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THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH IN MALWA: A STUDY
OF A CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

by

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This Thesis is based on original research conducted by the author while he was a research scholar at the Australian National University, Canberra, from 1972 - 1975.

William N. Darlington
13/3/75

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Note on transliteration

The author has employed several systems of transliteration in the preparation of this work. Persian and Arabic words have been transliterated according to the system used by the Bahá'í World Faith, as exemplified in Shoghi Effendi's translation of Nabíl-i-A'zam's The Dawn-Breakers and H. M. Balyuzi's The Báb. Sanskrit and Hindi words have been transliterated according to Sir Monier Monier-Williams' A Sanskrit-English Dictionary. For geographical locations in India the spellings of the 1961 Census of India have been used. Quotations are reproduced in their original form, even though differing from the spelling and transliteration used in this study.

Introduction

The Bahá'í World Faith is a contemporary religious movement which at the present time is supporting propagation activities in over three hundred countries and dependencies throughout the world. It is classified as a religious movement because its teachings and assertions of authority are claimed to be derived from the Sacred¹, specifically, an omnipotent and transcendent God, as manifested in the personage of a prophet figure² known by the title 'Bahá'u'lláh' (the Glory of God).

Since its early years of inception in nineteenth century Persia, the Bahá'í Faith has received very little scholarly attention. Outside of the pioneering efforts of the famed Cambridge Orientalist, E. G. Browne, whose work on the early history of the Bábí-Bahá'í movement stands unequalled, the Faith has been virtually bypassed as a topic of academic research.* Even in Browne's time his work on an 'insignificant sect of Islám'

¹ Here reference is made to Emile Durkheim's distinction between the Sacred and the profane. As he states, 'The division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane is the distinctive trait of religious thought.' (The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, trans. by Joseph W. Swain, (New York, 1965), p. 52). Thus it is the peculiarity of religious thought to set aside certain categories of reality as being inherently distinct from common spheres. Although the author is aware of the shortcomings associated with this definition, he still feels it is one of the most useful in terms of understanding the existential dimensions of religious thought, and therefore its use here.

² The term 'prophet' is used in the sense that it is employed by Max Weber; that is, '... a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment.' (The Sociology of Religion, trans. by Ephraim Fischhoff, (London, 1965), p. 46). More specifically, the author implies the 'ethical' prophet who 'Preaching as one who has received a commission from god, he demands obedience as an ethical duty.' (The Sociology of Religion, p. 55)

* Although some work was carried out by European and American scholars, none of it compared to Browne's efforts either in volume or intensity.

brought him criticism.³ Browne felt, however, that a record of the early years of the Faith's development would be invaluable if it were later to evolve into an established world religion. The rapid expansion of the Bahá'í Faith in recent years has justified Browne's efforts. Since the time of his work, however, many new developments have taken place within the movement. From its tumultuous beginnings in nineteenth century Persia the Bahá'í Faith has over the past 130 years developed into an internationally recognized world religion with headquarters in Haifa, Israel, and functioning communities on every continent of the globe. It is no longer a 'Persian' religion, but an international organization whose doctrines and institutions are influencing millions of people from many different cultural backgrounds. This fact alone should make the movement one of interest to the student of comparative religion, and it was with such thoughts that the author decided to investigate the present day activities of the Bahá'í Faith.

Having decided to conduct such a study, a suitable environment had to be found in which research could be carried out. One of the countries in which the Bahá'í movement has rapidly expanded in terms of declared believers is India. From the time of its inception in that country (1872)* until the early 1960's, the Bahá'í community remained a small and often isolated group of urban believers whose numbers probably did not amount to more than a thousand souls. However, with the development of internationally directed teaching campaigns aimed at enrolling the masses

³ Browne noted in his introduction to M. Phelp's Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi that the Oxford Magazine's issue of May 25, 1892, had considered that the history of a recent sect which has affected the least important part of the Moslem world and is founded on a personal claim which will not bear investigation for a moment was quite unworthy of the learning and labour which the author brought to bear upon it. See the above source, p. xii-xiv.

* This year marks the arrival of a missionary especially sent to the subcontinent by Bahá'u'lláh. For details see Chapter 2.

of humanity, the situation changed drastically. Almost overnight the number of declared believers in India jumped from less than a thousand in 1960 to close to four hundred thousand by 1974.⁴ The work was accomplished by travelling Bahá'í teachers who personally went to the villages of India to proclaim the message of the Faith and enroll those villagers who wished to become members. This phenomenon, known throughout the Bahá'í world as mass teaching, was particularly successful in two regions of central India in the state of Madhya Pradesh, namely, the areas surrounding the cities of Gwalior and Indore - Ujjain, the latter being known by the folk name of Malwa. In Malwa alone over one hundred thousand persons signed declaration cards.*

Having enrolled the new declarants, the leadership of the movement (from this time referred to as the Bahá'í Administrative Order) has set about to try and educate many of them in the various aspects of Bahá'í life, as its aim is to develop communities of believers throughout the world which are able to function within a framework of the movement's socio-religious institutions. However, due to lack of funds and a limited number of trained village teachers, in Malwa the Bahá'í Administrative Order has concentrated on trying to introduce the Faith's teachings and institutions into a number of 'model village' communities, some of which maintain resident Bahá'í teachers who have been specifically trained to act as community leaders. It is hoped that these 'model village' communities will be able to evolve into springboards for further community development, and consequently they are the focal point of Bahá'í educational efforts in

⁴ These are the official figures issued by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India in July of 1973. For a detailed list of figures regarding the growth of the Bahá'í community in India see Chapter 2.

* As most of the villagers in rural Malwa are unable to read or write many of them declared their belief by imprinting their thumb marks on Bahá'í declaration sheets.

Malwa. Given this situation, the region seemed an excellent laboratory in which to examine the current activities of the Bahá'í Faith, and consequently I decided to focus my study on the movement's work in rural Malwa.

II

The main purpose of the present study is to examine the various doctrines, teachings, and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith, both in theory, and as they are being implemented in a specific cultural environment. The work's scope, however, is not restricted to one discipline, as it also traces the movement's historical development from its earliest days in Persia to the advent of the mass teaching era in India and attempts to analyze from normative and structural points of view the various aspects of Bahá'í community life. Consequently, it is hoped that the study will be of interest to the historian and the sociologist as well as to the student of comparative religion.

In terms of organization the work is divided into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1-3) is primarily historical in outlook, while Parts II (Chapters 4-6) and III (Chapters 7-11) are more sociological in orientation.

Chapter 1 traces the growth of the movement from its inception in nineteenth century Persia to its emergence as an international faith. Being essentially an introductory chapter, it does not contain vast amounts of historical detail, but focuses on the major events that have highlighted the Bahá'í Faith's historical evolution. Regarding the early history of the movement three main sources were consulted. The first, entitled The Dawn-Breakers, written by Nabíl-i-Ázam (Muhammad Zarandí), a companion of Bahá'u'lláh, and translated by the movement's appointed Guardian, Shoghi Effendi (1897 - 1957), is the official Bahá'í history of the early years of the Faith. The other two, A Traveller's Narrative and The Táríkh-i-Jadíd,

were both translated by E. G. Browne. The former was written by the son of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá⁵, while the latter was penned by a certain Mírzá Husayn of Hamadán. In addition to the authors' accounts, both works contain Browne's own notes and comments which, being based on his thorough examination of various Bábí-Bahá'í, Muslim, and European sources, were extremely helpful. Along with these major works numerous secondary sources were consulted including among others: several articles written by Browne and published in The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland; his edited volume Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion, which contains several translations of original documents pertaining to the Faith; Comte de Gobineau's Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale; H. M. Balyuzi's The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh; Lord Curzon's Persia and the Persian Question; and A. Bausani's articles on the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in the Encyclopaedia of Islam.

The period from the death of Bahá'u'lláh to the present has been based on several Bahá'í original sources, the most important of which was Shoghi Effendi's God Passes By, a work describing the growth of the movement from its inception through the time of his leadership. Other important sources for this period include: 'Abdu'l-Baha's Will and Testament and Tablets of the Divine Plan; the letters and correspondence of Shoghi Effendi, published in various volumes including Bahá'í Administration, The Promised Day Is Come, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, Dawn of a New Day, The Advent of Divine Justice, Citadel of Faith, and Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand; the Universal House of Justice's⁶ Wellspring of Guidance, a collection of messages sent to the world's Bahá'í communities;

⁵ At the time of Browne's translation the author was not known. It was later uncovered that it had been penned by Bahá'u'lláh's son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

⁶ The supreme legislative body in the Bahá'í Faith, whose headquarters are located in Haifa, Israel.

and the thirteen volume set of The Bahá'í World: An International Record, a series of reference works published under the auspices of the Bahá'í Faith between the years 1927 and 1970. In addition, numerous secondary sources were consulted, all of which are listed in the bibliography at the end of the study.

Chapter 2 outlines the evolution of the Faith in India from the time of its earliest contact with the subcontinent up to the beginning of the mass teaching era. Much of the information in this chapter was obtained from two American Bahá'í publications, the aforementioned The Bahá'í World, and an early periodical, Star of the West (1910 - 1933), both of which contained numerous progress reports of Bahá'í activities in India over the years. In addition to these sources, use was also made of an Indian publication, Bahá'í Newsletter, whose various installments contained valuable information regarding the growth of the Indian Bahá'í community.

Chapter 3, the last chapter in this section, deals with the rise of the Bahá'í movement in the area of central India known as Malwa, tracing its growth and development in the region from the time of the first Bahá'í resident (1942) to the present day. While some of the information for this chapter could be gleaned from Bahá'í Newsletter and unpublished correspondence of the Indian National Spiritual Assembly,⁷ the majority of data had to be obtained by means of personal interviews with those individuals who participated in the events. Consequently, a large part of Chapter 3 is original history as recounted by the Bahá'í pioneers who made it.

Part II looks at the sociological framework within which Bahá'í teachings are being promulgated. The first part of Chapter 4 outlines the outstanding characteristics of the contemporary Malwa village social

⁷ The paramount Bahá'í administrative body in India.

system, highlighting those aspects of the system that are experiencing stress as a result of their contact with modern influences. In the second part Bahá'í statistical information for the region is presented along with short descriptions of the five 'model village' communities from which the author's examples of community development were taken. The primary purpose of this chapter is to inform the reader of the type of social milieu into which Bahá'í doctrines and institutions are being introduced so that he might better appreciate both the obstacles and coagencies with which the movement's teachers are confronted in their attempts to implement Bahá'í teachings in village communities. In preparing the chapter two works were extensively consulted: Adrian Mayer's Caste and Kinship in Central India, and K. S. Mathur's Caste and Ritual in a Malwa Village. Both of these works were based on field studies carried out in Malwa villages, Mayer's in village Ramkheri⁸ in Dewas district, and Mathur's in village Potlod in Indore district. Furthermore, several sources relating to social change in India were used, the most outstanding of which were M. N. Srinivas' Social Change in Modern India, and I. K. Ishwaran's edited volume Change and Continuity in India's Villages. This information, moreover, was supplemented by the author's own personal experiences in Malwa.*

Chapter 5 analyzes the organizational structure of the vehicle that is actively promoting the propagation and consolidation efforts of the Bahá'í Faith both in Malwa and in numerous countries throughout the world, the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Its pages examine the various levels of the Bahá'í administrative superstructure, with specific reference being given to their modes of operation in India and the resulting influences

⁸ Mayer uses Ramkheri as a pseudonym.

* The author spent six months in India doing field work.

exerted on Malwa. The analysis is not only based on numerous Bahá'í written sources but on personal interviews with individuals who are actively involved at all levels of Bahá'í leadership. These included talks with members of national and local administrative institutions in India as well as discussions with persons holding positions of international rank.

Chapter 6 describes the various channels of communication by which the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India maintains contact with its new declarants. These institutions are the primary conveyors of the movement's teaching and consolidation activities in Malwa, and consequently they can be considered the backbone of the educational program in the region. The data concerning their structure and modes of operation was obtained primarily through personal contact with them in the field, although some information was also acquired from specific written material gathered at the Bahá'í national office in New Delhi.

Part III constitutes the core of the work. In this section the essential sociological questions with which the study is concerned are raised. They are as follows:

- 1) What are the doctrinal and institutional norms of the Bahá'í Faith.
- 2) How are these norms being related to the Indian cultural environment?
- 3) To what extent do Bahá'í institutions in five 'model village' communities reflect these norms?

The individual chapters in Part III focus on the various doctrines and socio-religious institutions that are being introduced into 'model village' communities in Malwa. These aspects of community life can be divided into five main categories: doctrines and beliefs, ritual and ceremony, social principles, administration, and education and propagation. Each chapter

examines the given category's teachings or institutions, both as they are described in official Bahá'í literature, and as they are being taught in rural Malwa. In addition, at the end of each chapter data regarding the implementation of these teachings and institutions in five 'model village' communities has been cited.⁹ By comparing the structural manifestations with the normative formulations deductions are made as to the degree of institutional development that has taken place in these communities.

Chapter 7 presents the fundamental doctrines and beliefs of the Bahá'í Faith. The discussion is primarily concerned with those doctrines which have traditionally been referred to as theological or metaphysical. The bases for this information have been the works of the founder of the Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, and his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Only official Bahá'í translations have been used, that is, translations which have been published under the auspices of the Bahá'í World Faith. As stated at the outset of this introduction, the present work is concerned with the Bahá'í Faith in its contemporary form. As it exists today it is no longer a 'Persian' religion.

⁹ This information is based both on personal observation and reports of informants. Unfortunately, due to the author's movements in the rural areas being governmentally restricted, first hand observations could not be personally verified as being typical over an extended period of time, and consequently he has also relied on data supplied by 1) members of the Bahá'í Administrative Order who have had contact with the 'model' village communities, and 2) Bahá'í teachers who reside in the communities under examination. Although this presents a methodological problem of having to depend to some degree on the reports of individuals within the organization under study, the fact that these reports were for the most part consistent with observational experiences allows for their use. It is realized, however, that it is dangerous to make finalized conclusions based on such data, and consequently in each of the chapters in this section and again in the conclusion only speculative deductions are made. The central aim of this work, however, is to investigate the doctrines and institutions of a religious organization as they are being related to a specific cultural environment and not measure the degree of religio-cultural change they have induced - a task that would be virtually impossible for less than a team of field workers. Thus, the 'model village' data is primarily designed to be viewed as specific examples of the implementation of Bahá'í institutions in the rural areas and not illustrations of overall community development.

Since its development into an international organization, the Bahá'í Faith has had its scriptures translated into numerous world languages, the most prominent of which in terms of volume has been English. In fact, outside of Írán, English has become the unofficial language of the Bahá'í Faith.¹⁰ From the point of view of this study the opinions held by present day Bahá'í orthodoxy are considered important, for they reflect the doctrines which are currently being promulgated both in India and other countries throughout the world. Therefore, as the work is being written in English, the official translations are of greater value than the Persian originals themselves.

The following works of Bahá'u'lláh were used in the preparation of this chapter: The Kitáb-i-Íqán (Book of Certitude), revealed in Baghdád in the year 1862 as a reply to the questions of a certain Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Muhammad; The Hidden Words, composed in Baghdád in the year 1858; The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys, Bahá'u'lláh's two outstanding mystical works, also composed during the Baghdád period; and Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, revealed during his years of imprisonment in 'Akká. In addition, several compilations composed of various tablets and meditations have been consulted including: two compilations arranged by Shoghi Effendi, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, and Prayers and Meditations; a collection of the writings of both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá entitled Bahá'í World Faith; and The Bahá'í Revelation, a source containing several of Bahá'u'lláh's smaller tablets.

To the Bahá'í world the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá are also considered holy. Of these, numerous letters and discourses have been collected and published in three volumes under the title of Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas. Use has also been made of several works comprising the public

¹⁰

The Faith's Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, wrote extensively in English, and the Universal House of Justice consults in this medium.

addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his travels in Europe and North America. These include 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Canada, and Paris Talks. Another source containing abundant material regarding Bahá'í doctrines is a collection of table talks presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to a Bahá'í pilgrim, Laura Clifford Barney, in the prison city of 'Akká during the years 1904 - 1906 and later published in English under the title of Some Answered Questions. Finally, the author also consulted 'Abdu'l-Bahá's long essay addressed to the Bahá'ís of Írán in the year 1875 entitled The Secret of Divine Civilization.

Chapters 8 and 9, 'Ritual and Ceremony' and 'Social Principles', follow the same pattern of construction as Chapter 7. In both instances, after presenting the theoretical teachings involved, the means and methods by which they are being introduced into the rural areas are examined. This information is then supplemented with specific examples taken from the five 'model village' communities. Besides making use of the above listed works, in writing this chapter the author also consulted: the Universal House of Justice's recent publication, A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, a summary of the basic laws and ordinances laid down by Bahá'u'lláh; Bahá'í Prayers, a standard Bahá'í prayerbook; Bahá'í News, an American periodical; several Indian publications including The New Garden and Bahā'ī Gīt (Bahá'í Songbook); and correspondence from both Shoghi Effendi and the Indian National Spiritual Assembly.*

Chapter 10 analyzes local Bahá'í administrative institutions. As well as introducing the Faith's doctrines and devotional institutions into village communities, the Bahá'í Administrative Order is also attempting to establish administrative institutions within their confines which can act both as catalysts for community development and links of communication with the rest of the Bahá'í world. These institutions are not only being

* Much of the latter being unpublished correspondence.

introduced in India, but in every community around the world where Bahá'ís reside, and their establishment and development is an essential part of the Bahá'í movement's consolidation plan. In formulating this chapter several primary works have been consulted including the previously mentioned writings of Shoghi Effendi as well as two sources published by Bahá'í agencies in Great Britain and the United States, Principles of Bahá'í Administration and The Bahá'í Community. Following the pattern of other chapters, the author first describes the normative formulations of these institutions and then notes how they are being established and nurtured in the villages of rural Malwa.

The final chapter in this section, Chapter 11, states the Bahá'í position regarding community education and propagation. It is primarily concerned with describing the educational institutions established by the Bahá'í Administrative Order in Malwa, specifically, seasonal schools, regional conferences, and village primary schools. In addition, it briefly examines the role villagers are playing in helping to propagate the Faith.

Chapters 7 through 11 are essentially descriptive in nature. While some degree of analysis is contained within their pages the main analytical discussion has been reserved for the Conclusion. Drawing on the data supplied in the body of the work, the final chapter attempts to make some comprehensive statements concerning the aims and accomplishments of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa.

III

A basic question with which we must come to terms at the outset of this study is the one concerning the meaning of the statistical figures cited in the above paragraphs. In India there are almost four hundred thousand declared believers, and in Malwa over one hundred thousand villagers have declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh. Yet, in terms of

individual commitment what do these figures really indicate? Of course the author realizes that the query is one that can never be answered sufficiently. The very act of asking such a question assumes that there is an objective measure for determining an individual's faith, which there is not. However, from a sociological point of view, certain indices, such as attendance at religious functions, acceptance of certain doctrines, and participation in passage rituals, often denote, if not the strength of an individual's belief, at least his degree of involvement with religion as a social institution. In terms of the Bahá'í community in India, however, information of this nature is not available, and the large number of villages in Malwa alone where declarants reside (6,572) makes the acquisition of such data virtually impossible. Consequently, at this time the best one can do to come to an understanding of the situation in India in general and Malwa in particular is to rely on the information supplied by those persons who have been most active in the teaching work within the country.

According to individuals who hold positions of leadership within the Bahá'í community in India, the Bahá'í population can be divided into two basic categories. On the one hand there are the declarants who are considered 'deepened' Bahá'ís. This category includes those believers who are well-informed about the history, doctrines, and teachings of the Faith and participate on a regular basis in the movement's various socio-religious institutions. This group would amount to less than 1% of the total number of declarants in India and would be found mainly in urban areas. Most of the individuals in positions of leadership in the community come from this segment of the Bahá'í population. On the other hand there exists the great mass of village declarants who can be considered 'undeepened' Bahá'ís. While they have declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh as a prophet, in terms of behavior they are still

essentially Hindu. Consequently, when it is said that today there are four hundred thousand Bahá'ís in India, this statement must be qualified by adding that for close to 99% of the declarants being a Bahá'í means little more than having made an assertion on an ideological level of the acceptance of certain religious doctrines and social concepts. However, such declarations should not be dismissed as being completely insignificant. The fact that a large number of villagers in rural Malwa have made these assertions is indicative that there is potential for change in the villages. In fact, it is the faith in this possibility that has led the Bahá'í Administrative Order to undertake a campaign of educating new declarants in the various aspects of Bahá'í community life. An example of this faith can be seen in the following lines taken from an unpublished essay written by one of the leading Bahá'í teachers in India:

Bahá'u'lláh says that everybody on earth is capable to receive His Message and to know Him Who is the Manifestation of God on earth. About the creative power of the Word of God he says that "every Word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. 11

Another question concerning the new declarants which must be brought forward at this time is the one relating to their caste backgrounds. Is there any specific stratum of society from which the Bahá'í Faith has drawn its believers? According to those teachers who have been most active in Bahá'í propagation activities in rural Malwa, the initial years of mass teaching (1961 - 1963) saw a large number of lower caste members enroll in the Faith, particularly persons from those castes which have traditionally been referred to as 'unclean' and 'untouchable'. However,

¹¹ Hooshmand Fathea'zam, 'One Year Teaching Among the Masses', unpublished essay, p. 1

with the advent of new teaching techniques in the mid-1960's whereby higher castes were directly approached, many 'clean' caste Hindus also enrolled. Therefore, while in terms of numbers the majority of declarants in Malwa would still come from the lower levels of society, in many of those villages which have received the designation 'model village' a good number of 'clean' caste declarants can be found, and many of the most active Bahá'ís in the region come from this stratum of society.

IV

As has already been indicated, much of the data used in this study was collected by means of personal contact with the Bahá'í Faith in India. The author spent six months in that country during which time he was able to meet and interview many of those people who are involved in directing the movement's teaching and consolidation activities. These included the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly, members of important national and regional committees, a continental counsellor, institute teachers, and travelling teachers. Moreover, in Malwa use was made of the technique of participant observation whereby the researcher places himself in direct face to face contact with his object of research. This meant participating in teaching institutes, committee meetings, teacher training sessions, and devotional meetings, as well as making several trips to local Bahá'í village communities.

