran. Universities published new prospectuses in 1981 requiring that applicants belong to one of the four religions recognized in the constitution, namely the Muslim, Jewish, Christian or Zoroastrian religion. Admission to primary and secondary schools was refused to those who identified themselves as Baha'is, and hundreds of students were expelled. However, execution continued through 1982, 1983 and 1984. At least 32 Baha'is were executed or killed in 1983, and 30 executed or killed in 1984. One of the most dramatic groups of execution came in June 1983, when ten Iranian Baha'i women, including two teen-age girls, were hanged. The primary charge against them; teaching Baha'i children's and the women were subjected to intense physical and mental abuse in an effort to coerce them to recant their faith-an option that was almost always pressed upon Baha'i prisoners. Nevertheless, the fact that so many Baha'is were given the option of recanting, with the promise of release if they did so, is among the strongest proofs that the persecutions were based solely based on religious beliefs. [33]

Despite the overwhelming proof that the Baha'i community in Iran is being persecuted solely because of its religious beliefs, the Iranian Government continues to justify this persecution by charging the Baha'i community with a variety of offenses. The principle charges advanced by the Government are:- "That Baha'is are supporters of the Pahlavi regime and the late shah of Iran; that they collaborated with SAVAK, the secret police; and that the Baha'i faith is a political organization opposed to the present Iranian Government". "That Baha'is are agents of Zionism". "That Baha'is are involved with prostitution, adultery and immorality". [34]

The international community has responded to the persecution of Baha'i community in Iran with overwhelming sympathy and concern for the Baha'is and condemnation of the Iranian Government. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has passed eleven resolutions expressing serious concern about reports of human rights violation in Iran. Each resolution has made specific mention of the situation of the Baha'i

community there. Since 1985, United Nations General Assembly itself has approved seven resolutions which specifically mention the situation of the Baha'is in Iran and express concern over reports of human rights violations there. [35] For example, Mr. Galindo Pohl's 1990 report to the General Assembly noted that he had received extensive documentation that provides "evidence of discrimination, confiscation, rejection by universities, suspension of pensions, demands for the return of pension earned and paid, denial of passports and other irregularities". However, Iran's responses to the United Nations have always been less than satisfactory. As noted, they have produced a wide range of unsubstantiated charges against the Baha'is-from accusations of spying to being Zionists-aimed at justifying their persecution. International and non government organizations have also risen to the defense of Iran's Baha'is. Amnesty International, the Minority Right Group and Middle East Watch, among others, have closely monitored the situation of the Baha'is in Iran and published extensive reports which confirm persecution there. [36]

However, in early 1980s and early 1990s the Government has undertaken a reconsideration of its policies towards Baha'is. In 1988, most of those Baha'is being held in prison were released and the number of executions dropped sharply after 1985. During this period, Baha'i children were allowed to re-enroll in primary and secondary schools in most of the country. But the restrictions were not lifted to institutions of higher learning. Baha'is were not allowed to freely circulate their books. Some Baha'is were allowed to obtain new business licenses and restrictions to other forms of economic activity appeared to lessen. The economic oppression of Baha'is also continues to be an urgent problem as mentioned above that Baha'is were dismissed from positions in government and education in the early 1980s because of their religion. Baha'is are not free to travel outside Iran, as it is almost impossible for them to obtain passport. For past twelve years, the Baha'i community has been denied the right of assembly and the right to elect and maintain its administrative institutions.

VI. Conclusion

Summing up, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been accused of never producing convincing evidence with regard to its characterization of the Baha'i community. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran has offered them freedom "if they recant their belief and convert to Islam". Further, it is to be noted that the more aggressively the Iranian Government pursues its campaign against Baha'i the stronger Baha'i community seems to become. Baha'is remain officially 'unprotected infidels' and their rights are often ignored. Without them, the very existence of the Baha'is as a viable religious community is seriously endangered.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank his supervisor Prof. G.N Khaki, University of Kashmir (Centre of Central Asian Studies), whose lectures and publications have inspired the preparation of this paper. Thanks also to Dr. Rouf Ahmad, who reviewed earlier draft of this paper.