As a technique of social research participant observation has been, to say the least, a controversial issue among leading methodologists. Those who diminish its value as a research tool point out the problems of observer and subject bias, as well as the large amount of subjective judgement inherently involved in the procedure. For example, a well-known research team notes that 'The mere presence of the observer means that movements are made and orientations are developed toward him which would

not otherwise have occurred.'¹² Consequently, many sociologists feel that quantitative methods of data collection, such as survey or sampling techniques, are much more useful in terms of analyzing material and developing sociological generalizations. On the other hand, those who support participant observation argue that it is the most direct method of gathering information. As Howard S. Becker and Blanche Geer state in their article 'Participant Observation and Interviewing':

The most complete form of the sociological datum, after all, is the form in which the participant observer gathers it; an observation of some social event, the events which precede and follow it, and explanations of its meaning by participants and spectators, before, during, and after its occurrence. Such a datum gives us more information about the event under study than data gathered by any other sociological method.¹³

In a similar vein, another researcher has remarked that in India 'The officially sponsored surveys are usually quantitative, and they seldom succeed in getting behind a mass of figures and tables to come to grips with the realities of social processes at the village level.'¹⁴

In the present work participant observation was a vital necessity, as it supplied the author with information which could not be obtained by quantitative methods alone. It allowed him the opportunity to see at first hand the in-process workings of a religious organization, a situation which could not be recreated by questionnaires or structured surveys by themselves. Thus, participant observation served the vital function of supplementing the information received from written sources and informants with directly perceived phenomena.

¹² Morris S. Schwartz and Charlotte Green Schwartz, 'Problems in Participant Observation', American Journal of Sociology, vol. LX, July, 1954 - May, 1955, (Chicago), p. 346

¹³ Howard S. Becker and Blanche Geer, 'Participant Observation and Interviewing', Human Organization, Fall, 1957, (University of Kentucky), p. 28

¹⁴ K. Ishwaran, Introduction to Change and Continuity in India's Villages, ed. by K. Ishwaran, (New York, 1970), p. 13

Most of the research could be carried out in English. As stated earlier, all of the Bahá'í writings that are of consequence for the movement's current activities are available in English. Furthermore, nearly all of the individuals holding positions of leadership in the Indian Bahá'í community are able to converse in this medium.¹⁵ Accordingly, most of the official records concerning the development of the Faith in India are available in English. In addition, a working knowledge of Hindi was useful for reading certain sources relating to the local village communities, and more importantly, for communicating with some of the resident village teachers.¹⁶

Before closing, it would be appropriate to make a few comments concerning the choice of village communities to be visited. In selecting these communities two factors were considered. First, as was stated earlier, data from 'model villages' was desired: those communities which have had closer contact with the educational efforts of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Second, the author wanted communities with varying status group compositions. Consequently, he selected one community which consisted mainly of 'low' caste declarants, one community which was predominantly 'high' caste in membership, and three communities which displayed more of a mixed caste composition. From among these, the majority of data came from the mixed caste communities, as they presented situations in which the effect of Bahá'í social principles could more readily be observed. It should also be noted at this time that the names given to the village communities in the study are pseudonyms. This procedure has been followed mainly for the protection of the villagers. Since they provided the author with field data

¹⁵ Coming from the higher classes most of them have been at least partially educated in English.

¹⁶ Although most of the work in the villages was purely observational in nature, that is, it was directed towards noting patterns of behavior rather than recording audible responses, it was often necessary to converse with resident Bahá'í teachers, as they supplied the author with information regarding the general state of affairs in their particular communities.

he believes they are entitled to a certain degree of anonymity. The general location of each village, however, has been given both in the body of the work and on map #3.

In 1917 E. G. Browne wrote the following:

Of the future of Bahá'ism it is difficult to hazard a conjecture, especially at the present time, when we are more cut off from any trustworthy knowledge of what is happening in the world than at any previous period for many centuries. Less than a month ago the centenary of Bahá'u'lláh's birth was celebrated in America, whither his teachings have spread only within the last twenty years, but what influence they have attained or may in the future attain there or elsewhere it is impossible to conjecture.¹⁷

It is hoped that the data presented in this study, although limited to a specific region of central India, will shed some light on the question Browne found impossible to answer and thereby add to our knowledge of the Bahá'í Faith in particular and the human religious experience in general.

¹⁷ Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion, ed. by E. G. Browne, (Cambridge, 1961), p. xxiv

Part I Historical Development

Chapter 1 The Origins and Growth of the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith has been most directly influenced by Islām, notably the Shī'ah sect of that religion, as Shī'ism has been the national religion of Irān since the early sixteenth century (1502). Examples can be seen in the concept of progressive revelation, the doctrine of the imāmate and its theological implications, the rejection of an official priesthood, and the concept of the community of believers. In addition, there are numerous minor similarities ranging from religious terminology to style and method of prayer. In the course of this work many such influences will be noted, but first we must turn our gaze to mid-nineteenth century Irān and trace the origins of the new movement.

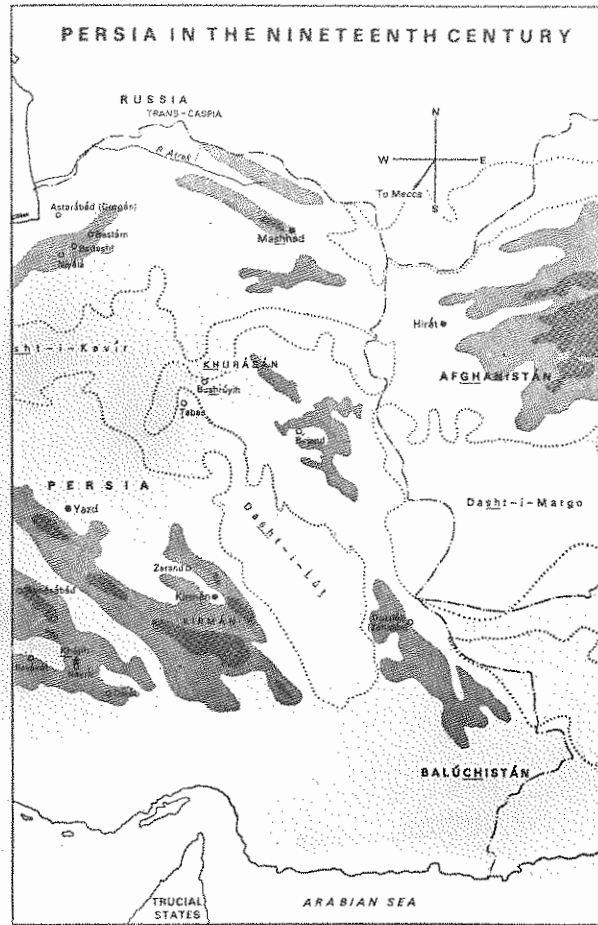
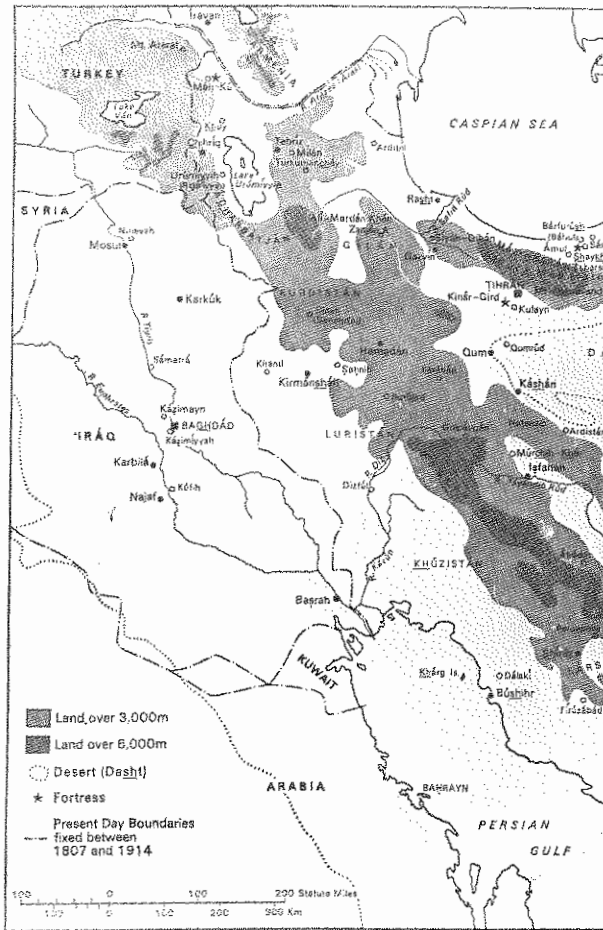
On the evening of May 22, 1844, in a small apartment in the city of Shīrāz, a young merchant by the name of Siyyid 'Alī-Muḥammad, while conversing with a certain Mullā Ḥusayn-i-Buṣhrū'ī, proclaimed himself a bāb, or gate to the 'hidden imām'.¹ A claim of this magnitude was not entirely unexpected, as numerous Shī'ah divines had recently been announcing the imminent appearance of such an individual. The most renowned of these divines had been Shaykh Aḥmad Zaynī'd-Dīn Aḥsā'ī (1743 - 1826), founder of the Shaykhī school, and his main disciple and inheritor of the school's leadership after his death, Siyyid Kāzīm-i-Rashtī (1793 - 1843). The former was considered the most learned of the learned², while the latter was largely responsible for spreading the doctrines of the Shaykhīs over the length and breadth of Persia. In fact, prior to his declaration 'Alī-Muḥammad had been a pupil of Siyyid Kāzīm.³

¹ According to Shī'ah doctrine (see Appendix A) the 'hidden imām' communicated with four chosen agents. The last of these agents, Abdu'l-Hasan Samarī, did not appoint a successor, thus ending the 'Lesser Concealment' in the year 940. In claiming to be a bāb Siyyid 'Alī-Muḥammad appeared to be enunciating another period when the expected imām should again be visibly represented. The official Bahá'í position, however, states that he was the imām mahdī himself, and his designation of bāb was meant to reflect that he was the gate to a greater prophet yet to come. For a Bahá'í explanation see Shoghi Effendi's introduction to Nabíl-i-A'zam's The Dawn Breakers, (New York, 1953), p. xxx-xxxi.

² A. L. M. Nicolas, Essai Sur le Shaykhisme I, (Paris, 1910), p. 18

³ E. G. Browne, A Year Amongst the Persians, (London, 1950), p. 65

Map 1



MAP DRAWN BY ROY MOLE

The Báb, as Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad came to be known, soon gathered around him seventeen disciples known as the 'Letters of the Living',⁴ and instructed them to inform the inhabitants of Persia and 'Irāq of his appearance. In October of 1844, having dispersed sixteen of the 'Letters' on their mission, the Báb along with one other disciple, Quddús, left on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina.

During the Báb's absence, the word of his declaration quickly spread throughout his home province of Fárs, so much so as to raise the fury of the conservative divines of Shíráz.⁵ As a result, several Bábís were arrested, and in June of 1845 the Governor-General of the province, Husayn Khán, hearing of the Báb's expected return, commissioned a body of horsemen to journey to Búshíhr, the port of disembarkation for returning pilgrims, and bring the the young Siyyid back to Shíráz where he was to be placed in confinement. Moreover, 'His followers were prohibited from discussing his doctrines in public, and some of the more active were beaten, mutilated and expelled from the town.'⁶ When brought before the Governor-General the Báb was insulted and struck in the face.⁷ Finally, at the behest of a maternal uncle who agreed to keep him in his home away from public view, the Báb was released.

The Báb, however, did not remain in isolation. During the following year he was constantly embraced by his new disciples with whom he openly consorted and to whose listening ears he dictated numerous tablets. Consequently, in September of 1846, Husayn Khán once more issued orders for his arrest. The Chief Constable of Shíráz, 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Khán, was requested to carry out the orders, but their issuance coincided with an

⁴ Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 69

⁵ H. M. Balyuzi, The Báb, (Oxford, 1973), p. 78

⁶ Browne, A Year Amongst the Persians, p. 66

⁷ Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 150

outbreak of cholera, which caused the Constable to take the Báb to his home, where upon arriving he found his sons stricken with the disease. According to the account of the official Bahá'í historian, Nabíl-i-A'zam, the Báb cured his sons, causing the thankful Constable to approach the Governor-General for his release.⁸ The accuracy of this account is uncertain, but 'Abdu'l-Bahá states in A Traveller's Narrative that the Báb was released on condition that he depart the city.⁹ In the last days of September, 1846, the Báb left for Isfahán.

In Isfahán the Báb apparently won the heart of the Governor-General of that ancient city, Manúchíhr Khán, for the government official protected him from the wrath of the local 'ulamá, seventy of whom had declared the Báb a heretic and condemned him to death.¹⁰ For four months he enjoyed the Governor-General's protection, during which time both the number of his followers and, as a consequence, his opponents continued to mount. The movement had by this time become so wide spread that the Sháh himself, Muhammad Sháh Qájár, began to take personal interest in it.¹¹ Following the death of Manúchíhr Khán in March of 1847, the Sháh issued orders for the removal of the Báb to the capital.

The Báb, however, was not destined to reach Tíhrán. During the journey to the capital his escorts received two messages: one from the Grand Vizier, Hájí Mírzá Áqásí, directing them to proceed to the village of Kulayn, located less than thirty miles from Tíhrán, where they were to await further instructions; and a second, twenty days later, from the Sháh. According to the account in A Traveller's Narrative, the royal message

⁸ Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 196-197

⁹ A Traveller's Narrative written to illustrate the Episode of the Báb, vol. II, ed. and trans. by E. G. Browne, (Cambridge, 1891), p. 11

¹⁰ Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 209

¹¹ The Qájár chieftans began their rule in 1796.

declared:

Since the royal train is on the verge of departure from Teherán, to meet you in a befitting manner is impossible. Do you go to Máku and there abide and rest for a while, engaged in praying for our victorious state; and we have arranged that under all circumstances they shall shew you attention and respect. When we return from travel we will summon you specially.¹²

The fortress of Máh-Kú is situated on a mountain peak overlooking the city from which it is named. Located in the province of Ádharbáyján in the extreme north-west of Írán, it is but a short distance from the Aras river and the meeting place of the Russo-Turkish frontiers. In this fortress, awaiting an interview that would never take place, the Báb was lodged for close to nine months. During this time he produced one of his best known works, the Dalá'il-i-Sab'ih (The Seven Proofs), and began the composition of the Persian Bayán.¹³

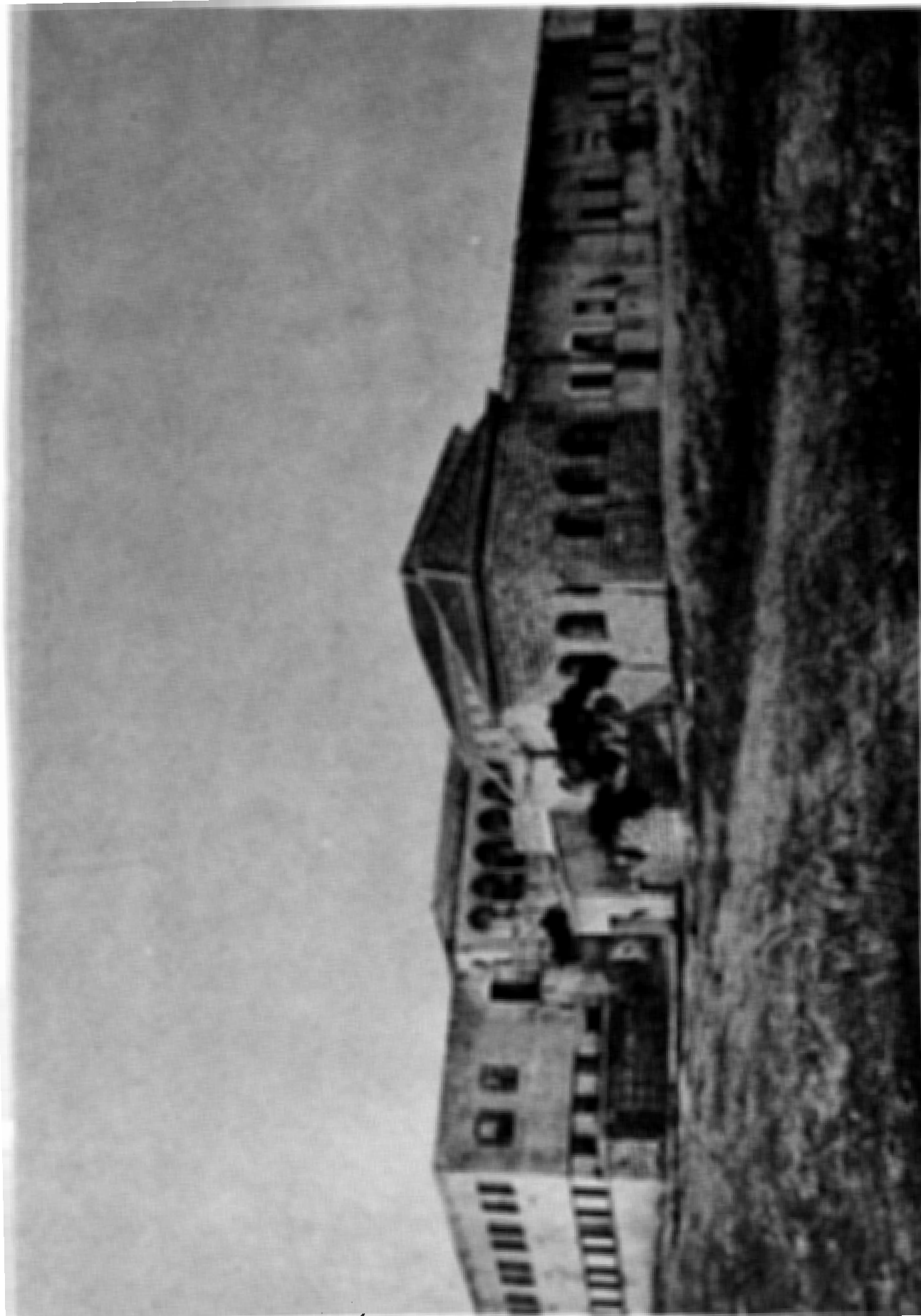
On April 9, 1848, he was transferred to the castle of Chihríq, located in the vicinity of the region known today as Ridá'íyyih. He was moved as a result of a request submitted by a Russian minister in Tihrán who feared a possible disturbance so close to the Russian border.¹⁴ The Báb initially remained in Chihríq for three months. Apparently, during his first stay in the castle prison he began referring to himself not only as the Báb, but as the qá'im.¹⁵ As Mírzá Husayn of Hamadán states in his history of the Báb, The Táríkh-i-Jadíd, 'It was during his sojourn at Chihríq, too, that the Báb, having due regard to the exigencies of the

¹² A Traveller's Narrative, p. 15-16

¹³ Balyuzi, The Báb, p. 132

¹⁴ 'Letter written by Mullá Ahmad-i-Ibdál', in Balyuzi, The Báb, p. 132

¹⁵ In Shí'ah theology the qá'im is identified with the return of the 'hidden imám'. See Appendix A.



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time, the dictates of expediency, and the capacity of men, declared himself to be the Kā'im; though some think that he made this declaration during the latter days of his residence at Mākú.¹⁶ Perhaps for this reason, as well as the continued success of the movement throughout the realm, in July of 1848 the Báb was summoned to Tabríz by orders of the Grand Vizier to be examined by a panel of divines in front of the Crown Prince, Násiri'd-Dín Mírzá.

During his examination at Tabríz the Báb was asked by Hájí Mullá Maḥmúd, the Nizámu'l-'Ulamá, if he claimed to be the mahdí, the Lord of Religion, to which the Báb responded - 'yes'.¹⁷ Amír Aslán Khán, who was present at the interrogation, reported the Báb stated the following: 'And I swear by God that I am that person whom you have been expecting from the beginning of Islām until now; I am he whom forty thousand doctors will deny.'¹⁸ According to E. G. Browne, during the trial the divines of Tabríz mocked the Báb, asking him obscure questions about Arabic grammar and reproaching him for not being able to respond to their demand to perform a miracle. Browne summarized the events as follows:

That the whole examination was a farce throughout, that the sentence was a forgone conclusion, that no serious attempt to apprehend the nature and evidence of the Báb's claim and doctrine was made, and that from first to last a systematic course of brow-beating, irony and mockery was pursued appear to me to be facts proved no less by the Muḥammadan than by the Bábí accounts of these inquisitorial proceedings.¹⁹

At the close of the proceedings the Báb was bastinadoed and sent back

¹⁶ Mírzá Huseyn of Hamadán, The Táríkh-i-Jadíd, ed. and trans. by E. G. Browne, (Cambridge, 1893), p. 241

¹⁷ A Traveller's Narrative, note M, p. 288-289

¹⁸ Amír Aslán Khán, 'Report of the Interrogation of the Báb', trans. by E. G. Browne, Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion, p. 253

¹⁹ A Traveller's Narrative, note M, p. 290

to Chihríq. The ecclesiastical sentence which was handed down by the 'Ulamá of Tabríz stated that the only thing which caused the postponement of his immediate execution was doubt as to his sanity, and continued: 'Should this doubt be removed, the sentence of an incorrigible apostate would without hesitation be executed upon thee.'²⁰

Following the examination of the Báb at Tabríz, persecution of Bábís was intensified throughout the entire country. In October of 1848, a host of Bábís under the leadership of Mullá Husayn (the first disciple of the Báb), having been initially attacked by the townspeople of Bárfurúsh and subsequently pursued by military troops of the province, finally took shelter at the shrine of Shaykh Ahmad ibin-i-Abí-Tálib-i-Tabarsí, around which they proceeded to build a fortress. The presence of over three hundred Bábís in a fortified garrison led the Sa'ídu'l-'Ulamá of Mázinďarán to request aid from the Sháh.²¹ Muhammad Sháh had died a month before, and the new ruler was Násirí'd-Dín Sháh, the same man who had three months earlier attended the examination of the Báb at Tabríz. In response an army of 12,000 men was sent to Mázinďarán, and the fort was put under siege. After more than seven months struggle the Bábís weakened by lack of food and water surrendered, only to be slaughtered by their assailants.²² Included in this group were most of the 'Letters of the Living'.²³

The early months of the year 1850 were marked by two further military actions against the Bábís. The first took place outside the town of

²⁰ 'The Ecclesiastical Sentence (fatwá) of the 'Ulamá of Tabríz', trans. by E. G. Browne, Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion, p. 259

²¹ Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 358

²² 'Note of Captain C. F. Mackenzie Regarding his Journey from Rasht to Astarábád in 1859', Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion, p. 242-243

²³ Mírzá Yahyá Subh-i-Ezel, 'A Succinct Account of the Bábí Movement', trans. by E. G. Browne, Appendix III of The Táríkh-i-Jadíd, p. 417

Nayríz in the province of Fárs, where as in Mázinđarán more than a hundred Bábís were beseiged by troops of the Sháh and took refuge in a fort. Like their fellow believers at fort Shaykh Tabarsí the majority were finally killed, many being taken to Shíráz in chains to meet their end.²⁴ The second struggle occurred in the city of Zanján. From May to December approximately three thousand Bábís led by Hujjat-i-Zanjání (a local divine) withstood the onslaught of over eighteen of the Sháh's regiments. The operation drew the attention of the British envoy, Lt-Col. Sheil, who on September 5, 1850, reported that '...these fanatics are reduced to a few hundred fighting men, they continue to maintain a hopeless contest with undaunted resolution, refusing submission on any terms...' ²⁵ However, their defeat was only a matter of time, and in the end the great majority of Bábís at Zanján either met with death or were imprisoned.

Two months after the start of the Zanján insurrection the Báb was once again summoned to Tabríz, this time by Násiri'd-Dín Sháh's new Grand Vizier, Mírzá Taqí Khán, who planned to put him to death by warrant of the clergy.²⁶ Apparently it was hoped that the death of the Báb would lead to the termination of the new movement. In the words of the French historian Comte de Gobineau:

Mírzá Taqí Khán, maudissant la mollesse avec laquelle son predecesseur, Hájjí Mírzá Aqásí, avait laisse naitre et grandir un pareil peril, comprit qu'il ne fallait pas prolonger cette faut et voulut couper le mal dans sa racine. Il se persuada que la source en etait le Báb lui-meme, premier auteur de toutes les doctrines qui troublaient le pays, et il voulut faire disparaitre cette source.²⁷

²⁴ Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 495

²⁵ Quoted in Balyuzi, The Báb, p. 210

²⁶ Mírzá Huseyn of Hamadán, p. 293

²⁷ Comte de Gobineau, Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale, (Paris, 1928), p. 210-211

In the noonday sun of Tabríz on July 9, 1850, the Báb (having received his death warrant from Mullá Muḥammad-i-Mámaqání) was suspended by rope along with one other disciple on a wall in the citadel square. Three rows of 250 soldiers opened fire.²⁸ When the smoke rose the Báb was nowhere to be seen, but he was soon found in a nearby recess whence he was returned to the scaffold and once again fired upon, the second volley of bullets taking the desired course.²⁹ The two bodies were subsequently dragged through the city streets and finally thrown on the edge of the city's surrounding moat.

The death of the Báb dealt a great blow to his followers. Constantly attacked, they were now forced to accept the fact that their 'promised one' had been taken from them. In the midst of such despair, in August of 1852 three young Bábís made an attempt on the life of the Sháh. Their ill-conceived plan failed and brought upon the much persecuted Bábí community even greater governmental and ecclesiastical vengeance. The Great Persecution of 1852 has had numerous reporters, but in spite of the cruelties³⁰ cast upon it, the community survived, as 'It was their

²⁸ Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 512

²⁹ There are five different accounts of the execution of the Báb. Nabíl's account (p. 513) and A Traveller's Narrative (p. 43-44) agree that the Báb and his disciple were both unharmed after the first firing and that they were only killed after the second volley. The Tárikh-i-Jadíd (p. 301-307) states that the Báb's disciple was executed alone, after which the Báb was fired upon thrice, the first two volleys missing their mark. According to E. G. Browne (The Tárikh-i-Jadíd, note 2, p. 306), the Nuqtatu'l-Káf of Mírzá Jání says that the disciple was executed alone and that the Báb was fired upon twice. In A Traveller's Narrative Browne adds that the two Muslim histories which mention the execution of the Báb present varying descriptions of the episode. The Násikhu't-Tawárikh (A Traveller's Narrative, note A, p. 182) declares that both men were shot upon, the first volley killing the disciple but leaving the Báb unharmed, thus necessitating a second volley. The Rawzatu's-Safa (A Traveller's Narrative, note A, p. 191) makes no mention of a second firing.

³⁰ See 'An Austrian Officer's Account of the Cruelties Practised on the Bábís who Suffered in the Great Persecution of 1852', Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion, p. 265-271.

readiness to meet death that made the Babees [sic] so formidable to their
 assailants.³¹

The doctrines of the Báb were never systematized into a coherent whole. This was largely due to the fact that except for a short period in Shíráz the Báb was isolated from the majority of his followers. It is true that a number of his leading disciples meeting in the hamlet of Badasht in July of 1848 decided that the movement was not just an offshoot of Islám but an independent Faith, a new Dispensation which repudiated old laws and established new ones.³² However, the absence of the Báb detracted from their attempt to formulate doctrine. But doctrine was not the real issue. The Báb attracted followers by means of his personal charisma and his claim. In this sense he serves as a perfect example of Max Weber's concept of prophet where '...the personal call is the decisive element distinguishing the prophet from the priest. The latter lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition, while the prophet's claim is based on personal revelation and charisma.'³³ This charismatic quality which drew individuals to the Báb was expressed by his first disciple, Mullá Husayn, when recalling his first meeting with his master said:

That holy repast refreshed alike my body and
 soul. In the presence of my Host, at that hour,
 I felt as though I were feeding upon the fruits
 of Paradise...Had my youthful Host no other claim
 to greatness, this were sufficient - that He
 received me with that quality of hospitality and
 loving-kindness which I was convinced no other
 human being could possibly reveal.³⁴

³¹ Lady Mary Leonora Sheil, Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia, (London 1856), p. 181

³² See Balyuzi, The Báb, p. 167-170, and Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 288-300.

³³ Weber, p. 46

³⁴ Quoted in Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 62

As mentioned earlier, the Báb claimed to be the gate to the imám mahdí and at later date to be the qá'im himself. E. G. Browne claims that the Báb saw himself as the latest spokesman for God, the Eternal Essence, Who had revealed Himself to numerous prophets in the past and would continue to do so in the future.³⁵ Consequently, the Báb did not claim to be the final mouthpiece of the Divine. According to Browne, in the Persian Bayán emphasis '...is laid on the doctrine that this revelation is not final, but that believers therein must continually expect the coming of "Him whom God shall manifest", who will confirm what he pleases of the Bayán and alter what he pleases...'³⁶ To this hope, the appearance of 'Him whom God shall manifest', the mass of bewildered Bábís, hunted and leaderless, now turned their thoughts.

Following the attempt on the life of the Sháh, many of the leading Bábís throughout the country were arrested and thrown into prison. Among these prisoners was a certain Mírzá Husayn 'Alí, known amongst the Bábís as Bahá'u'lláh, the 'Glory of God'. He was the son of a well-known minister of the royal court, and his activities in the Bábí movement were soon brought to the attention of governmental authorities. Along with several companions, he was confined to an old abandoned reservoir in Tíhrán known as the Síyáh-Chál. He remained there for four months, during which time no less than twenty-eight Bábís were executed.³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh later claimed that it was during this period of confinement that he received revelations from God in which it was made known to him that he was 'Him

³⁵ E. G. Browne, 'The Bábís of Persia. II. Their Literature and Doctrines', The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, vol. XXI, (London, 1889), p. 914

³⁶ Browne, 'The Bábís of Persia. II', p. 919

³⁷ A Traveller's Narrative, note T, p. 329-334

whom God shall manifest'. Bahá'u'lláh expressed this experience in the following words:

O King! I was but a man like others, asleep
upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the
All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught
Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This
thing is not from Me, but from One Who is
Almighty and All-Knowing. And He bade Me
lift up My voice between earth and heaven, and
for this there befell Me what hath caused the
tears of every man of understanding to flow.³⁸

Bahá'u'lláh was subsequently released, possibly due to the prestige of his family and the intervention on his behalf of a Russian minister in Tíhrán, but he was exiled by order of the Sháh to Baghdád, never again to return to his native Persia. On January 12, 1853, together with several members of his family Bahá'u'lláh began a two month journey westward.

Upon his arrival in Baghdád Bahá'u'lláh found the community of Bábís (most of whom had fled to Baghdád to avoid further persecution) in a state of utter confusion. 'The community of the Báb, harassed and hounded and heart-broken, was in grave danger of succumbing to forces of reckless nihilism within its own ranks.'³⁹ After remaining in Baghdád for one year, during which time he shared the leadership of the community with his half-brother, Şubḥ-i-Azal (the person the Báb had made the inheritor of community leadership granted he abdicate if 'Him whom God shall manifest' should appear⁴⁰), Bahá'u'lláh, not yet having declared his revelation, alone and on foot left for Sulaymáníyyih.

For close to two years Bahá'u'lláh dwelt in the mountains of Kurdistán

³⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, trans. by Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1969), p. 11

³⁹ H. M. Balyuzi, Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith, (London 1970), p. 42

⁴⁰ E. G. Browne, Introduction to Hájji Mírzá Jání's Nuqtatu'l-Káf, in E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series, vol. XV, (London, 1910), p. xxxi-xxxii

far removed from human habitations.⁴¹ Then, in March of 1856 he returned to Baghdád

Bahá'u'lláh remained in Baghdád for seven years. During this period he revealed⁴² three of his best known writings: Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude), Kalimát-i-Maknúnih (The Hidden Words), and Haft-Vají (The Seven Valleys). The first contains among other themes an explanation of the symbolism contained in the New Testament and the Qur'án; The Hidden Words is a distillation of the eternal verities; while The Seven Valleys is an example of Bahá'u'lláh's mystical prose. At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh played an active role in helping reconstruct the Bábí community, which had sorely declined since the death of the Báb.

Bahá'u'lláh's active participation in the life of the Bábí community in Baghdád had two consequences: first, it engendered a breach between himself and his half-brother Subh-i-Azal, a split which was later to have important ramifications for the movement; and second, it aroused the wrath of several local divines and subsequently the hostility of the Persian Consul-General in Baghdád, Mírzá Buzurg Khán. The latter, by means of his vivid letters portraying Bahá'u'lláh as a threat to the security of the empire, induced the Sháh to instruct his Foreign Minister, Mírzá Sa'íd Khán, to direct the Persian Ambassador in Constantinople to make arrangements with the Ottoman government for Bahá'u'lláh's deportation to Turkish territory. An extract from the Foreign Minister's letter reads

⁴¹ 'We betook Ourselves to the wilderness, and there, separated and alone, led for two years a life of complete solitude...Alone, We communed with Our spirit, oblivious of the world and all that is therein... until the hour when, from the Mystic Source, there came the summons bidding Us return whence We came.' (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, trans. by Shoghi Effendi, 2nd ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1970), p. 250-251.

⁴² Bahá'ís believe these works to be the revealed word of God.

as follows:

...then the best thing is that explicit orders should be given to His Excellency Námíq Pasha the governor of the Province of Baghdád, while on this side also orders should be issued to the Prince-Governor of Kirmánsháhán, that Mírzá Husayn 'Alí and such of his followers and familiars as are the cause and root of the mischief should be arrested in such manner as is requisite, and handed over at the frontier to the officers of the afore-mentioned Prince; and that the Government should detain them, under guard and supervision, in some place in the interior of the country which it regards suitable, and not allow their evil and mischief to spread.⁴³

Consequently, in March of 1863 Bahá'u'lláh received a letter from 'Alí Páshá, the Grand Vizier of the Sultán of Turkey, which bade him journey to Constantinople. While tarrying for twelve days in the Najíbíyyih Garden, he announced to his companions before departing that he was 'Him whom God shall manifest'. It was the twenty-second day of April, 1863.

Bahá'u'lláh and his companions in banishment arrived in Constantinople on August 16, 1863. There they lingered for four months awaiting a decision from the government as to their fate. In December of that year they learned they were to be sent to Adrianople. Following a twelve day journey through ice and snow they arrived at their destination.

It was in Adrianople that the breach which began in Baghdád between Bahá'u'lláh and Subh-i-Azal widened into an unbridgeable lacuna. In this city Bahá'u'lláh issued an open and public announcement of his revelation,⁴⁴ but the appointed heir to leadership of the Bábí community refused to recognize his claim. He and his followers asserted that it was impossible that one revelation should so soon be abrogated by another.⁴⁵ Hence, from

⁴³ 'Letter from Mírzá Sa'id Khán to the Persian Ambassador in Constantinople', trans. by E. G. Browne, Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion, p. 286-287

⁴⁴ H. M. Balyuzi, Bahá'u'lláh, (London, 1963), p. 36

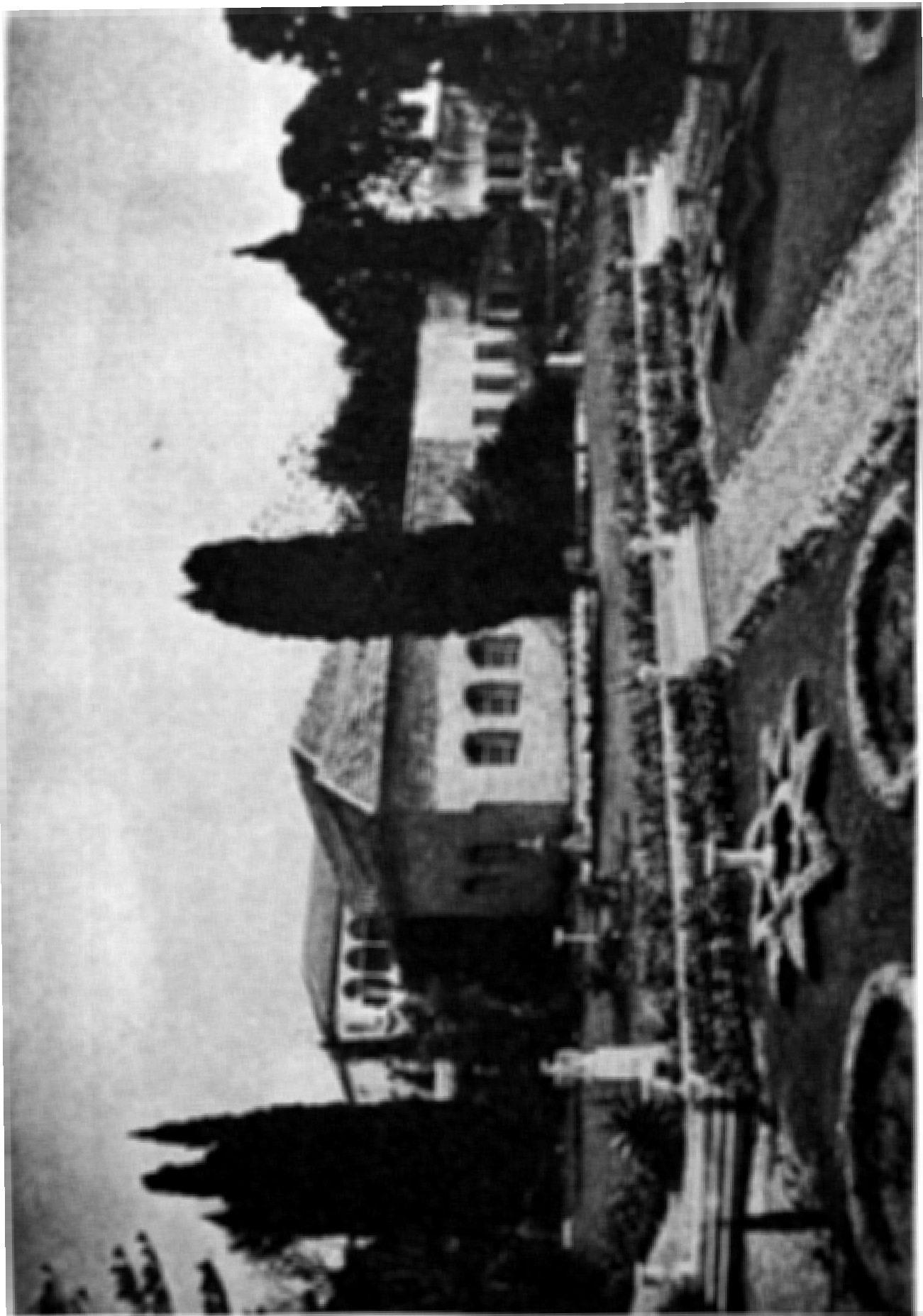
⁴⁵ E. G. Browne, 'The Bábís of Persia. I. Sketch of their History and and Personal Experiences amongst Them.', Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, vol. XXI, p. 514-515

this time forward there were two groups within the old Bábí community: those who followed Bahá'u'lláh were known as Bahá'ís; and those who took the side of Subh-i-Azal were termed Azalís. By and large the great majority of former Bábís supported Bahá'u'lláh.⁴⁶

The growing enmity between the two groups (characterized by examples of open hostility) as well as the continual stream of Bahá'í pilgrims who came to see their new master began to cast suspicion in the eyes of the Turkish authorities as to the intentions of the community. Consequently, a decision was finally reached whereby Bahá'u'lláh and a number of his companions were to be banished to the penal colony of 'Akká, a small island situated in the bay near Haifa (Israel), where murderers and political agitators from all parts of the Ottoman Empire were consigned, while Subh-i-Azal and his followers were to be sent to Famagusta, Cyprus. Thus, on August 12, 1868, the already twice banished band of Persians once again began a journey into exile.

Bahá'u'lláh and his family reached 'Akká on August 31, 1868. Until October of 1870 they (along with approximately seventy other Bahá'ís) were kept under closed confinement in the citadel barracks. During this period several followers became ill and died, and Bahá'u'lláh's younger son was killed when he fell through a skylight. The group was finally transferred to a local caravanserai, while Bahá'u'lláh and his family were lodged in a small house within the city walls where they remained for nine years. After this time the restrictions placed upon Bahá'u'lláh by the local authorities were somewhat relaxed, and he was allowed to occupy two houses outside the city proper: the first located four miles north of 'Akká, where he dwelt for two years; and the second, a neighbouring abode known as the mansion of Bahjí, where he remained until his death in 1892.

⁴⁶ G. N. Curzon, Persia and the Persian Question, vol. I, (London, 1966), p. 499



Bahjí

During Bahá'u'lláh's exile in 'Akká, numerous Bahá'ís from throughout the Near East came on pilgrimage to the prison city. Initially the most they could hope for would be to catch a glimpse of their master from beyond the city's moats, but as restrictions were gradually lifted they were permitted to call on him in person. Bahjí became the center of such activity, and it was here that the Cambridge Orientalist, E. G. Browne, met Bahá'u'lláh in person.⁴⁷

In both Adrianople and 'Akká Bahá'u'lláh penned numerous tablets. These writings can be classified into roughly four categories: laws and ordinances, prayers and meditations, interpretations of past scriptures, and discourses and exhortations. Among these, two compositions stand out in their magnanimity: the Súriy-i-Múluk (Súrih of Kings), and the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (The Most Holy Book). The former, composed in Adrianople, collectively addressed the major kings, rulers, and ecclesiastical leaders of the world. This exordium was later supplemented by letters sent to individual rulers from 'Akká. Included in the list of recipients were 'Álî Páshá, the Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire, the ecclesiastical leaders of Sunnî Islâm, the French Emperor, Napoleon III, the Czar of Russia, Alexander II, Queen Victoria, Pope Pious IX, the rulers of the Americas, and numerous others. In these tablets:

He called upon them to take fast hold of the "Most Great Law"; proclaimed Himself to be "the King of Kings" and "the Desire of all Nations"; ...exhorts them to be reconciled among themselves, to unite and to reduce their armaments; bids them refrain from laying excessive burdens on their subjects, who, He informs them, are their "wards" and "treasures"; enunciates the principle that should any one among them take up arms against another, all should rise against him; and warns them not to deal with Him as the "King of Islâm" and his ministers had dealt.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ For a description of this meeting see E. G. Browne's Introduction to A Traveller's Narrative, vol. II, p. xxxviii-xl

⁴⁸ Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1965), p. 206-207

A special tablet was likewise sent to the Sháh of Persia, Násiri'd-Dín Sháh. As Lord Curzon reported, the messenger who carried this tablet '...received the penalty of his rash presumption by being branded to death with red-hot bricks.'⁴⁹ The Kitáb-i-Aqdas was revealed at Bahjí in 1873. This book not only set down the laws and ordinances of Bahá'u'lláh's religion, it also established a line of succession for his cause and ordained those institutions that would ensure its future unity.

Like the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be a manifestation of God, an appointed spokesman for the Sacred. However, there were two major differences in their ministries. First, while the Báb directed his message primarily to the Islamic world, Bahá'u'lláh also made his claims known to leaders of the Occident. He claimed to fulfill not only the expectations of Shí'ah Islám but the prophecies of other religious traditions. For example, in the epistle to Pope Pious IX he announced that 'the Word which the Son concealed is made manifest.'⁵⁰ Likewise, his letter to the high-priests of the Zoroastrian religion proclaimed that 'the Incomparable Friend' is manifest.⁵¹ Second, Bahá'u'lláh was able to codify his message to a much greater extent than was the Báb. The latter's ministry lasted only nine years, most of it being spent in isolation, while from the time of his declaration in Baghdád until his death in 'Akká Bahá'u'lláh had almost thirty years in which to elaborate upon his teachings. Although he too was kept a constant prisoner, the numerous pilgrims that attended their master both in Adrianople and 'Akká allowed him to maintain regular communication with his followers, and

⁴⁹ Curzon, note 1, p. 500

⁵⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, Proclamation to the Kings and Leaders of Religion, in The Bahá'í Revelation. A Selection from the Bahá'í Holy Writings, rev. ed., (London, 1970), p. 30

⁵¹ Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 211

consequently, in terms of doctrines, laws, and institutions, the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are much more coherent and intact.

Bahá'u'lláh's main doctrines, which shall be examined at greater length in subsequent chapters, can be summarized as follows. There is only one God, the transcendent and omnipotent Source of the universe, Whose Essence can be comprehended by no man. However, from time to time God reveals Himself to certain individuals (manifestations) who in turn reveal to men principles by which they should live their lives. The commandments Of God vary in accordance to the needs and exigencies of the time, but their purpose is always the same: to draw men both as individuals and as societies closer to the knowledge of the Sacred. Being the latest of God's messengers whose dispensation will last not less than a thousand years, Bahá'u'lláh has the right to abrogate the laws and institutions of the past and introduce new ones. The core of Bahá'u'lláh's social teachings is the concept of the oneness of mankind. All men regardless of race, sex, religious background, or economic status are considered equal in the eyes of God, and should therefore treat each other as equals. Consequently, in the Bahá'í Faith, as in Islám, there is to be no priestly hierarchy. Instead, there should exist a community of believers sharing similar status. The sole source of authority within the community is the manifestation and his duly appointed successors, be they individuals or institutions. The point to be stressed, however, is that Bahá'u'lláh spoke with the authority of the Sacred, and his various decrees are therefore to be followed unhesitatingly.