REFERENCES

- [1]. John A.Boyle, Persia History and Heritage, Henry Melland Limited, London, 1978, p.17
- [2]. Alessandro Baussani, Religion in Iran, Bibiliotheca Persica, New York, 2000, p.382
- [3]. J.E.Esslemont, Baha'u'llah and the New Era, Baha'i Publishing Trust, London, 1937, p.13
- [4]. Alessandro Baussani, Religion in Iran, Bibiliotheca Persica, New York, 2000, p.381
- [5]. John Ferraby, All Things Made New, Baha'i Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 2007, p.205
- [6]. Alessandro Baussani, Religion in Iran, Bibiliotheca Persica, New York, 2000, p.382
- [7]. John Ferraby, All Things Made New, Baha'i Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 2007, pp.209-10
- [8]. J.E.Esslemont, Baha'u'llah and the New Era, Baha'i Publishing Trust, London, 1937, p.17
- [9]. Ibid.p.18
- [10]. Alessandro Baussani, Religion in Iran, Bibiliotheca Persica, New York, 2000, p.383
- [11]. Gloria Faizi, Baha'u'llah The Promised One, Baha'i Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 2003, p.3
- [12]. J.E.Esslemont, Baha'u'llah and the New Era, Baha'i Publishing Trust, London, 1937, p.25
- [13]. Gloria Faizi, Baha'u'llah The Promised One, Baha'i Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 2003, p.83
- [14]. Alessandro Baussani, Religion in Iran, Bibiliotheca Persica, New York, 2000, p.393
- [15]. John Ferraby, All Things Made New, Baha'i Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 2007, p.250
- [16]. J.E.Esslemont, Baha'u'llah and the New Era, Baha'i Publishing Trust, London, 1937, p.54
- [17]. Anonymous, Paris Talks, Baha'i Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 2003, p.3
- [18]. John Ferraby, All Things Made New, Baha'i Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 2007, p.
- [19]. J.E.Esslemont, Baha'u'llah and the New Era, Baha'i Publishing Trust, London, 1937, p.61
- [20]. Ibid,p.66
- [21]. Eunice Braun, From Strength to Strength, Baha'i Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 1978, p.5
- [22]. Alessandro Baussani, Religion in Iran, Bibiliotheca Persica, New York, 2000, p.395
- [23]. John Ferraby, All Things Made New, Baha'i Publishing Trust, New Delhi, 2007, pp.301-302
- [24]. Ibid, p.296
- [25]. Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Delhi, 1944, pp. 101-102
- [26]. Peter Smith, "Shoghi Effendi". A Concise Encyclopedia of the Baha'i Faith, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp.314-317
- [27]. Abdul Baha, some answered Questions, lauraclifford Barney, Trans (London), 1971, p.172

-
- [28]. Peter Smith, "Universal House of Justice" A Concise Encyclopedia of the Baha'i Faith Oxford one world publication, 2000, pp.346-350
- [29]. Dramatic declines in the fortunes of the faith have tended to be regional rather than global, and when they have occurred they seem to have been offset by developments in some areas that in the long run proved to be even more beneficial to the faith than the setback was detrimental. For example, the near annihilation of the Babis in Persia during the 1850's was counterbalanced by Baha'u'llah's banishment to Iraq, a development that permitted the realization of the Baha'i dispensation and was the first in a sequence of steps leading to the firm establishment of the faith in numerous regions outside its area of origin. In a similar vein, suppression of the large, wealthy, and firmly established Baha'i communities in the Caucasus and Turkistan following the Russian revolution coincided with the contrasting developments stimulated by the Tablets of the Divine plan, in particular the opening up of Australia and New Zealand, the initial settlement of south Africa, and the extensive forays of the indefatigable Martha root, first into south America and then over the next two decades, into all other continents of the world.
- [30]. Douglas Matin, *The Persecution of Baha'is Iran, 1844-1984* (1984), pp.15-29
- [31]. Shahrugh Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran, Clergy state relations in the Pahlavi Period*, 1980, pp.76-87
- [32]. Douglas Matin, *The Persecution of Baha'is Iran, 1844-1984* (1984), p.22
- [33]. Anonymous, *The Baha'i Question*, Baha'i International Community Publication, New York, p.15
- [34]. Ibid, pp.24-25
- [35]. Affolter, Friedrich W. (2005). "The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Baha'is of Iran (PDF)". *War Crimes, Genocide and Crimes against Humanity* 19 (1): 59-89. doi 10.1016/0048-721X (89)90077-8. <http://www.aa.psu.edu/journals/war-crimes/articles/V1/v1n1a3.pdf>.
- [36]. Christopher Buck, "Islam and Minorities: The Case of the Baha'is" (2003), pp.83-106.