Through his own efforts Bahá'u'lláh was able to lift the Bábí community out of its despair. He was able to capture and transfer to himself the charismatic qualities of the Báb, and in so doing steer the movement on its new course - that of a world religion. The powerful impression he

made upon his followers was summed up by the poet Na'ím when he sang:

Why should we not see a hundred thousand souls
His sacrifice?

Why should we not see a hundred thousand hearts
bewitched by Him? ⁵²

Upon his death in May of 1892 the Sultán of Turkey was notified by telegram that 'the Sun of Bahá has set'. ⁵³

After the death of Bahá'u'lláh the leadership of the movement passed to his eldest son, 'Abbás Effendi. In his last testament Bahá'u'lláh alluded to 'Abbás Effendi's position as interpreter of his writings, ⁵⁴ but when the latter claimed leadership of the Bahá'í community, Bahá'u'lláh's younger son, Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí, refused to recognize him, asserting that his elder brother had concealed part of his father's testament.

Subsequently, all but two of Bahá'u'lláh's immediate family took the side of Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí. However, the large majority of Bahá'ís throughout the Near East followed 'Abbás Effendi, and after several years of intra-community conflict Mírzá Muḥammad's group ceased to carry much influence in the Bahá'í ranks. At this time 'Abbás Effendi took the title of 'Abdu'l-Bahá ⁵⁵ (the servant of Bahá) by which he was later to become known throughout the Bahá'í world.

Although still a prisoner of the Turkish government, in 1894 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave his approval to a Lebanese convert to introduce the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States, thereby initiating a new phase in the growth of the religion. Until this time the movement's believers had come only from the East. Under the leadership of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the Bahá'í Faith was destined to be established both in Europe and

⁵² Quoted in E. G. Browne, A Literary History of Persia, vol. IV, (Cambridge, 1959), p. 214

⁵³ Balyuzi, Bahá'u'lláh, p. 67

⁵⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-'Ahd, in The Bahá'í Revelation, p. 162-163

⁵⁵ H. M. Balyuzi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, (London, 1971), p. 60

North America.

Following the fall of 'Abdu'l-Hamíd's Ottoman government in July of 1908, 'Abd'ul-Bahá was finally released from captivity; he was sixty-five years old. Three years later, in August of 1911, he left for Marseilles and for the next three months addressed various groups both in London and Paris concerning his father's teachings. These groups ranged in constitution from Archdeacon Wilberforce's congregation to Annie Beasant's Theosophical Society. After wintering in Egypt 'Abdu'l-Bahá again journeyed westward, this time to the United States and Canada where he remained for over six months. During his visit he traversed the entire continent, lecturing from New York to California. His subjects on these occasions varied from talks on the nature of man to discussions about economic principles for the modern world, but he always stressed one point, namely, that Bahá'u'lláh had lived for the explicit purpose of raising mankind to a new level of spiritual existence. By the time 'Abdu'l-Bahá returned to the Holy Land in December of 1913, after a second trip to Europe and a five month stay in Egypt due to poor health, numerous Bahá'í groups had been formed both in Europe and in North America.

During the war years (1916-1917) 'Abdu'l-Bahá penned the Tablets of the Divine Plan in which he outlined a teaching campaign that would take the message of the Bahá'í Faith to 120 territories and islands. At this time the movement had followers in only thirty-five countries,⁵⁶ and the initiation of the plan would have to wait until 1937 when its administrative institutions would be strong enough to support such a campaign, but the dark hours of World War I could not diminish 'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision.

On November 28, 1921, 'Abdu'l-Bahá died. For twenty-nine years he had been the recognized leader of the Bahá'í Faith. His charismatic

⁵⁶ Balyuzi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 424

qualities, though somewhat different in nature than those of the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh were none the less compelling, as is witnessed by the impression he left on numerous individuals both in Europe and North America. He was not a manifestation of God; he did not claim to receive revelation from the Sacred. Bahá'ís believe, however, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was divinely inspired and guided⁵⁷ and therefore contact with the Sacred did not cease with the death of Bahá'u'lláh but was seen to be manifest in the living example of his eldest son.⁵⁸

The leadership of the Bahá'í community next passed to Shoghi Rabbani, known more commonly to Bahá'ís as Shoghi Effendi.* A grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, he was only twenty-four years of age when he learned he had been appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith by declaration of his grandfather's last will and testament. The young man suddenly found himself the leader of an emerging world religion whose adherents resided in thirty-five

57 Amín Banání, 'The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá', World Order, vol. VI, #1, Fall, 1971, (Wilmette, Illinois), p. 68

58 The official position of the Bahá'í Faith regarding the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was stated by Shoghi Effendi as follows: 'He is, and should for all time be regarded, first and foremost, as the Center and Pivot of Bahá'u'lláh's peerless and all-enfolding Covenant, His most exalted handiwork, the stainless Mirror of His light, the perfect Exemplar of His teachings, the unerring Interpreter of His Word, the embodiment of every Bahá'í ideal, the incarnation of every Bahá'í virtue, the Most Mighty Branch sprung from the Ancient Root, the Limb of the Law of God, the Being "round Whom all names revolve", the Mainspring of the Oneness of Humanity, the Ensign of the Most Great Peace, the Moon of the Central Orb of this most holy Dispensation - styles and titles that are implicit and find their truest, their highest and fairest expression in the magic name 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He is, above and beyond these appellations, the "Mystery of God" - an expression by which Bahá'u'lláh Himself has chosen to designate Him, and which, while it does not by any means justify us to assign to him the station of Prophethood, indicates how in the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized.' (Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, rev. ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1969), p. 134

* Effendi is a title of respect, meaning mister or sir. 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructed all Bahá'ís to address him as such.

countries. The task to which he dedicated his life involved not only expanding this number but constructing a viable administrative system which would link the various Bahá'í communities throughout the world and allow them to interact with one another. 'A new day had come to the Cause, new methods were required. This was to be the era of emancipation of the Faith, of recognition of its independent status, of the establishment of its Order, of the up-building of its institutions.'⁵⁹

From his headquarters in Haifa, Israel, the center of the Bahá'í world, Shoghi Effendi began his task. From the beginning of his Guardianship he set out to establish the Bahá'í Faith as an independent religion. Up to this time the Faith had been closely tied to Islám; it had been reared in its milieu and had deeply imbibed of its heritage. While not denying this parentage Shoghi Effendi consciously attempted to wean the young movement:

Shoghi Effendi never set foot in the Mosque whereas 'Abdu'l-Bahá had attended it until the last Friday of His life. What local people had suspected - that the Bahá'í Cause was really something quite different - became blatantly clear; that which it would have been almost impossible for the Master to do, namely, to sever the intimate bonds which had bound him for so long to the Arab community, particularly the Muhammadan community of Palestine, during many years when it was forbidden to even mention the name Bahá'í, the Guardian now did overnight and began to encourage the Bahá'ís to likewise do in different parts of the world.⁶⁰

Shoghi Effendi was unexpectedly aided in his efforts when on May 10, 1925, the Egyptian law court of Beba, after hearing a case in which a small village headman had demanded that the Muslim wives of several local Bahá'ís be granted a divorce on the grounds that their husbands were heretics,

⁵⁹ Rúhíyyih Rabbání, The Priceless Pearl, (London, 1969), p. 229

⁶⁰ Rúhíyyih Rabbání, Twenty-five Years of the Guardianship, (London, n.d.), p. 5

stated that:

All these prove definitely that the Bahá'í religion is a new religion, with an independent platform and laws and institutions peculiar to it, and show a different and contradictory belief to the beliefs and laws and commandments of Islám. ⁶¹

Between the years 1923 and 1937 Shoghi Effendi personally directed several projects. These included sending teachers to different parts of the world, translating literature, and guiding the construction of the Bahá'í temple in Wilmette Illinois. The most important task he undertook during these years, however, was the strengthening of national and local Bahá'í administrative institutions. ⁶²

During the lifetime of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a national body which administered the affairs of the various communities under its jurisdiction had been introduced in the United States and Canada. Before the establishment of this institution there had existed throughout the world only scattered local communities whose activities were rarely co-ordinated. By 1934 Shoghi Effendi had created additional national bodies in Persia, 'Irâq, India-Burma, Great Britain, Germany, Egypt-Sudan, and Australia-New Zealand. The National Spiritual Assembly assumed grave responsibilities, '...for it has to exercise full authority over all the local Assemblies in its province, and will have to direct the activities of the Friends, guard vigilantly the Cause of God, and control and supervise the affairs of the Movement in general.' ⁶³ Such institutions were only established in countries where there existed a strong base of local communities. Until such time as other countries and regions of the Bahá'í world developed

⁶¹ The Bahá'í World. A Biennial International Record, vol. III, April 1928-1930, (New York, 1930), p. 49

⁶² These institutions will be examined in subsequent chapters.

⁶³ Principles of Bahá'í Administration. A Compilation, 3rd. ed., (London, 1973), p. 74

this base, their local communities were guided by the Guardian himself.

Under the directive of Shoghi Effendi, in 1927 the American community adopted a Bahá'í National Constitution which set down the powers, duties, and functions of the National Spiritual Assembly and gave it a firm basis in law. This Constitution in turn set an example for the various national spiritual assemblies throughout the Bahá'í world to follow. Likewise, the By-Laws of the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the City of New York, drafted in 1931, served as a model for every local community around the globe.⁶⁴ By means of constant letters and telegrams Shoghi Effendi advised the various institutions, both national and local, how they should conduct their affairs in accordance with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In such a way he was orienting the communities towards the common goal of becoming unified bodies directed from a world center.⁶⁵

In 1937 Shoghi Effendi launched the first of three systematic teaching campaigns designed to spread the message of Bahá'u'lláh across the entire planet. Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá's scheme as set down in the Tablets of the Divine Plan was finally initiated. Known as the Seven-Year Plan, it was directed mainly towards the American community. Its goals included the establishment of one Bahá'í community in every state of the United States, province of Canada, and republic of Latin America. In addition, the various countries in which Bahá'í communities existed were called upon to extend teaching activity, increase the translation of Bahá'í literature, develop Bahá'í educational courses, and work towards the purchasing of properties or buildings to be used as future national centers. By the time of its completion in April of 1944, the goals of the Plan as regards the Americas were achieved, and the numerous Bahá'í communities

⁶⁴ Rúhíyyih Rabbání, The Priceless Pearl, p. 303

⁶⁵ Rúhíyyih Rabbání, The Priceless Pearl, p. 303

throughout the world had been both numerically and structurally strengthened.

After a two year respite, the Second Seven-Year Plan was begun. Like its predecessor, it called on the Bahá'í communities in various countries to continue to expand their activities in the vital areas of teaching, publication of literature, and community education. Moreover, it outlined a systematic teaching campaign for Europe similar in objectives to the previous operation in the Americas.

The latter years of the Second Seven-Year Plan saw the introduction of two new institutions on the international level: the International Bahá'í Council, and the Hands of the Cause. The former, composed of eight members appointed by the Guardian and designed to be the forerunner of a future Bahá'í international court,⁶⁶ initially served the purpose of providing a link between the Faith and the new state of Israel. The second was a group of nineteen individuals (later expanded to twenty-seven) also appointed by the Guardian, whose duties were to help propagate and protect the Bahá'í Faith. Each Hand was assigned a specific area of the world in which he was to consult with local and national institutions regarding their teaching efforts. He also formed a vital communicative link between the communities under his jurisdiction and the Guardian in Haifa.

The success of the Second Seven-Year Plan was marked by the creation of four new national spiritual assemblies; national bodies were formed in Central America, South America, Canada, and Italy-Switzerland,⁶⁷ bringing the total number of such institutions in the Bahá'í world to twelve. At

⁶⁶ The Bahá'í World, vol. XII, April 1950-1954, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1956), p. 41

⁶⁷ During the early years of the development of the administrative system assemblies were often assigned to areas or regions - thus the assembly of Central America etc.

the conclusion of the Plan in 1953, Shoghi Effendi felt that the movement was now strong enough to launch its most ambitious program of expansion.

Four international teaching conferences held successively in Kampala, Uganda, Wilmette, U. S. A., Stockholm, Sweden, and New Delhi, India signaled the advent of the Ten-Year Crusade. Shoghi Effendi notified all Bahá'í communities around the world that:

Feel hour propitious (to) proclaim (to the) entire Bahá'í world (the) projected launching (on the) occasion (of the) convocation (of the) approaching International Conferences (on the) four continents (of the) globe the fate-laden, soul-stirring, decade-long, world-embracing Spiritual Crusade involving (the) simultaneous initiation (of) twelve national Ten Year Plans (and the) concerted participation (of) all National Spiritual Assemblies (of the) Bahá'í world aiming (at the) immediate extension (of) Bahá'u'lláh's spiritual dominion as well as (the) eventual establishment (of the) structure (of) His administrative order (in) all remaining Sovereign States, Principal Dependencies, comprising Principalities, Sultanates, Emirates, Shaykhdoms, Protectorates, Trust Territories (and) Crown Colonies scattered (over the) surface (of the) entire planet. 68

The major objectives of the Ten-Year Crusade included; doubling the number of countries in which the Faith was established from 131 to 260; doubling the amount of translated literature, doubling the number of temples in the world from two to four; and quadrupling the number of national spiritual assemblies to forty-eight.

In the midst of this world-wide project Shoghi Effendi suddenly died. In November of 1957 he succumbed to a heart attack in London after being bed ridden by a case of the Asiatic flu. The Bahá'í world was initially in a state of shock. Shoghi Effendi, the architect of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, was now gone. He had appointed no successor; the Faith stood leaderless. In this state of emergency the Hands of the Cause,⁶⁹

⁶⁸ The Bahá'í World, vol. XII, p. 253

⁶⁹ In 1957 eight more Hands of the Cause were appointed by Shoghi Effendi, bringing their total to twenty-seven. For details see Chapter 5.

meeting in Haifa, assumed leadership of the movement. From this time until the end of the Ten-Year Crusade in 1963 they constituted the highest institution in the Bahá'í world.

In April of 1963 elected delegates from throughout the Bahá'í world met in London to take part in the Bahá'í World Congress, an event marking the completion of the Ten-Year Crusade. By this time the number of countries and territories opened to the Faith numbered 259 and the number of national spiritual assemblies stood at fifty-eight. At this meeting the Bahá'ís elected a body of nine men known as The Universal House of Justice, which was accorded the distinction of becoming the paramount administrative institution in the Bahá'í world. Until the passing of Shoghi Effendi the Bahá'í Faith had always been dependent on a specific individual to interpret its scriptures and direct its activities. With the election of the Universal House of Justice the leadership of a charismatic individual came to an end.

The Universal House of Justice feeling that 'The great work of teaching must be extended, not only in those areas where mass conversion is beginning, but everywhere.'⁷⁰ in October of 1963 announced their formulation of the Nine-Year Plan, to be inaugurated in April of 1964. The goals of the new Plan included raising the number of local communities in the world to 13,700 and increasing the number of national spiritual assemblies to 108. It also called for the translation of literature into 133 additional languages. In the words of the Universal House of Justice the driving aim of the plan was, '...to carry the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to every stratum of society, not only in the towns and cities but also in the villages and country districts where the virus of materialism has

⁷⁰ 'Message to National Conventions, May 7, 1963', Wellspring of Guidance. Messages from the Universal House of Justice, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1970), p. 6



The Bahá'í World Center

had much less effect on the lives of men...' ⁷¹

When the Nine-Year Plan ended in April of 1973 the Bahá'í Faith was no longer an 'obscure sect of Islám'. It had established itself as an independent world religion, being recognized as such by the state of Israel. Furthermore, it had introduced its institutions into more than three hundred countries and dependencies throughout the world and had developed an efficient system of administration. It had broken the bonds of geographic isolation and become a full-fledged international movement.

A perusal of the short history of the Bahá'í Faith reveals several themes of analytical interest. The first concerns the prophets' means of legitimatizing their claims. It has continually been stressed throughout this chapter that both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were individuals possessed of dynamic charismatic qualities and that their claims to prophethood were largely based on these qualities. For example, when asked for a substantiation of his claim during the examination at Tabriz, the Báb responded by asking his examiners who else had the power to reveal so many verses of scripture in such a short period of time. This recalls the answer given by Muhammad twelve hundred years earlier when he used his creation of the Qur'án as a proof of his station. In a like manner, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh pointed to the power of their leader's verses as proof that he was 'Him whom God shall manifest'. ⁷² Hence, although the two men professed to fulfill the prophecies found in past scriptures, thus adding an element of apologetics to their assertions, it was the self-generated charisma which they felt to be the Sacred within them that was the decisive factor. Again one can not help but notice the precision with which their

⁷¹ 'Message of July, 1964', Wellspring of Guidance, p. 28

⁷² E. G. Browne, 'Some Remarks on the Bábí Texts edited by Baron Victor Rosen in Vols. I and VI of the Collections Scientifiques de l'Institut des Langues Orientales de Saint-Petersbourg', Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, vol. XXIV, 1892, p. 303

personal qualities and characteristics match Max Weber's ideal type of the ethical prophet.

The second theme involves what may be termed the transference of authority. One of the central problems in the history of religions has been the question of the maintenance of legitimate authority. As Max Weber points out, after the prophet makes his claim there generally follows a period of routinization during which a religious community arises through a process '...whereby either the prophet himself or his disciples secure the permanence of his preaching and the congregation's distribution of grace, hence insuring the economic existence of the enterprise and those who man it...'⁷³ The main issues have always been; first, who has the authority to assume the leadership of the community after the prophet's death; and second, in what sense is this authority related to the Sacred? In fact, it is over these very issues that the major divisions within many of the world's religious communities have resulted, the classic example of such a rift being the one which occurred after the death of Muḥammad and divided the Islamic world into two mainstreams, Sunnī and Shī'ah.

During the development of the Bahá'í community the question of legitimate authority has arisen at each stage of transition: Bahá'u'lláh's claim to leadership of the Bábí community was challenged by Ṣubḥ-i-Azal; 'Abdu'l-Bahá's authority was contested by his half-brother Mírzá Muḥammad 'Alí; Shoghi Effendi faced the antagonism of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's private secretary, Aḥmad Sohráb; and the Universal House of Justice had to deal with the rebellion of one of the Hands of the Cause, Mason Remey. However, in each instance the overwhelming majority of community members sided with those individuals to whom the immediate power fell, and consequently the

⁷³ Weber, p. 60-61

Bahá'í Faith has to this day averted a major break within its ranks capable of realistically challenging the established claim to legitimate authority.

One of the important characteristics of Bahá'í leadership has been its asserted relationship to the Sacred. Both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh claimed to receive direct revelation from God. The official Bahá'í position concerning 'Abdu'l-Bahá is that 'Whatsoever His tongue utters, whatsoever His pen records, that is correct; according to the explicit text of Bahá'u'lláh in the Tablet of the Branch.'⁷⁴ Thus, although falling into a different category than either the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh, his word is accepted by Bahá'ís as being inspired by the Sacred. Likewise, Bahá'ís hold that Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice by the power granted to them by 'Abdu'l-Bahá are divinely guided. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá's last will and testament reads:

The sacred and youthful branch, the guardian of the Cause of God as well as the Universal House of Justice, to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abhá Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of His Holiness, the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God.⁷⁵

Therefore, in the tradition of Shí'ah Islám the Bahá'í Faith maintains that contact between God and the leadership of His community has not been severed but progressively continues.

Finally, during both its early years of growth in Persia and its later expansion throughout the world the Bahá'í Faith has attracted followers from various social and economic backgrounds. Lord Curzon found them in every walk of life from the ministers of the royal court to the scavenger

⁷⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'The Covenant', in The Bahá'í Revelation, p. 184

⁷⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, trans. by Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1944), p. 11

and the groom.⁷⁶ Hence, it is difficult to argue that the movement is solely the manifestation of a specific socio-economic class. Rather, it appears that the Bahá'í Faith is a product of a world whose rapidly collapsing civilizations, be they characterized by an overt rationalism or a dogmatic traditionalism, have failed to answer, both individually and socially, the basic problems of modern man.

The Bahá'í Faith sees its historical mission as being that of creating the foundation of a new world civilization, and therefore its teachers are attempting to impart the Faith's message to the masses of mankind. One country with which the movement's connections can be traced back to its earliest years of historical development, and one which has subsequently become a center of mass teaching activity, is India, and it is to this land that we shall now turn our attention.

⁷⁶ Curzon, p. 499

India's earliest contact with the new movement took place during the time of the Bāb. The various histories of the Bāb make mention of several prominent Indian believers. Nabíl-i-A'zam tells us that one of the 'Letters of the Living' was an Indian known as Shaykh Sa'id-i-Hindí. Like the other disciples of the Bāb, he was directed by his master to spread the message of the new revelation. This command took him not only to various parts of Persia, but also to his homeland of India. His work in India, however, was unproductive. As Nabíl states, '... the latter was productive of what might seem a negligible result, its only fruit being the conversion of a certain siyyid ...'¹ After this, Shaykh Sa'id-i-Hindí dropped from sight, his ultimate fate remaining a mystery.

Another Indian convert during the ministry of the Bāb was a certain blind Siyyid, Jenāb-i-Baṣír, about whose life the Bābí histories are not in complete agreement. Nabíl states that this believer was none other than the above mentioned Siyyid converted by Sa'id-i-Hindí in the town of Multan, where 'Casting behind him the trappings of leadership, and severing himself from his friends and kinsmen, he arose with a fixed resolve to render his share of service to the Cause he had embraced.'² On the other hand, The Tāríkh-i-Jadíd claims Siyyid Baṣír heard of the Bāb's appearance in Bombay from where he hastened to Mecca and met the Bāb in person.³ After this meeting he returned to Persia and began to disseminate the teachings of his new master. Both histories agree, however, that he became active within the Bābí community, and that he was known for his eloquence and

¹ Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 652

² Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 589

³ Mírzá Huseyn of Hamadán, p. 245-246

depth of learning.

The activities of Jenáb-i-Basír were finally brought to the attention of the state authorities. The Táríkh-i-Jadíd says that after the Mázinďarán upheaval Siyyid Bašír went to 'Irāq where he was eventually arrested by the Prince-Governor in Burújird who, '... because he was so ready of speech and eloquent in discourse, first ordered his tongue to be cut out, and then put him to death.'⁴ Nabíl says he was arrested in Luristán where after being tortured, he eventually succumbed.⁵ It is clear from both accounts, therefore, that Jenáb-i-Bašír never returned to his homeland.

A third convert from India was a dervish mentioned in The Táríkh-i-Jadíd under the title of 'the Indian believer'.⁶ This is most likely the same individual mentioned in Nabíl's account who had seen the Báb in a vision and soon hastened to Persia on foot to find the imám mahdí. The dervish met the Báb in Chihríq where the latter gave him the title Qahru'lláh.⁷ After leaving the Báb's presence, 'the Indian believer' began to expound his leader's doctrines. This eventually led to his being arrested in the city of Khuy where the new convert along with several other Bábís was beaten and paraded through the streets on an ass.⁸ If indeed 'the Indian believer' was the same Qahru'lláh mentioned by Nabíl - the likeness of the two accounts making it appear to be so - he later, following orders from the Báb, left on foot for India where he was to announce the appearance of the qá'im. Whether or not he successfully returned to India is unknown.

That there were other Indian believers present in Persia during the time of the Báb is made apparent by Mahjúr's monograph on the Bábí

⁴ Mírzá Huseyn of Hamadán, p. 247

⁵ Nabíl-i-A'zam, p. 590

⁶ Mírzá Huseyn of Hamadán, p. 241

⁷ Balyuzi, The Báb, p. 137

⁸ Mírzá Huseyn of Hamadán, p. 244

insurrection in Mázindarán. He lists four Indians as being among the 318 Bábís who defended themselves at Fort Shaykh Tabarsí.⁹ It is evident, however, that the activities of Indian converts at this time were for the most part limited to Persia: Shaykh Sa'id-i-Hindí upon reaching India found his efforts unproductive; Qahru'lláh's arrival in his homeland remains doubtful; and while it seems apparent from The Táríkh-i-Jadíd's account of Jenáb-i-Bašír's hearing about the Báb in Bombay that some knowledge of the Báb's doctrines was current in India, it also appears that it was only partial or scattered knowledge. Therefore, it is safe to say that during the lifetime of the Báb the new Faith was virtually non-existent in the subcontinent.

The year 1872 marks an historical landmark in the history of the Bahá'í Faith in India. It was in this year that Jamál Effendi arrived in Bombay and began to actively teach the doctrines and principles of the new religion. Since the time of the Báb's death in 1850, several Bábís, and henceforth Bahá'ís, had settled in Bombay (largely in association with the Parsi community), but no active teaching of the message had taken place. In 1871 from his confines in 'Akká, Bahá'u'lláh commissioned one of the numerous pilgrims who came to visit him from throughout the Near East to proceed to India and spread the word of his religion. This man, a learned scholar of Arabic and Persian, was the above mentioned Sulaymán Khán-i-Tanákábuní Jamál Effendi. Having had the title of 'Lamia' (the brilliant one) conferred upon him by Bahá'u'lláh,¹⁰ Jamál Effendi and his kinsmen Mírzá Huseyn late in the year 1872 boarded a boat in Port Said, Egypt, and set sail for India. Upon

⁹ E.G. Browne, 'Further Notes on Bábí Literature', Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion, p. 238

¹⁰ Siyyid Mustafá Roumie, 'Bahá'í Pioneers', Star of the West. The Bahá'í Magazine, vol. XXII, # 3, June, 1931, (Washington D.C.), p. 76 (Note - The author of this article was the same Siyyid Mustafá-i-Rúmí mentioned in subsequent pages who was converted by Jamál Effendi. The spelling of names differs due to the fact that I have listed the author's name in the exact form as it appears in Star of the West).

arriving in Bombay the two Bahá'ís were received by several Persian merchants.

During his stay in Bombay Jamál Effendi delivered a great many talks concerning the claims and principles of the Bahá'í Faith. One such talk was directed towards the head of the Khoja community, the Aga Khan. However, rather than bringing converts to the Bahá'í Faith, his discourses aroused the animosity of numerous religious leaders, and consequently the two teachers, on the advice of their friends, departed the city. Although their initial stay in the great port city was cut short, Bombay was subsequently to become one of the leading Bahá'í communities in India.

After leaving Bombay the two men travelled throughout the subcontinent delivering the message of Bahá'u'lláh to the elite of the country:

It was his custom to notify his arrival to the Governor or highest official of the place in British India and to the ruling prince in an Indian State. He would then pay a visit to them and deliver the Message. His list of those whom he delivered the Message contains names of almost all the high officials and princes and princesses of the land.¹¹

In 1876 an historic gathering was held in the old Mughal capital of Delhi. The event was the assumption of the title 'The Empress of India' by Queen Victoria. Present at this ceremony were all the rulers of the various states in India, as well as numerous religious and secular leaders of the country. Jamál Effendi used this timely occasion to reveal the message of the Bahá'í Faith to many of the dignitaries. For example, he was able to meet and talk with Swāmī Dayanand Sarasvati, founder of the Ārya Samāj.¹²

The movement's initial reception in India was a mixed one. In most instances Jamál Effendi was met with consideration and courtesy. There were, however, several exceptions to this gentility. As previously

¹¹ Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 31, May, 1944, (New Delhi), p. 1-2

¹² Siyyid Mustafa Roumie, 'Bahá'í Pioneers', Star of the West, vol. XXII, # 3, June, 1931, p. 78

mentioned, he met with hostility in Bombay, and at later date he experienced similar antagonism in Calcutta. Altogether, the fruits of his labor seemed negligible. During a year's travel in India Jamál Effendi had managed to convert only a handful of individuals. When he left the subcontinent in 1878 to carry the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to the countries of South-east Asia, he left behind him three prominent converts:

Ra'fíd-din Khán of Hasanpur, Hájí Ramaḍán of Rampur, and Siyyid Muṣṭafáy-i-Rúmí of Madras.¹³ The latter was destined not only to give great service to the Faith in India, but also in Burma where he helped establish two Bahá'í groups, one in Rangoon, and another in Mandalay.¹⁴

The next twenty years was a period of slow growth and development for the Bahá'í Faith in India. The message of the movement was spread via the work of devoted converts to the major cities of the subcontinent. Teaching activities were directed from three centers of Bahá'í organization: Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. Many of the programs were presented under the auspices of the Theosophical Society, while others were carried out by individual believers in their own way and by their own means. Slowly the claims of the Bahá'í Faith began to reach the ears of many of the educated members of Indian society.

During his years of leadership, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sent several prominent Bahá'í teachers to India to help promote the movement. Among these were Mírzá Maḥmúd-i-Zarqání, and Aga Mírzá Mahram. The latter finally settled in Bombay where he played a leading role in the Bahá'í community, while Mírzá Maḥmúd-i-Zarqání toured the country and eventually returned to his native Persia.¹⁵ Both men by means of their zealous spirits helped enhance teaching activity throughout the country, and by the year 1908 there were a

¹³ Siyyid Mustafa Roumie, 'Bahá'í Pioneers', Star of the West, vol. XXII # 4, July, 1931, p. 112

¹⁴ Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 31, May, 1944, p. 10

¹⁵ Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 31, May, 1944, p. 2



Siyyid Mustafáy-i-Rumí

number of Bahá'í local spiritual assemblies (communities of nine or more believers) established in India including assemblies in Bombay, Calcutta, Aligarh, and Lahore. Of these, the Bombay community took the forefront in both the teaching of the Faith and the translation of literature. Its advancements in the area of translation marked the first time any of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh had been translated into one of the native languages of India. The activities of the Bombay community were commented upon by a travelling American Bahá'í, Sydney Sprague, who in 1908 reported, 'There are three meetings a week held in Bombay and there are as a rule eighty to a hundred men present.'¹⁶ He also emphasized that it was not easy to become a Bahá'í in India. 'It often means a great sacrifice on the part of a believer, a loss of friends, money, and position.'¹⁷

In January of 1910 a convention comprised of members from the various religions of India was held in Allahabad. The Bahá'ís were invited to this convention, and Siyyid Mustafá-i-Rúmí, one of Jamál Effendi's original converts, presented a talk which was enthusiastically received by the delegates. As a result of the interest shown at the convention it was decided that teaching activities in the subcontinent should be accelerated, and approximately one year later a national teaching campaign was launched. The program called for the election of a nineteen member teaching council which would co-ordinate propagation activities across the entire country. The council officially came into existence during the early months of 1911.¹⁸

Two female American Bahá'ís were very prominent during the campaign, and their influence was felt by the various Bahá'í communities in the subcontinent. One, Lua Getsinger, was personally directed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to travel to India and spread the Faith. 'Just as 'Abdu'l-Bahá had sailed

¹⁶ Sydney Sprague, A Year with the Bahá'ís of India and Burma, (London, 1908), p. 15

¹⁷ Sprague, p. 17

¹⁸ 'Letter from N.R. Vakil', Star of the West, vol. II, # 7-8, August, 1911, (Chicago), p.14

from the East to the West to spread the Faith, He now summoned Lua to travel from West to East to do the same thing.¹⁹ The other teacher, Mrs. H. Stannard, a student of comparative religion, answered a call for assistance put out by the Indian community. For several years these two dedicated women delivered lectures from one end of the country to the other. Lua Getsinger spoke on various aspects of the Bahá'í Faith at numerous meetings sponsored by such groups as the Ārya Samāj, the Brāhmo Samāj, and the Theosophical Society. In addition to her lecture tours, Mrs. Stannard represented the Bahá'í religion at the All-India Theistic Conference of 1913.²⁰ Both women were also responsible for the publication of Bahá'í articles in several Indian newspapers. For example, in the Sind Gazette of December 24, 1913, an editorial appeared which stated that:

A rather remarkable visitor to Karachi - far more remarkable than any of the Congress and Conference dignitaries - is Mrs. Stannard, the Baha'i Missionary. This gifted lady, who has studied all the religions of the world, and all the philosophies, and has come to the conclusion, not that they are all wrong, but that they are all right, has a new gospel to preach - not her own, but that of her Master, Abdu'l-Baha, the head of the Baha'i religious movement.²¹

The popular response that the two Americans received throughout their travels was portentous; in future years American believers would continue to play an active role in the teaching campaigns of the Indian community.

Although not winning many converts to the movement, the teaching campaign was still of great importance to the development of the Bahá'í community in India, as it marked the first real attempt to systematically teach the Faith in the subcontinent. It not only paved the way for future plans, it also gave the Bahá'ís of India their first true feeling of

¹⁹ William Sears and Robert Quigly, The Flame, (Oxford, 1972), p. 112

²⁰ Star of the West, vol. V, # 2, April, 1914, (Chicago), p. 22

²¹ 'Editorial from The Sind Gazette', in Star of the West, vol. V, # 2, April, 1914, p. 23

community spirit. Before this time, teaching activities were for the most part efforts of individual communities; rarely was there an attempt made to organize anything beyond the local level. Thus, the Teaching Council of 1911 was in many ways the forerunner of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India and Burma.

December 27-29, 1920, is another significant landmark in the history of the Bahá'í Faith in India. It was on these dates that the First All-India Bahá'í Convention was held in the city of Bombay. Representatives of all the major world religions were present, as well as Bahá'í delegates from throughout the country. Although there are no official figures on the number of Bahá'ís residing in India during this time, it was estimated that there were nearly 175 followers present at the Convention.²²

There were several important resolutions passed at the Convention from which the following were taken:

- 1) that funds be collected to build a Bahá'í temple in India;
- 2) that a school be started in Bombay for the education of Bahá'í children;
- 3) that a Bahá'í library be established in India;
- 4) that a publishing society be established to translate Bahá'í literature into different Indian languages; and
- 5) that there be a greater expansion in teaching activities and distribution of literature.²³

It was to these objectives that the Bahá'ís of India now turned.

It is significant to note that the First All-India Bahá'í Convention and the death of 'Abdu'l-Bahá were separated by less than a year. It was as if the Indian community sensed the new course the movement would take

²² K.K. Bhargava, 'Echoes of First All-India Bahá'í Conference', Star of the West, vol. XII, # 13, Nov, 1921, (Chicago), p. 220

²³ 'The First All-India Bahá'í Convention', Star of the West, vol. XII, # 1, March, 1921, p. 21

under the guidance of Shoghi Effendi. From this point forward the Bahá'í community in India - in accordance with the Guardian's plans for the Faith throughout the world - was to an ever increasing degree to become oriented towards executing its teaching plans within the framework of an international administrative structure, the center of which was the Guardian himself.

Between the years 1921 and 1938 the objectives initiated by the First All-India Bahá'í Convention were pursued vigorously. Consequently, there were notable accomplishments in all areas of endeavor. The guidance of these projects was entrusted to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India and Burma, which Shoghi Effendi saw fit to create in April of 1923. The role he bequeathed to this body is evident from the contents of the following message sent in November of 1925:

I pray that your newly constituted National Spiritual Assembly may grow from strength to strength, may co-ordinate and consolidate the ever-expanding activities of the friends in India and Burma and inaugurate a fresh campaign of Teaching that will redound to the glory and power of the Most Great Name.²⁴

The National Spiritual Assembly, composed of nine individuals elected by delegates of the various local communities in India and Burma, met periodically in Bombay. Ten years later, in January of 1933, it was incorporated with the government of India.

Organized teaching activities and the distribution of literature were greatly increased during these years. One of the largest teaching events took place at the centenary celebration of the birth of the founder of the Ārya Samāj, Dyanand Sarasvati. The commemoration was held in Mathura in the year 1925, and the Bahá'ís were granted special camp grounds where they were allowed to distribute their literature. During the five day event almost five thousand booklets explaining the principles of the Faith were

²⁴ Shoghi Effendi, 'Message of November 24, 1925', Dawn of a New Day, (New Delhi, 1970), p. 11

distributed.²⁵

The Guardian constantly encouraged the Bahá'í community of India and Burma to increase their teaching activities. He continually stressed that it was part of their duty as Bahá'ís to spread the message of Bahá'u'lláh. For example, in a message to the Bahá'ís of India dated November 25, 1934, he said; 'The essential is that all the friends, without any exception whatever, should realise the full measure of the responsibility which Baha'u'llah has placed on them for teaching far and wide his Message.'²⁶ At a later date he reiterated that '... an unprecedented effort in the field of teaching is urgently required. Such an effort is of vital and paramount importance.'²⁷

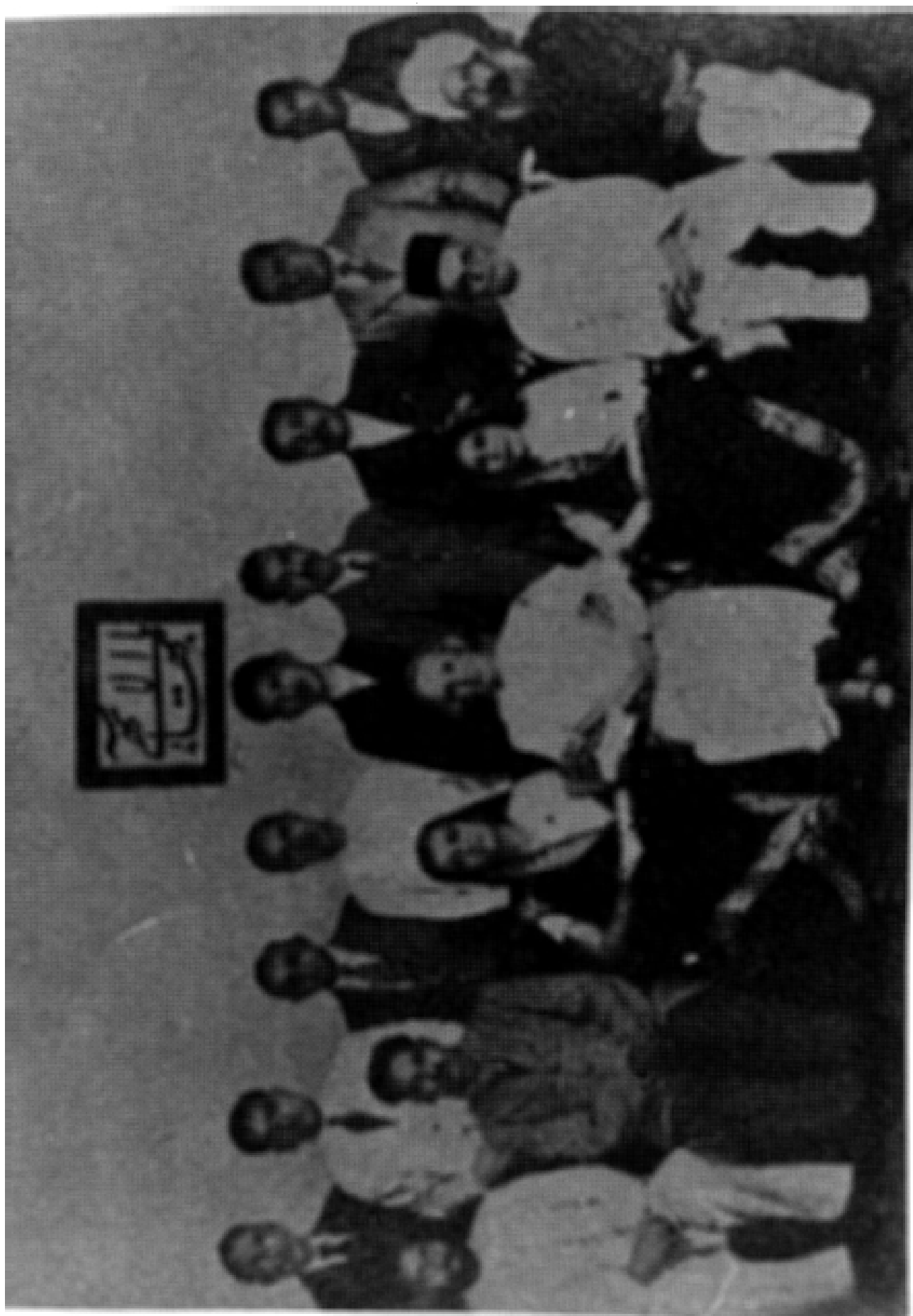
In an effort to stimulate teaching activity, Shoghi Effendi sent several teachers from various parts of the world to the subcontinent. Among the most famous of these travelling teachers was an American convert, Miss Martha Root. She made two tours of India, one in 1930 and the other in 1937-1938. A short synopsis of her work shows she delivered public lectures from Karachi to Madras, including major presentations in the colleges and universities of Lahore, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Delhi, Aligarh, Lucknow, Kanpur, Allahabad, Benares, Patna, and Calcutta. She also broadcast radio messages in both Mysore and Hyderabad and met with many of the leading personalities of the country including the poetess Mrs. Sarojini Naidu. Her work was so impressive that the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma in a letter to the Bahá'ís of the United States said of her, 'Martha Root has opened the whole of India for us, and it now devolves upon us to so utilize these openings.'²⁸

²⁵ The Bahá'í World, vol. II, April, 1926 - 1928, (New York, 1928), p. 42

²⁶ Shoghi Effendi, 'Message of November 25, 1934', Dawn of a New Day, p. 50

²⁷ Shoghi Effendi, 'Message of March 10, 1936', Dawn of a New Day, p. 59

²⁸ The Bahá'í World, vol. VIII, April, 1938 - 1940, p. 61



Martha Root and Indian Bahá'ís

There were numerous other teachers who took to the highways and railways of India during these years in order to help spread the knowledge of the Faith to a greater number of the subcontinent's inhabitants: Mr. Mahfúz-'ul-Haq 'Ilmí carried on active propagation in Delhi; Professor Pritam Singh made several teaching tours of the colleges and universities of northern India; Mrs. Shírin Fozdar spoke to more than a thousand people in the town hall of Calcutta²⁹; and Mrs. Keith Ransom-Kehler made a two month lecture tour of the major cities of the country. Therefore, the teaching work which Shoghi Effendi prescribed as a vital necessity to the advancement of the Faith in India was systematically increased.

Advancements were also made in the field of publishing between the years 1921 and 1938. Many Bahá'í books were translated into several different Indian languages including Gujarati, Bengali, Sindhi, Hindi, and Urdu. One of the most internationally well known introductory books on the Faith, Dr. J.E. Esselmont's Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, was one of these texts. Shoghi Effendi had personally encouraged the Bahá'ís of India to translate this work. In March of 1932 he wrote; 'I wish to urge you to take as soon as you possibly can, the necessary and most effective steps to ensure the translation of Dr. Esselmont's book into Urdu and Gujrati.'³⁰ Another major publishing accomplishment was the establishment of a Bahá'í monthly magazine, the Kaukib-i-Hind. The magazine was published in Urdu and had over 200 subscribers. In addition, over 200 articles appeared in newspapers and magazines throughout the country including many articles in Telugu speaking areas.

Concerning the other goals which the First All-India Bahá'í Convention had set for the Indian community, the following can be related: A Bahá'í school for children was successfully established in Poona, and in September of 1937 the first Indian Bahá'í Summer School session was held; Bahá'í books

²⁹ Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 8, March, 1937, p. 5

³⁰ Shoghi Effendi, 'Message of March 12, 1932', Dawn of a New Day, p. 33-34

were presented to a number of major libraries around the country; and construction of a Bahá'í Center was begun in Karachi.

The efforts made by the Bahá'í community in India during these years increased the public's knowledge of the movement. Furthermore, under the guiding hands of Shoghi Effendi and the National Spiritual Assembly the various Bahá'í communities throughout the country began to function as a unit. The time had come when Shoghi Effendi could truly speak of the 'Indian community'. However, even with the inter-community organization that marked the period, the number of new converts to join the movement was practically nil; over the eighteen year period only three new local spiritual assemblies had been added to the list of assemblies in the country.

One of the characteristics of teaching activity during this period was that it was by and large directed towards the educated elite of the country. In fact, ever since its inception in India the movement had been closely connected with the intellectuals and leaders of the country. Even though as early as 1933 (when referring to translation work) Shoghi Effendi had said, 'I would urge you to concentrate your energy on this important and essential preliminary to an intensive campaign of teaching among the masses in India,'³¹ his advice went virtually unheeded. Lecture tours and university visits were capable of reaching only certain strata of society, and, as previously noted, these were the types of activity that predominated. Perhaps for this reason, the number of converts in India remained infinitesimal.

When in 1937 Shoghi Effendi initiated the Seven-Year Plan in the United States, the Indian community meeting in convention in Karachi suggested to the National Spiritual Assembly that a similar project be started in India and Burma, and consequently the National Spiritual Assembly resolved to undertake a Six-Year Plan which would commence in 1938, but due

³¹ Shoghi Effendi, 'Message of March 24, 1933', Dawn of a New Day, p. 42

to lack of funds, it was not until 1940 that any real action was taken. It was the Guardian who finally set the project in motion by earmarking money for the creation of a special teaching fund to help finance the Plan. In this regard, his secretary relayed that:

He trusts that this will stimulate the body of Indian and Burmese Baha'is also to contribute to this Fund generously and by providing the necessary means to enable them to speedily fulfil the task they have avowed to carry out.³²

The Six-Year Plan contained several distinguishing characteristics which were not found in previous teaching plans. Until this time most teaching activities had involved lecture tours in co-ordination with various reform movements such as the Ārya Samāj, the Brāhmo Samāj, and the Theosophical Society. In the past there had been very little contact with sections of society outside the intellectual circles. The new Plan attempted to change these policies. No longer were only the large cities visited, but efforts were also made to hold meetings independent of other groups in smaller cities and towns. More importantly, the emphasis was shifted from teaching tours to the establishment of residences throughout the country. Individual Bahá'ís now left their homes and moved to areas where they could address a larger segment of the population. Hence, a conscious effort was made to direct the teachings of the Faith towards a different social stratum.

Once underway, the Six-Year Plan produced immediate results. By 1941 three new local spiritual assemblies had been formed: one in Hyderabad, one in Kota, and one in Bangalore. As was his custom, Shoghi Effendi wired the Indian community, congratulating them on their achievements and urging them to continue their efforts.³³ The next year saw three more local spiritual assemblies established, and Bahá'í Groups (communities whose members total less than nine) were formed in Secunderabad, Belgaum,

³² Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 31, May, 1944, p. 2

³³ The Bahá'í World, vol. IX, April, 1940 - 1944, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1945), p. 60

and Ujjain. By the time of the Fourteenth Annual Bahá'í Convention held in Poona in 1943, eight new assemblies had been formed. The rigorous teaching efforts continued during the final year of the Plan, resulting in twenty-nine local spiritual assemblies being established in the subcontinent by 1944.³⁴

The achievements of the Six-Year Plan encouraged the Indian Bahá'í community to launch another teaching campaign starting in April of 1946. A month before its inception Shoghi Effendi (writing from Haifa to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India and Burma) remarked:

The believers in India have set an inspiring example to their fellow-believers throughout the East, and even to the great mass of their co-religionists in Bahá'u'lláh's native land, and have abundantly demonstrated to them all, what organized activity, boldly conceived and soundly and energetically conducted can achieve when directed and animated by the ennobling influences and the generative spirit of the Faith of Baha'u'llah.³⁵

Although marred by the disruptive events brought upon the subcontinent by the partition of Pakistan and India in July of 1947, the Four-Year Plan met with much the same success as had the previous Six-Year Plan. By April of 1947 another eight local spiritual assemblies had been founded, and the same number of groups had been established. In addition, each summer, Bahá'í schools for both children and adults were organized. Due to these encouraging figures the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma received nearly six hundred pounds sterling from Bahá'í communities throughout the world to finance yet another teaching project, and as a consequence, in 1951 India embarked on its third successive teaching campaign.

One of the major accomplishments of India's third teaching project occurred in the area of translation and publication. The language problem had always been a major roadblock for Bahá'í teachers in India, and during

³⁴ The Bahá'í World, vol. IX, p. 63

³⁵ Shoghi Effendi, 'Message of March 20, 1946', Dawn of a New Day, p. 113

the third campaign a determined effort was made to bridge the communication gap by translating publications into as many as fifteen different languages. As a result, over four thousand books and pamphlets were sold and distributed. Also, between the years 1951 and 1953 eight new local spiritual assemblies were established³⁶, and by the end of 1953 there were approximately seven-hundred Bahá'ís in India.

In October of 1953 the fourth and final Intercontinental Teaching Conference, which had been designed to inaugurate the Ten-Year Crusade, was convened in New Delhi. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, Pakistan, and Burma³⁷ hosted the gathering. Other participating National Spiritual Assemblies included the United States, Canada, Central and South America, Persia, 'Irāq, and Australia and New Zealand. Mason Remey, a Hand of the Cause and the Guardian's representative at the Conference, delivered Shoghi Effendi's message, which enumerated forty-one new territories and islands within the Asia Teaching Mission to be opened to the Faith during the Crusade. In this message he said of the Asiatic Continent:

... the cradle of the principal religions of mankind; the home of so many of the oldest and mightiest civilizations which have flourished on this planet; the crossways of so many kindreds and races; ... such a continent, so privileged among its sister continents and yet so long and so sadly tormented, now stands at the hour of the launching of a world-encompassing Crusade, on the threshold of an era that may recall, in its glory and ultimate repercussions, the great periods of spiritual revival which, from the dawn of recorded history have, at various stages in the revelation of God's purpose for mankind, illuminated the path of the human race.³⁸

The 450 Bahá'ís present at the Conference not only outlined strategies for the upcoming Crusade, they also engaged in a program of public relations. A reception held in one of Delhi's large hotels was attended by over

³⁶ The Bahá'í World, vol. XII, p. 69

³⁷ With the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India and Burma became the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, Pakistan, and Burma.

³⁸ The Bahá'í World, vol. XII, p. 31

a thousand persons, and delegates were also sent to meet with government leaders including the President and Vice-President of India, as well as the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. When the closing prayer of the final session had been chanted on October 15, 1953, the Indian community once again found itself embarking on another teaching project; one which by the time of its completion in 1963 would have completely revolutionized the composition of the Indian Bahá'í community.

While not seeing any outstanding numerical increase for the Bahá'í community in India, the 1950's contained two important events which should be noted. One was the separation of the India, Pakistan, and Burmese National Spiritual Assembly into three distinct bodies: Pakistan received an independent National Spiritual Assembly in 1957, and Burma became separate in 1959. The other occurrence, although minor at the time, proved to be an omen concerning the future direction the movement would take in India. It involved the first village teaching conference in India held in village Rāmpur (near Benares) where several villagers had earlier been converted. Several recommendations came from this conference which were important in terms of their future implications. First, it was requested that the National Spiritual Assembly print up simple leaflets in Hindi to be distributed in nearby villages. Second, it was suggested that study classes in Hindi be established in Rāmpur, and finally, it was recommended that city Bahá'ís interact with Rāmpur's inhabitants by participating in their religious festivals, thus creating an atmosphere of friendliness.³⁹

The modern period of Bahá'í history in India began in 1961. In that year Hand of the Cause Dr. R. Muhájir, while making one of his frequent trips to the subcontinent, decided that a village conference similar to the one in Rāmpur should be held in central India. As a result, in January of

³⁹ Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 93, March, 1958, p.3

that year a conference was held in village Saṅgimandā,⁴⁰ located in Shaḡapur district of Madhya Pradesh in the region known traditionally as Malwa. At the conclusion of the conference a great many villagers enrolled in the Faith, and word of this occurrence spread to nearby villages. Chapter 3 will examine in greater detail the subsequent events that followed the conference, but for now, suffice it to say that within the next few years a great tide of villagers declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh. In other areas of India the Bahá'í communities having taken note of the events in Malwa began directing their teaching activities towards village communities. Consequently, in the following years the number of both declared believers and local spiritual assemblies in India mushroomed. A message from the Hands of the Cause in the Holy Land to the National Conventions of the Bahá'í World in April of 1962 reflected this increase:

India, one of the first countries in the world to receive the light of a newly-born Revelation has, during the past year, witnessed a tide of mass conversion not only wholly unprecedented in that country but without parallel anywhere in the entire world during the last one hundred years of Baha'i history.⁴¹

The statistical report issued by the Indian National Spiritual Assembly in July of 1973 (Table 1) graphically demonstrates the growth of the Faith during recent years.

⁴⁰ This event will be elaborated upon in Chapter 3.

⁴¹ The Bahá'í World, vol. XIII, 1954 - 1963, (Haifa, 1970), p. 298

Table 1⁴²

Year	A. Local Spiritual Assemblies	B. Believers	C. Population of India
1961	78	(less than 1000)	439,234,771
1963	723	89,217	
1964	1,064	109,815	
1965	1,322	141,508	
1966	2,137	206,391	
1967	1,543	226,554	
1968	1,988	240,390	
1970	3,350	312,602	
1971	4,467	356,774	547,367,925
1972	4,817	380,349	
1973	4,369	394,081	

As the statistics reveal, the number of declared believers in India jumped from less than a thousand in 1961 to close on ninety thousand by March of 1963, an increase of approximately eighty-nine thousand in two years. By the end of the Universal House of Justice's Nine-Year Plan in 1973, this number had risen to close on four hundred thousand. It had taken nearly ninety years for the Bahá'í community in India to reach the thousand mark in population, and then suddenly within a twelve year period this figure was multiplied four hundred times.

The natural question which arises when one examines these figures is, 'What was the cause of this sudden upsurge?' In many instances the

⁴² The above figures indicate that the Bahá'í Faith is a growing organization in India. Although the accuracy of the figures in both columns B and C cannot be exactly determined, the former coming from the organization in question and not an independent source, and the latter being the Indian census figures for 1961 and 1971 (the difficulties involved in Census taking in India detracting from the accuracy), they are the only statistical guides available, and therefore, in order to give the reader a general picture of the increase in the number of Bahá'í declarations during the last thirteen years, use has been made of them. The large increase in declarations between 1961 and 1963 is no doubt a structural jump; that is, it reflects the change in teaching approach which provided the movement with a larger audience. The steady growth between 1963 and 1973, however, would indicate that declarations are increasing at a greater rate than the general population.

question is not an easy one to answer. Many of the Indian Bahá'ís claim that the recent growth was a sprouting of the seeds that had been planted by earlier teachers. While this answer may contain some grain of truth, it seems evident that during these years there were certain new approaches in teaching methods which set them off from earlier programs.

The most obvious change was that after 1961 teaching activities were for the most part directed towards the village population of the subcontinent. The Rampur conference had been the forerunner of this shift in emphasis, and with the advent of the Sangīmandā conference the Bahá'í teaching mission in India was converted from a primarily urban movement to a rural oriented crusade. As a result, the Indian Bahá'í community became known throughout the Bahá'í world as a 'mass teaching' community, that is, a community whose resources are directed towards teaching the Bahá'í Faith to the rural uneducated masses of humanity. In fact, India was one of the first countries in the world since the time of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh to orient itself towards the masses.

In conjunction with this shift in goal direction, the community out of necessity began to reorient its teaching methods. Before the mass teaching era the Bahá'í community in India was more closely allied with Islām than with Hinduism. This development was only natural, as the early pioneers to India had come from Persian backgrounds and were therefore more apt to communicate with individuals who shared a similar cultural heritage. Thus, in terms of language, theology, and cultural symbols the Bahá'í Faith had much more in common with Indian Islām than it did with Hinduism. In the 1960's a conscious effort was made to relate the Bahá'í message to the Hindu tradition. The masses of Indian villagers were rooted in this tradition, and if the Bahá'í Faith was to speak to these people it would have to do so in concepts and symbols that they could understand. For example, Bahá'ís in India had tended to identify the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh with the Shi'ite religio-cultural symbols of the qá'im and the Imām Ḥusayn.

Needless to say, in Hinduism these symbols have no meaning. There is in Hindu cosmology, however, a concept of the Sacred manifesting Itself into the world in order to destroy evil doers and re-establish righteousness. This is the doctrine of the avatāra, most succinctly expressed in the Bhagavad Gītā. In order to more adequately communicate their message, Bahá'í teachers spoke of Bahá'u'lláh as an avatāra.⁴³ He was identified with that One who periodically descends into the world. As Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gītā:

Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bharata (Arjuna), then I send forth (create incarnate) Myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come in to being from age to age.⁴⁴

Furthermore, the only requisite for becoming a Bahá'í was acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as an avatāra, a marked contrast to earlier teaching approaches which demanded a new declarant to have a relatively thorough knowledge of the Faith before he was allowed to become a member of the community.

One innovation during this period which may have been partly responsible for the large increase in declarations was the opening of three teaching institutes in Indore, Mysore, and Gwalior.⁴⁵ One of the main functions of these institutes was to train travelling teachers, and consequently, special courses were given in methods of explaining the basic teachings and institutional structure of the Faith to uneducated villagers.

⁴³ This is not to say that before the mass teaching era Bahá'ís in India had not referred to Bahá'u'lláh as an avatāra. For example, at the First All-India Bahá'í Convention in 1920 Mr. Ayer gave a lecture which identified Bahá'u'lláh with the avatāra tradition. Rather, it is to point out that during the 1960's Bahá'í teachers in India made a conscious effort to direct their message towards the Hindu tradition, and as a consequence this approach became more predominant.

⁴⁴ Bhagavad Gītā, IV, 7-8, English trans. by S. Radhakrishnan, (New York, 1948), p. 154-155

⁴⁵ One of these institutes will be examined in Chapter 6.

For added incentive examinations were given at the end of training periods, and as a result Bahá'í teachers were better equipped to relate the Bahá'í message to the Hindu villager.

Of course, the efforts of individual Bahá'í teachers during these years cannot be underestimated. The upsurge in enthusiasm, which saw its initial display following the first signs of mass conversion in Malwa in 1961, seemed to boost the confidence of the Indian Bahá'í community. Men and women who were before hesitant to move in the rural areas now began to actively teach to this segment of society. The Indian National Spiritual Assembly spoke of this new dedication in the following dispatch:

There is a young man who is going to many parts of the country with his car, leaving behind his young wife and children and aunt to look after his business, just to serve the Cause of God for the love of the beloved Guardian. There are many like him who have left their jobs - whether in business or the medical profession to move among the people. There are a few young men who have given up their college studies for one year to teach the Faith, saying that the studies could wait but the Crusade of the beloved Guardian would not last forever. These are a few examples of the upsurge of enthusiasm which have made our previous exploits pale.⁴⁶

Today there are 397,054 registered believers and 4,412 local spiritual assemblies in India, and the Universal House of Justice has set a goal of greatly increasing both of these figures within the next five years. The Bahá'í Faith has now reached a position in Indian society where it is no longer unknown. Since the time of its inception in the subcontinent the Faith has passed through several stages of development. Initially a small band of Persian immigrants, it subsequently evolved into a small yet internationally linked group of educated elite, and finally into a community characterized by its large number of uneducated rural constituents. This last phase has no doubt been the most important, and it is one in which a specific region in Madhya Pradesh has played an important role. This region is Malwa.

⁴⁶ Bahá'í News (United States), * 386, April, 1963, (Wilmette, Illinois), p. 9

The region in India known as Malwa is the area of the modern day state of Madhya Pradesh that is bounded on the north by the Gwalior hills, on the east by the Betwa river, on the south by the plains of Narmada, and on the west by the Chambal river. Malwa proper may be described '... as a table-land, in general open and highly cultivated, varied with small conical and table-crowned hills and low ridges, watered by numerous rivers and small streams, and favoured with a rich productive soil, and a mild climate, alike conducive to the health of man, and the liberal supply of his wants and luxuries.'¹

The agricultural productivity of the region has always been widely acclaimed in India. In 1880 Sir John Malcolm commented in his A Memoir of Central India that '... few parts of India will be found to possess more natural advantages, or to produce greater variety of grain.'² Included in these crops are wheat, barley, corn, millet, sugar cane, and cotton. In addition, certain districts are known for their opium crops, the sale of which is controlled by the government.

The region contains two major cities: Ujjain of traditional fame, and Indore, a modern industrial center. The former is situated on the banks of the sacred river Narmada and was once the capital of Avanti, one of the sixteen principal states in India during the time of the Buddha. It was a renowned trading center where caravans travelling from as far away as Antioch unbuckled.³ 'Ujjain [Ujjain] ... has perhaps more undoubted claims to

¹ Sir John Malcolm, A Memoir of Central India, vol. I, (London, 1832), p. 3-4

² Malcolm, p. 8

³ Upadhyaya, p. 2

remote antiquity than any inhabited city in India; it being not only mentioned in the sacred volumes of the Hindus, but in the Periplus of the Erythrean sea, and by Ptolemy.⁴ Indore, on the other hand, is largely a product of modern India, having only developed during the nineteenth century. Today with a population of 572,622 it ranks as the largest city in Malwa.

Malwa has always been known as a cultural center of the subcontinent. The renowned Guptan poet, Kālidāsa, was a native of the region, as were numerous artists and musicians of classical India. Even today the Vindhya hills are spotted with temples and shrines of both local and All-India importance, and the city of Ujjain with its famed Mahā Kāl temple (the Great Time) is still a pilgrimage spot for both Vaiṣṇavite and Śaivite Hindus.

'Malwa has had an eventful history, partly because it provides by far the best route from northern India to the Deccan and so has attracted conquerors, and partly because, when there has been peace, the fertility of the area has supported prosperous kingdoms.'⁵ Having been annexed by Aśoka, Ujjain became one of the four district capitals of the Mauryan Empire. Then in the second century B.C., a powerful Central Asian tribe known as the Śakas entered the Punjab and slowly moved southwards. 'One section of this horde entered Mālwa, and founded a line of Saka princes who are known as the Western Kshatrapas or Satraps.'⁶

Malwa was rescued from Śaka domination by the legendary Vikramāditya who wrestled authority away from the invaders in the first century B.C. It was this occurrence which marked the beginning of the Vikrama Era, an event similar in Calenderic importance as the birth of Christ or the Hijra of Muḥammad. Malwa was dominated by Hindu rule until the thirteenth

⁴ Malcolm, p. 22

⁵ Adrian Mayer, Caste and Kinship in Central India, (London, 1960), p. 11

⁶ The Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol. IX, (Oxford, 1908), p. 335

century A.D. when the Slave Sultan Iltutmish invaded the region which he proceeded to plunder but did not occupy.⁷ 'Alá-ud-dín Khaljī's forces occupied Malwa in 1305, but it was not until the time of Fīrūz Shah (1351 - 1388) that it was completely conquered.

From 1398 until its absorption into the Mughal Empire during the reign of Akbar, Malwa was governed by several Muslim rulers who had asserted their independence from the central authority in Delhi. After Akbar's invasion, the country remained part of the Empire for the next 138 years. However, during the rule of Aurangzeb there began a period of breakdown; 'The year 1698 brings to an end the long period of peace and prosperity in Malwa. It also closes the century of united Malwa under Mughal rule.'⁸ By the middle of the eighteenth century the region had passed into the hands of the Marāthā chieftans.

The peak of Maratha power in Central India was reached during the reign of Mahādji Sindhiā. Having made the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II his puppet, he became the virtual ruler of most of northern India. His successor, however, met with ill times and was finally forced to sign a subsidiary alliance with the British in 1817. The other dominant Marāthā chieftan of the period, Malhar Rao Holkar, was likewise forced to conclude a peace treaty with the British. Consequently, although the Marāthā princes retained their domains and titles in Malwa, by the early nineteenth century their power had come to an end. Until 1947 it was the British rulers of India who held the real power in Malwa.

When India's independence was finally recognized in 1947, the Holkar State of Indore, the Sindhiā State of Gwalior and Dewas (both in which parts of Malwa were politically situated), and twenty other states acceded to the Dominion. In May of 1948 these states formed the Madhya Bhārat

⁷ The Cambridge History of India, vol. III, ed. by Sir Wolseley Haig, (New York and Cambridge, 1928), p. 55

⁸ Raghbir Sinh, Malwa in Transition, (Bombay, 1936), p. 27

Union. When the government of India decided to reorganize its member states on a linguistic basis, the new state of Madhya Pradesh was formed in 1956. The state included within its borders the former states of the Madhya Bhārat Union as well as the British Indian province of Central Provinces and Berar.

In socio-economic terms the region is characterized by its predominantly rural population. Four districts have less than 20% of their population in cities. The largest percentage of urban dwellers is found in Indore district where 60% of the population lives in cities. As one might expect, in a region which is predominantly rural, literacy is not high. Indore district has the highest literacy rate with 38% of its population being able to read and write. On the low end of the scale is Rajgarh district where only 10% of the population is literate. The percentage of scheduled caste^{*} members ranges from 7% in Dhar district to 23% in Shajapur district. Table 2 portrays by district statistical information relating to the above mentioned categories.

* Scheduled castes are those which have been placed on the government schedule for receiving special social benefits. In common usage the term has become synonymous with 'untouchable' or Harijan.

Table 2⁹

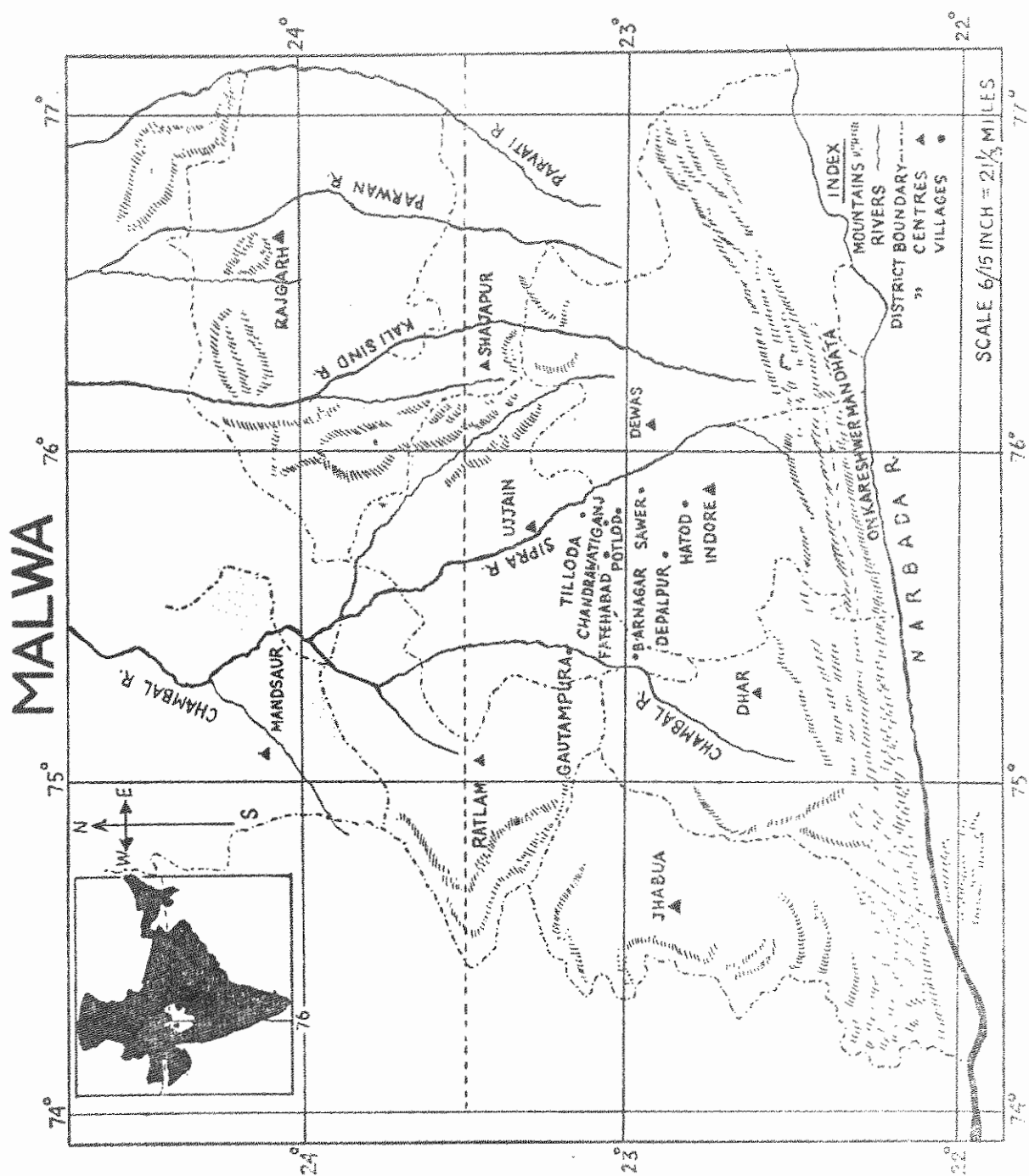
District	Population	Rural %	Urban %	Literate %	Scheduled Caste %
Mandsaur	752,085	79	21	22	15
Ratlam	483,521	71	29	21	13
Ujjain	661,720	68	32	23	20
Indore	753,594	40	60	38	14
Dewas	446,901	85	15	17	18
Shajapur	526,135	90	10	13	23
Rajgarh	516,871	91	9	10	19
Dhar	643,774	90	10	13	7

The history of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa is contemporary; it was only in 1942 that the first Bahá'í pioneer settled in the region. During the early years of India's Six-Year Plan Shoghi Effendi was calling for Indian Bahá'ís who resided in the major cities of the subcontinent to disperse themselves to smaller cities and towns for the purpose of spreading the message of the Bahá'í Faith to a greater range of the country's inhabitants:

Smallness of numbers, lack of skilled teachers and modesty of means should not discourage or deter them. They must remember the glorious history of the Cause which ... was established by dedicated souls, who, for the most part, were neither rich, famous, nor well-educated, but whose devotion, zeal and self-sacrifice overcame every obstacle and won miraculous victories for the Faith of God. Such spiritual victories can now be won for India and Burma by the friends. Let them dedicate themselves- young, and old, men and women, alike- and go forth and settle in new districts, travel and teach, in spite of lack of experience, and be assured that Baha'u'llah has promised to aid all those who arise in His name. His

⁹ The above figures were taken or derived from the 1961 Census. As Malwa is more of a linguistic than a political entity, agreement on the political districts it encompasses is lacking. The districts cited in this study are those in which Bahá'í activity has been most pronounced.

Map 2



strength will sustain them; their own weakness is unimportant.¹⁰

As previously mentioned, the policy of establishing residences throughout the country rather than solely relying on travel visits or lecture tours was one of the major changes that distinguished the Six-Year Plan from former plans.

At the time that the Guardian was making appeals, Mrs. Shírín Boman Meherabání, a Bahá'í of Parsi Ancestry, was living with her husband in Bombay where she was secretary of the city's Local Spiritual Assembly. For several years she and her husband, along with several other Bahá'ís in the Bombay community, had been making teaching trips to various cities in Maharashtra and Gujarat. While being aware of the Guardian's plea for Bahá'í pioneers to pick up their belongings and move to isolated areas, she had not made a step in this direction, as both the family's business and close relations were rooted in Bombay. Finally in 1942, having decided that she could no longer excuse herself from the Guardian's call, Mrs. Meherabání approached her husband about moving away from Bombay. Mr. Meherabání was initially unresponsive to such a request, but after a vivid dream in which he felt the Guardian call on him to make a sacrifice for Bahá'u'lláh, he consented.

The Meherabánís had not decided in which city they planned to settle. At first they travelled with their children to Bhopal, but finding the city unsuitable they decided to move on. Mrs. Meherabání prayed for an answer. The next morning they went to the railway station having determined that they would settle in the first town in which the afternoon train from Bhopal would stop. This town was Ujjain.

¹⁰ 'Letter written on Shoghi Effendi's behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India and Burma, June 29, 1941', Arise to Serve, (New Delhi, 1971), p. 69

In Ujjain the Meherabánís initially supported themselves by using some of the family's savings. At first Mr. Meherabání was forced to make frequent and extended trips to Bombay in order to ensure the transference of his business to other hands, but after these problems were settled he set up a new business in Ujjain and began to spread the message of the Faith.

In the beginning the Meherabánís' teaching activities were limited to speaking to friends and acquaintances within the confines of their own home. In Bahá'í parlance this type of teaching is referred to as 'fireside teaching', where the message is spread by means of open discussion within intimate groups. From these discussions, as well as from general investigation, it soon became evident to the Meherabánís that before their coming to Ujjain the Bahá'í Faith was virtually unknown in Malwa.

In 1943 another Bahá'í family from Bombay, the Munjes, joined the Meherabánís. Dr. Munje was one of the most prominent Bahá'í scholars in India, and he and his wife were a welcome addition to the Bahá'í community in Ujjain, which after a year of teaching still consisted of the Meherabánís and their children.

The year 1944 was a significant one for the Bahá'í community in Ujjain. During that year several important landmarks were established including the formation of the city's first Local Spiritual Assembly and the holding of the first Bahá'í public meeting in Malwa.

The Bahá'í Newsletter of May, 1944, mentioned the formation of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Ujjain, an event which earned the Meherabánís and the Munjes a place on the Bahá'í honor roll for distinguished service.¹¹ After the arrival of the Munjes, five new converts had been added to the group, four Muslims and a Hindu. On April 21, having gathered nine believers in one community, the Bahá'ís of Ujjain

¹¹ Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 31, May, 1944, p. 13

brought into being the city's first Local Spiritual Assembly.

The year 1944 also marked the centenary of the movement's origins; it was 100 years earlier in Shīrāz that the Báb made his first declaration. The Bahá'í community in Ujjain, like many other local communities both in India and throughout the world, used this occasion to proclaim the message of the Faith publicly. On the night of May 23, 1944, the recently established Bahá'í center was illuminated with lights, and pamphlets were distributed. On the same evening a drama depicting the major events in the life of the Báb was presented in the town hall. Both of these events signify the first public proclamation of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa.

Two other opportunities for the Bahá'ís of Ujjain to publicly proclaim the Faith arose within the same year. The first was the occasion of a Bahá'í marriage ceremony, and the second was the convening of an Ārya Samāj conference.

The marriage of one of Mrs. Meherabānī's daughters to a newly converted Muslim boy caused some commotion within the city. According to Mrs. Meherabānī, several of the leading mullás of Ujjain hinted that violence might erupt if the Muslim boy was allowed to participate in the ceremony. Mrs. Meherabānī was personally threatened, and one mullá declared he would carry the black flag to the ceremony. Although there were continual grumblings within the Muslim sector of Ujjain, the ceremony proceeded as planned, and the uniqueness of an inter-Faith wedding gave the Bahá'ís an opportunity to inform the public of the universality of their religion.

Perhaps the most significant event in the year 1944 for the Ujjain Bahá'í community was their participation in one of the city's Ārya Samāj conferences. In terms of the future development of the movement in Malwa this conference was of great importance. During the meeting the Bahá'ís established contact with several individuals who would later be instrumental in helping them teach the message of Bahá'u'lláh in rural Malwa. Mr. Maḥfūẓ-'ul' Ḥaq'Ilmī, a well known Bahá'í travelling teacher, was asked

by the Bahá'ís of Ujjain to address the assembled group on the subject of the social principles of the Bahá'í Faith. His speech attracted the attention of one Kísan Lāl, a scheduled caste leader from Shajapur (a district located north-east of Ujjain). Following the conference, Kísan Lāl came into active contact with the Ujjain Bahá'í community, which finally resulted in his declaring himself a Bahá'í. He then returned to Shajapur.

In Shajapur Kísan Lāl informed many of his low caste compatriots about the movement. As a result, the Bahá'í center in Ujjain was soon frequented by interested Harijans from the villages of Shajapur, but the elitist attitude that dominated the thinking of the Indian Bahá'í community at this time prevented them from being enrolled. The significance of this attitude and its later transfiguration is of vital importance to an understanding of the growth of the Bahá'í movement in Malwa, and it therefore warrants closer examination.

Outside of Írán, the Bahá'í Faith had to a large degree been associated with middle class urban intellectuals. This was true during its early years of development in the Americas and Europe and was no less characteristic of its early years of growth in India. The attitude concerning new believers which tended to characterize the Bahá'í community in India until the launching of the Ten-Year Crusade was the following: Before new believers could be enrolled into the movement they should not only have an adequate knowledge of the basic doctrines and principles of the Faith, they should also possess an acute awareness of its administrative organization and devotional procedures as well as a good understanding of its historical development. This approach to finding converts virtually excluded the illiterate segments of society, as it was impossible for villagers to grasp the finer details of the movement's structure and organization. As a result, although there were several instances of lower caste interest in the Faith before the commencement of the Ten-Year Crusade, Bahá'í communities in India did not take advantage of this interest. Their

understanding of what it meant to be a Bahá'í was not acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as a manifestation of God, it also included the ability to grasp the Bahá'í Faith in all its complexity. For example, for many years it was standard procedure in India for local administrators to examine a potential new believer before accepting his declaration. If they did not feel his knowledge was adequate, he would not be enlisted. Hence, in 1944 the Bahá'ís of Ujjain did not even consider that illiterate Harijans could be enrolled.

Between the years 1944 and 1947 several new believers were enrolled in Ujjain, and a Bahá'í community was established in nearby Indore where Mrs. Meherabání's brother had recently set up residence. In addition, a few individuals from surrounding villages who were judged capable of meeting Bahá'í standards were enrolled. One of these individuals was Dayā Rām Mālviā, who, like Kīśan Lāl, was a scheduled caste leader. He resided in village Harsodan, situated approximately fifteen miles outside the Ujjain city limits. Dayā Rām in turn enlisted several prominent scheduled caste members of his village, thereby establishing the first Bahá'í village community in Malwa.

The type of teaching activities carried out by the Bahá'í communities in Malwa during these years can be gleaned from the National Spiritual Assembly's Annual Report for the year 1946-47, parts of which are quoted below:

Teaching work: This was done through distribution of literature, personal contacts and also by correspondence. Many souls have been interested in the Cause and we pray that in this new year the fruits of the last year's seed sowing may appear ... there was an All-Faiths Conference organized by the Theosophists at Ujjain when Mrs. Shírín Boman, as a Bahá'í delegate, spoke on "Universal Brotherhood" ... On Guru Govindsingh's birthday anniversary, a Bahá'í speaker having been invited by the local Sikh community, who have come to look upon the Bahá'í Faith as an universal Faith, Mrs. Shírín Boman addressed that meeting... The N.S.A's valuable suggestion to write to the various radio stations for Bahá'í broadcast has been duly complied with. Several letters of request

in this regard have been sent to the various Indian broadcasting stations from Ujjain, Indore and Gwalior.¹²

With the coming of independence to British India, and the partition of the subcontinent into the independent states of India and Pakistan, the Bahá'í communities in Ujjain and Indore were dealt a severe blow. A large percentage of the communities' believers had come from Islamic background, and therefore, when partition was announced in July of 1947 most of them left for Pakistan. It seemed to the Meherabánís that all of their efforts had come to nought. The Ujjain Local Spiritual Assembly (the only one in Malwa) was lost, as there were no longer nine believers within the city. Also, the great tension that immediately followed partition made any type of religious proselytizing dangerous, especially for a religion that was so closely related to Islám. In this situation the Meherabánís decided to leave Ujjain and move north to Gwalior. Consequently, Malwa was left with only a few scattered believers, but the name Bahá'í was now known in the region, and the seeds which the Meherabánís had sown would later sprout and grow.

For the next twelve years Malwa lay virtually dormant; local spiritual assemblies were established, lost, and re-established in Indore, but that community did not provide any real support for teaching activities. Travelling teachers, however, frequented the region. In one report it was said of Ujjain:

This is a place where some of our pioneers had worked against great odds some years ago. It was pleasing to note that still there were some sympathisers to be found there who are keen that the centre be opened. Although they were non-Bahá'ís, they offered to keep the centre going until some Bahá'í could take it over.¹³

¹² 'Annual Report of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India and Burma; 1946 - 1947', p. 61

¹³ Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 86, January, 1957, p. 5

The outstanding event of the period was a visit to Malwa following the 1953 Intercontinental Conference in New Delhi of one of the newly appointed Hands of the Cause, the American Dorothy Baker. Upon the conclusion of the Delhi Conference, she was asked by Shoghi Effendi to stay in the subcontinent. She spent a fortnight in central India visiting Gwalior, Indore, and Ujjain. In all three cities she gave public lectures in colleges and town halls, and in Indore alone she gave ten addresses between December 23rd and 25th.¹⁴ However, the most important aspect of Dorothy Baker's trip was not the numerous lectures she delivered but her excursion to village Harsodan.

Following her lecture program in Ujjain, Dorothy Baker made an unscheduled afternoon excursion to village Harsodan. There she met not only with the local Bahá'ís, but with a large number of the lower caste inhabitants of the village. Her attitude was one of love and concern for the villagers as a whole - she ate with them and participated in their activities. To her, all men were Bahá'ís regardless of their economic or educational backgrounds. She seemed to exude that quality of unrestricted love that has manifested itself periodically in saints of such varied religious backgrounds as St. Francis or Jalálu'd-Dín-i-Rúmí.¹⁵ Mrs. Meherabání, her travelling companion during the excursion, later said of Dorothy Baker:

She gave us a completely new outlook. Before her trip we knew that the Faith was for all men, but we were concerned that those who entered its fold should have an understanding of the Faith. Dorothy Baker taught us that the most important thing in the Faith was love of Bahá'u'lláh and our fellow men. The details were minor. She really opened our eyes.*

The attitudes expressed by Dorothy Baker during her stay in Malwa seemed to characterize the general change in teaching approach throughout the Bahá'í world that followed the inauguration of the Ten-Year Crusade.

¹⁴ Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 66, January, 1954, p. 4

¹⁵ Dorothy Baker was killed in early 1954 when the plane which was carrying her from India exploded and crashed in the Mediterranean.

* Mrs. Meherabání expressed this during an interview in New Delhi in March of 1974.

Emphasis was now placed on going out to the people and accepting them as individuals rather than expecting them to immediately conform to Bahá'í ideals and institutions. Consequently, the feeling was slowly being generated within the Bahá'í community by certain far-sighted believers that the hope of the Bahá'í movement in India lay with the masses who lived in the villages. Before this vision became a reality another eight years would pass.

Malwa was resuscitated from its period of stagnation in 1959 when Mr. K.H. Vajdí and his wife settled in Ujjain. Mr. Vajdí, a businessman born in the Parsi community of Bombay, converted to the Bahá'í Faith during his youth and subsequently served the movement both in India and Africa, working on various committees and participating in numerous teaching projects. Mrs. Vajdí, a daughter of Mrs. Meherabání, had just obtained a teaching position at Ujjain's Vikram University in the Faculty of Economics, and it was this appointment that brought the couple to Malwa.

When the Vajdí's arrived in Ujjain there was only one other Bahá'í in the city. However, as mentioned earlier, there was a substantial group of sympathisers in Ujjain, and the Bahá'í community in Indore, although not active in teaching activities, had once again attained assembly status. The Vajdí's' work of reconstructing the Bahá'í community in Ujjain was carried out in much the same manner as earlier attempts; teaching activities were primarily directed towards the upper stratum of society, and accordingly, the membership of the city's new Local Spiritual Assembly, which was re-established in 1960, reflected an upper class composition. The members included a secondary school teacher, three businessmen, and three clerks as well as the Vajdí's. All the members were educated at least to the secondary level, and, moreover, the new converts were all from high caste Hindu backgrounds, a marked contrast to the previous community in Ujjain which had been dominated by former Muslims. This change was partly a consequence of the Ten-Year Crusade's new approach of consciously directing

the teachings of the Bahá'í movement towards Hindus. Bahá'ís were now better versed in the Hindu tradition and could present the Faith in a context that was meaningful to their listeners.

During the year 1960 the Ujjain community increased by four with the addition of three Hindus and one Muslim. Thus, by the end of the year, the community consisted of thirteen members, twelve men and one woman. These individuals together with the small Bahá'í community in Indore and the Bahá'ís of Harsodan and Shajapur constituted the Bahá'í community in Malwa. Little did they know that the movement was on the verge of great expansion, the likes of which had not been experienced in the Bahá'í world since the time of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

For years Shoghi Effendi had been calling on the Bahá'ís of the world to take the message of Bahá'u'lláh to the masses of mankind. As early as 1936 he had said:

What the Cause now requires is not so much a group of highly cultured and intellectual people who can adequately present its Teachings, but a number of devoted, sincere and loyal supporters, who, in utter disregard of their own weaknesses and limitations, and with hearts afire with the love of God, forsake their all for the sake of spreading and establishing His Faith. In other words, what is mostly needed nowadays is a Bahá'í pioneer and not so much a Bahá'í philosopher or scholar.¹⁶

During the Ten-Year Crusade this plea was intensified. The beginnings of small-scale mass conversion in Africa during the mid-1950's presented Shoghi Effendi with an opportunity to reiterate the necessity of taking the movement to the masses. His aim was to remove from the believers' minds any misconceptions of what it meant to be a Bahá'í and thus clear the way for all segments of society to become part of the Bahá'í community. His secretary, writing to the National Spiritual Assembly of South and West Africa, in July of 1957, relayed the Guardian's feelings:

¹⁶ Bahá'í News (United States), # 102, August, 1936, p. 2, quoted in Directives from the Guardian, (New Delhi, 1973), p. 75

... the friends should be very careful not to place hindrances in the way of those who wish to accept the Faith. If we make the requirements too rigorous, we will cool off the initial enthusiasm, rebuff the hearts and cease to expand rapidly. The essential thing is that the candidate for enrolment should believe in his heart in the truth of Baha'u'llah. Whether he is literate or illiterate, informed of all the Teachings or not, is beside the point entirely.¹⁷

In February of 1959 the Indian National Spiritual Assembly voiced its new attitude towards teaching the masses:

On the other hand we should not deprive people to embrace the Faith pending their acquiring elaborate knowledge of the Faith and details of administration, etc. If conviction in Faith has been established in mind and heart of our friends, no matter how little they know about the Faith, we should not deprive them to have rights and privileges of being Bahá'ís.¹⁸

In accordance with this policy, in 1960 Dr. R. Muhájir, Hand of the Cause, met in special session with the Indian National Spiritual Assembly to discuss the implementation of mass teaching in India. His main advice was for Bahá'í teachers to go to the villages. He called for volunteers from the National Spiritual Assembly to launch the new campaign. Mrs Meherabání, who was now a member of this body, volunteered her services and left for the area of India she knew best, Madhya Pradesh.

In Indore Mrs. Meherabání took council with her brother. He informed her that some Bahá'í contact had previously been made with a Bhil tribal village located forty-five miles from Indore. Accordingly, Mrs. Meherabání left the next day for village Kweitiopānī, where she remained for several days, sharing the villagers' food and bedding and giving them the message that Bahá'u'lláh, the universal avatāra whose religion would unite men of all religious and cultural backgrounds, had appeared. During the next few weeks she periodically returned to Kweitiopānī, each time elaborating

¹⁷ 'Letter written on Shoghi Effendi's behalf to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of South and West Africa, July 9, 1957', Arise to Serve, p. 97

¹⁸ Bahá'í Newsletter (India), # 100, January-February, 1959, p. 2

upon different teachings. She then invited those who believed in Bahá'u'lláh to join the Bahá'í Faith. As a result, nearly 75% of the village of 200 declared themselves believers by placing their thumbprints on enrolment cards (they could not write) which were subsequently sent to the national office in New Delhi. Thus, Kweitiopānī was the first village in India to experience the mass teaching activities of the Bahá'í Faith, and its conversions signalled the coming of a new period in the history of the movement in India.

Having initiated mass teaching in the Indore area, Mrs. Meherabānī decided to carry out similar activity on the Ujjain side. Before her departure from Indore, however, she was informed that Dr. Muhájir had returned to India and was desirous of holding a village conference in Malwa similar to the conference that had been held in village Rāmpur several years earlier. In consultation with the Vajdís it was decided that village Saṅgimandā, a predominantly scheduled caste village in Shajapur - the district where interest in the movement had arisen years before - would be a suitable site. With the aid of Kisan Lal, arrangements for the conference were made, and in late January of 1961 Dr. Muhájir arrived in Ujjain and proceeded by jeep to the village. The report of the Indian National Spiritual Assembly reveals the scene that awaited him:

When the Bahá'ís started for Saṅgimandā on foot and in bullock carts, they did not know what was awaiting them. The approach to the mud huts of the village was decorated with simple coloured papers. A number of villagers came out several miles to receive their guests ... Amid the beating of drums, booming of guns and devotional songs, cries of 'Allāh-u-Abhá' and 'Bahá'u'lláh Jai' were heard ... The conference was publicized within a few hours and attracted over 300 people.¹⁹

A great open air meeting was held at which Bahá'í speakers spoke of Bahá'u'lláh as bhagavān kalkin, the tenth avatāra of Viṣṇu whose return in Vaiṣṇavite theology will mark the end of the kali-yuga.²⁰ They also

¹⁹ The Bahá'í World, vol. XIII, p. 299

²⁰ Viṣṇupurāṇa, IV, 24, 98-101, English trans. by M. N. Dutt, (Varansi, 1972)

emphasized that within the Bahá'í Faith all men are considered equal, for God makes no distinction between rich and poor, high caste and low caste. The latter point was particularly attractive to the villagers of Saṅgīmandā who, coming from the scheduled castes, were often shunned by higher caste members of society. When the meeting concluded those who wished to declare their belief in Bahá'u'lláh were asked to thumbprint an enrolment card. Over two hundred villagers declared themselves, and 'Representatives from neighbouring villages did not leave the place till they were assured by the Bahá'ís that they would send somebody to their places...'²¹ With the holding of the Saṅgīmandā conference mass declaration in Malwa had begun.

The flame that was lit in Saṅgīmandā soon spread. Word had circulated to nearby villages of the new 'casteless' religion whose avatāra considered all men equal, and, as a result, members of these villages were soon appealing for Bahá'í teachers to come to their communities and explain the teachings and principles of the movement. In addition, the National Spiritual Assembly purchased several jeeps and sent Bahá'í teachers on village tours throughout the various districts of Malwa. Mrs. Meherabání and her son-in-law Mr. Vajdí were the spearheads of the new campaign, and they spent long hours travelling the pathways of rural Malwa proclaiming the new religion wherever they went. Their message was always the same: Bahá'u'lláh, the new avatāra, had appeared to lead men out of the age of darkness. As the momentum in teaching activity was accelerated, the response of rural Malwa grew. In fact, the large increase in declarations in India between the years 1961 and 1963, as revealed in the statistics presented in Chapter 2, was primarily the outcome of the mass teaching campaigns in Malwa and the nearby districts surrounding the city of Gwalior.

During the first few years of mass teaching in Malwa the movement

²¹ The Bahá'í World, vol. XIII, p. 299

enlisted individuals primarily from the lower castes, particularly the scheduled tribes and castes. This was due to two basic factors. The first and perhaps most obvious reason was the teachings of the movement itself. Being anti-caste and proposing a world brotherhood of men, they spoke to the specific plight of the Indian Harijan. The second concerned the initial rural contacts made by Bahá'ís in Malwa. As shown earlier, two of the original Bahá'í converts in rural Malwa came from scheduled caste background; Kīśan Lāl from Shajapur, and Dayā Rām Malvīa from Harsodan. When the Indian National Spiritual Assembly decided to activate a campaign of mass teaching it turned to these individuals for help, and the two men naturally took the Bahá'í teachers to those communities they knew best—the Harijan communities. Hence, a large percentage of declarants during these years came from the ranks of the scheduled castes.

The Vajdí household in Ujjain suddenly became a hub of activity where numerous new Bahá'ís from surrounding villages often congregated. It soon became evident that a Bahá'í center was necessary to accommodate the visitors. Consequently, a location in the city was obtained, and Bahá'í activity in Ujjain was focused around this center until 1965 when a new building and grounds situated approximately one mile outside of the city was purchased.

During these years of rapid expansion the Faith was not free from opposition. The Ārya Samāj, which was happy to accommodate the movement as long as it was an intellectual philosophy, became actively hostile when the Faith began to enter the arena of action and enrol the masses. Ārya Samājists began to follow the Bahá'í teachers in the rural areas attempting to reconvert anyone who had declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh. Their main point of attack was that the movement was actually a form of Islām in disguise. Villagers were told their wives would be taken from them and they would be forced to eat the holy mother cow.* Animosity became so

* This information was revealed to the author by Bahá'í village teachers.

great that the Indian National Spiritual Assembly in their Teaching Report of December 1963, wrote to the Universal House of Justice:

The greatest welcome news is the rising opposition of the Arya Samajists in Madhya Pradesh. May the One in whose hand are the reins of the Cause give an opportunity to India to prove her mettle and occasion to the friends to purify and sanctify themselves. Dr. Munje, Mrs. Shirin Boman, Mr. K.N. Pradhan and Mr. K.H. Vajdi toured the erupting area at a great personal hazard.²²

Bahá'í teachers answered these charges by insisting the Bahá'í Faith was an independent world religion which, far from being disdainful towards Hinduism, wanted to purify it from the dross of man-made convention. By the end of 1964 the anti-Bahá'í activities of the Ārya Samāj in Malwa had subsided though there existed a rather bitter peace which at any time was liable to lead to confrontation.²³

In February of 1964 a prominent visitor, Rúhíyyih Khánum²⁴ (widow of the late Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi, and a Hand of the Cause), arrived in India. In Haifa, Israel, she had received news of the progress the movement was making in India and soon became desirous of seeing the situation first hand. During her nine month stay in the subcontinent she made a special excursion to Malwa in order to visit some of the new village believers. Late in February Rúhíyyih Khánum arrived in Indore.

Rúhíyyih Khánum's initial experience in rural Malwa was her visit to village Kweitiōpānī, the first village in Malwa to experience mass teaching,

²² 'Teaching Report of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, Dec, 10, 1963', p. 1-2

²³ In this regard, a prominent Bahá'í teacher informed me that Ārya Samājist antagonism reached its peak in early 1964 when the Bahá'ís were challenged to a verbal confrontation in a Shajapur village. At the meeting the Ārya Samājist spokesman claimed Bahá'u'lláh was a Muslim prophet and that Bahá'ís were introducing a foreign god into India. The tide turned, however, when a scheduled caste Bahá'í offered the Ārya Samājist a glass of water which he refused to drink, as to do so would have meant breaking caste commensal barriers, which he was apparently unwilling to do.

²⁴ Rúhíyyih Rabbani is commonly known throughout the Bahá'í world as Rúhíyyih Khánum.

and the first Bahá'í 'model village' in India. Her talk in Kweitiōpānī exemplified the Bahá'í teaching method. She told the gathered villagers:

... that they should be proud of their heritage as tribal peoples and should never feel ashamed of it ... She then explained that the very essence of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is unity in diversity and is not unity in uniformity; that the beauty of the society of the future will be that each people will bring its own unique gift to enrich the whole.²⁵

Following her excursion to Kweitiōpānī, Rúhíyyih Khánum visited the mass teaching district of Shajapur where she attended a regional conference. Before departing the area she also made numerous stops in local villages where the response to her arrival was always one of joy and acclamation. In the village of Jahāngirpur she was greeted by a brass band playing royal marches, and as she walked down the village lanes people shouted '... Dharm-Mata Ki Jai Ho,²⁶ (long live our spiritual mother).

Returning to Indore, Rúhíyyih Khánum presented her last talk in Malwa in the newly acquired Bahá'í teaching institute. Here she addressed forty travelling teachers on the importance of continuing the mass teaching campaign. She told them that consolidation of these new gains was necessary, and a program directed towards this end would be initiated, but the Bahá'ís of Malwa having begun the fire of mass teaching in India must now turn it into a conflagration; all believers, new and old, should be brought into active participation.

The advice which Rúhíyyih Khánum gave to the travelling teachers was heeded by the Bahá'ís of Malwa. Active teaching was continually pursued throughout the remaining years of the 1960's, so that by the end of the decade there were over one hundred thousand declared believers in Malwa. There was one major change, however, that distinguished the teaching methods

²⁵ Violette Nakhjavani, Amatu'l-Bahá Visits India, (New Delhi, n.d.), p. 50-51

²⁶ Nakhjavani, p. 53

of the early 1960's from those of the mid and late 1960's. During the latter period a conscious effort was made to attract other than 'low' caste members to the movement. As was stated earlier, a large majority of the early mass teaching declarations came from among the lower castes, and, as a result, the upper castes tended to identify the Bahá'í Faith as a scheduled caste movement and would have nothing to do with it. When mass teaching began in the Gwalior area in 1962, the Bahá'ís in that region used a new method. Rather than going directly to the scheduled castes they would first approach the leading castes of the village, a technique that allowed for a greater range of castes to join the movement, as the 'clean' castes were not alienated by teachers entering the villages and converting 'low' castemen. Consequently, since the Bahá'í Faith claimed to be a religion for all men, the approach used in the Gwalior area was soon realized to be the most advantageous, and accordingly, the mid 1960's saw this method of teaching introduced into Malwa with the result that during this time a number of higher caste members declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh.

The enrollment of new believers was not the only arena of activity in which the Bahá'í teachers in Malwa participated. As Rúhíyyih Khánum had noted during her presentations in Indore, consolidation programs were a necessary corollary to mass teaching. As the main objective of the Bahá'í Faith was not just to present a set of idealistic beliefs to mankind but to educate declarants in the various aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's religion so that a unified world order of believers co-ordinated by a system of local, national, and international institutions could evolve, a systematic plan for 'deepening' new adherents had to be initiated. As a result, a spirited program designed to educate specific believers in all phases of the movement's teachings was launched.

Consolidation procedures had been set in motion as early as 1963 with the opening of the Indore Teaching Institute. One of the primary functions of this institution was to 'deepen' a number of village believers in all

facets of the Faith's teachings so that upon returning to their respective villages they would be able to disseminate this information among the remainder of the new declarants. Special resident instructors were brought to the Institute to teach both week-long and week-end classes in Bahá'í history, administrative organization, consultation methods, and ethics. Dr. Munje, one of the first Bahá'ís to settle in Malwa, and Mr. Dushyant Kūmār were both active in this program. By 1964 the Indore Teaching Institute was having regular courses and had already trained many declarants to teach their fellow villagers.²⁷ In 1965 similar courses under the direction of Mr. Jādav were initiated in the new Bahá'í Center in Ujjain.

Another institution designed to help educate new believers was the village primary school. The schools served two purposes: first, they educated village children in the fundamentals of primary education and introduced them to the basic teachings of the Bahá'í Faith; and second, they served as Bahá'í village centers where new believers could hold meetings. Such schools were only established in villages where government schools were not present or functioning. The first school was introduced into village Kweitīopānī where the inhabitants were instructed in Hindi, arithmetic, and Bahá'í history and social principles.

The tremendous growth of teaching activity that characterized the 1960's, and the initiation of an energetic consolidation program that followed in its wake, necessitated the creation of new administrative institutions. Consequently, in the mid-1960's the National Spiritual Assembly created the Area Teaching Committee of Central India. The function of this body was to formulate and supervise both teaching and consolidation activities in the mass teaching areas of Malwa and Gwalior, thereby relieving the already overburdened National Spiritual Assembly of

²⁷ 'National Spiritual Assembly Circular of August 27, 1964'

having to deal with these matters directly. After consulting, the Committee notified the National Spiritual Assembly of its decisions, and the national body either ratified the proposals or sent them back for re-evaluation.

With the continued expansion of the movement in Madhya Pradesh the National Spiritual Assembly in the late 1960's divided the Area Teaching Committee into two Regional teaching committees: one for northern Madhya Pradesh and the other for southern Madhya Pradesh. The former held its meetings in Gwalior, while the latter alternated its meetings between Indore and Ujjain.

In the 1970's the organization of the teaching committees was once more rearranged. The State Teaching Committee of Madhya Pradesh was established in January of 1973 and had under its charge two Regional teaching committees whose areas of jurisdiction were the same as those mentioned above. Consequently, by the end of the Nine-Year Plan there were three administrative institutions directing teaching and consolidation activities in Malwa: the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, the Madhya Pradesh State Teaching Committee, and the National Spiritual Assembly.

Since 1970 the Bahá'í Administrative Order has been primarily concerned with consolidation and 'deepening' work. Teaching has continued, but not with the same pace or zeal that characterized it during the 1960's. Bahá'í administrators have now set a goal of trying to develop a specific number of 'model village' communities in Malwa. Before examining the various aspects of Bahá'í community life that the movement's leaders hope to develop in such communities, the structure of both the administrative system directing Bahá'í activities and the social system into which they are being introduced will be examined in greater detail.

Part II The Sociological Framework

Chapter 4 The Local Village

If we are to correctly understand the current activities of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa, and comprehend the position the movement holds within the total sociological panorama of the region, then it is necessary from the beginning to make several typological distinctions. First, there are the local villages of Malwa. The life patterns of the individuals who inhabit these communities are largely determined by a traditional value system. The traditional system, however, is by no means homogeneous; it is continually coming under attack from certain modern-secular values and institutions which have emerged as a result of India's contact with the West. Second, there exists the Bahá'í Faith's administrative system consisting of local, regional, national, and international bodies which is characterized by a set of socio-religious values markedly different to the value system and corresponding institutional manifestations of the traditional village. Finally, there are those villages in which the Bahá'í Administrative Order is attempting to introduce its valuational and institutional components. While the members of these communities are still largely influenced by traditional patterns of behavior, they are in some cases slowly coming under the influence of Bahá'í socio-religious attitudes and modes of conduct.

Part II will examine the structures of both the contemporary village social system and the Bahá'í Administrative Order. The analysis will not be detailed; such a task would in itself demand two separate volumes. Rather, the chapters in this section will point out the distinguishing characteristics of each system, creating in the process a sociological framework that will hopefully facilitate an understanding of Bahá'í propagation and consolidation efforts in rural Malwa.

A social system '... is a mode of organization of action elements relative to the persistence or ordered processes of change of the interactive patterns of a plurality of individual actors.'¹ That is, it is a complex network of values and corresponding institutions which determines where an individual in a given group is located in relationship to other individuals (status), and defines what the individual does in his relations with other members of the group (role).²

The social system of the contemporary Malwa village is made up of a combination of traditional and modern elements. Traditionally it has been characterized by

- 1) its rigid hierarchical classification of status groups in this world (caste) and its belief in a corresponding hierarchy of deities in the other world;
- 2) its propensity towards ritual specialization;
- 3) its incarnation of religion in perpetual symbols or images;
- 4) its concepts of ritual purity; and
- 5) its regional orientation.

However, since the coming of the western powers to the subcontinent modernizing elements have slowly been finding their way into village life. In all spheres of life, economic, political, social, religious, and educational, these elements have infiltrated the inner sanctum of tradition. The increasing economic dependence of the village on urban centers, the expansion of democracy, and the spread of public education

¹ Talcott Parsons, The Social System, (London, 1952), p. 24

² According to Leonard Broom and Philip Selznick a role may be defined as a pattern of behavior associated with a distinctive social position, while status is used to designate an individual's place within a system of social ranking. Sociology A Text with Adapted Readings, 4th ed., (London, 1968), p. 18 and 44

are but a few examples of the forces of modernization that are continually affecting the contemporary village, and, as a result, traditional socio-religious values and institutions are finding themselves more and more in a state of stress. In order to better understand this phenomenon we must take a closer look at traditional village norms and their corresponding modern counterparts.

Perhaps the most well known aspect of the village social structure, and one which has had a vast number of investigators, is the caste system. The outstanding characteristic of the system is group exclusiveness; in any given village there exists a range of status groups known as castes whose members' roles as regards occupation and ritual performance are rigidly defined. These groups are endogamous and have strict rules regarding commensal relations; individual members of a given caste can only find mates within their own caste group, and, generally speaking, they will not eat unripe or kacca foods from a caste lower than their own.³ In addition, there is an entire galaxy of rules and regulations ranging from modes of address to styles of clothing that mark off the exclusiveness of each caste. The hierarchical ordering of castes is justified by religious ideals. The traditional and largely theoretical account of the ordering of the castes is the well-known four varna classification in which the Brāhmaṇs (priests) receive the highest position, followed by the Kṣatriyas (warriors), Vaiśyas (merchants and artisans), and Śūdras (labourers).⁴ Within each varna (class) there are

³ Kacca foods are those cooked in water and/or salt. Included in this group are staple foods of cakes, unleavened sorgham meal, rice, curries, and chutneys. Kacca foods are distinguished from pakka foods, which are those prepared in clarified butter (ghi). The latter can be shared by a greater range of castes.

⁴ The Rg Veda (X, 90) gives an account of creation whereby a primeval man (purusa) sacrifices himself, thereby creating the universe. From various parts of his body were produced Brāhmaṇ, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra. Over the millennia another category, 'untouchable', was added to the list making five basic classifications.

numerous subdivisions, castes, and the position of a given caste in the hierarchical structure can vary from one region to another, but in every region the ranking of each caste is firmly established.

The major assumption that underlies the entire system is the inequality of status groups. A Brāhmaṇ is considered superior both in terms of occupation and ritual status to a Kṣatriya, and a Kṣatriya superior to a Vaiśya. The main distinction in terms of inequality, however, is drawn between 'clean', 'unclean', and 'untouchable' castes. Castes of the first three ~~Varnas~~, being considered 'clean', would have more extensive social intercourse with one another than they would with the Śūdra ('unclean') and 'untouchable' castes. 'There are no common feasts between these two divisions of castes. Castes of the "unclean" and "untouchable" divisions are regarded as "servant castes", who must dine only after the "master castes" have taken their meals.'⁵ Accordingly, the political and economic power in the village is dominated by the 'clean' castes, and among them Brāhmaṇs and Rājputs (Kṣatriya) stand out.

The doctrine of karma, a type of cosmic law of cause and effect, justifies the inequality. Individuals are born into certain castes because of the deeds they have committed in past lives, and their actions in the present life will determine their status in future lives. Hence, nearly every aspect of village life is influenced by one's caste, as the village is the cosmos in microcosm.

While caste exclusiveness still characterizes village life in Malwa and determines one's status and role within the community, anti-caste ideals are slowly finding their way into the system. The two main sources of agitation are the political arena and the educational system. Article 14 of the Indian Constitution states that India as a secular state holds all of its citizens equal before the law.⁶ Theoretically, each citizen

⁵ K.S. Mathur, Caste and Ritual in a Malwa Village, (Bombay, 1964), p. 127

⁶ Constitutions of Asian Countries, prepared by The Secretariat of the Asian-African Legal Consultative Committee, (Bombay, 1968), p. 194

regardless of caste has an equal vote in the democratic process of electing the nation's leaders. An awareness of their new rights as citizens has begun to manifest itself within the minds of many 'low' caste members, the result being that numerous 'low' caste and particularly scheduled caste political factions have arisen within the past two decades. A prominent example of this phenomenon is the rise of the politically oriented Neo-Buddhist Movement⁷ in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Also, the introduction into the rural areas by the Indian government of elected administrative bodies, pancāyats,⁸ is helping to undermine the traditional village power structure, as these institutions provide opportunities for lower castemen to hold positions of authority in the village.

In addition to a growing political awareness, the expansion of public education is also having a disruptive influence on caste exclusiveness. Many villagers now have the opportunity to leave their communities and go to urban centers where they can take part in higher education, and their introduction to new ideas often creates psychological conflicts resulting in the rejection of traditional rigidity. For example, the author met several village students in Ujjain who told him they would not necessarily marry into their own caste, and while there is often a difference between what a person says he will do and what he actually does, the fact that these students even considered breaking caste rules regarding marriage exemplifies the growing conflict that is manifesting itself in contemporary Malwa villages as a result of the collision of traditional and modern values.

One of the principal precepts of popular Hinduism, and one that is closely related to the hierarchical ranking of status groups in the village

⁷ Concerning the Neo-Buddhist Movement see Eleanor Zelliot, 'Gandhi and Ambedkar - A Study in Leadership', and Adele Fiske, 'Scheduled Caste Buddhist Organizations', in The Untouchables in Contemporary India, ed. by J. Michael Mahar, (Tuscon, 1972).

⁸ For an elaboration on this institution see Chapter 10.

is the concept of purity and pollution. 'Hindus regard purity as the supreme virtue. Of the three major attributes of God and dharma, viz. satyam (truth), sundaram (beauty), and sivam (purity, auspiciousness), the last is the most important.'⁹ According to the Hindu view of life everything in existence is either intrinsically impure, neutral, or pure. Being intrinsically neutral, man must continually purify himself throughout his life by performing certain prescribed rituals known as samskāras (rites of passage).¹⁰ The number and form of these rituals vary according to caste; while the Brāhmaṇ is required to perform nine samskāras, the Śūdra castes are required to perform only three. Moreover, contact with anything impure¹¹ requires that the polluted object or person be purified by means of special ritual ablution. Two of the most well known agents of purification are fire and water, and hence bathing in a holy river such as the Sīpra is often prescribed as a remedy for removing the taint of impurity. Again, differences in purification methods vary according to caste.

In terms of social interaction the concept of purity and pollution plays an important role in village life. Taking improper food from a caste lower than one's own is considered polluting, and as a result an elaborate system of rules regulates village commensal activity. In general, the higher a caste's ranking, the fewer the number of castes from which its members are allowed to accept food. Consequently, a Brāhmaṇ will rarely take food from anyone but a fellow casteman, although he can prepare food for all castes.

Purity

and pollution concepts are not just limited to their effect on commensal relationships. Sometimes, as in the case of certain 'untouchable' castes,

⁹ Mathur, p. 97

¹⁰ Rites of this type include those relating to birth, initiation, marriage, and death.

¹¹ Examples of impure objects include body fluids, leather, meat, alcohol, and feces.

the mere presence of another individual within a specified distance is enough to pollute a 'clean' casteman. Consequently, the Hindu ideal of purity has traditionally acted as a conceptual support for the maintenance of caste exclusiveness.

The rigidity that characterizes the Hindu concept of purity and pollution is also coming under attack. In many instances, however, the pressure for change has not come from voluntary opposition but from involuntary circumstances which have arisen as a result of general social and technological change. While the Indian Constitution forbids the implementation of such inequities as pollution by touch, changing social conditions have done more to eliminate it than enforced legislation. For example, with the growth of industry in India numerous persons from both urban and rural areas were employed in factories.¹² 'The factories attracted workers from all levels of traditional society as they offered comparatively high wages.'¹³ As a result, high and low caste members were brought into close physical contact with each other, a situation which according to the traditional concept of purity and pollution would have in many instances necessitated ritual ablution. However, since a factory cannot function efficiently if its workers are constantly having to purify themselves, the traditional pattern of behavior gave way to the more functional one.

The introduction of public transportation, notably buses, has resulted in the same situation. In a bus (as anyone who has travelled on an Indian bus well knows) a Brahman may find himself at extremely close quarters with an 'untouchable'. Also, as M.N. Srinivas has pointed out, the

¹² Large factories exist not only in Indore and Ujjain but in several other Malwa cities including Ratlam, Nagda and Agar.

¹³ M.N. Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966), p. 65

popularity of travel and teashops where numerous castes often mix is not confined to city folk but extends to villagers as well.¹⁴ Hence, the changing facts of social reality in both urban and rural India have helped weaken, at least in some areas of social intercourse, the strong notion of purity and pollution that has for so long permeated village life.

Another characteristic of the social system of the contemporary Malwa village is its propensity towards ritual specialization. As with the concept of purity and pollution, ritual specialization reflects both one's status and role within the community. In the religious life of the village, rituals relating to fasts and feasts, rites of passage, and individual worship vary in form and content according to caste, and as a result in each village there is an entire hierarchy of ritual practices, the form and content of which are determined by the relative position within the community of the participant's status group.

Ritual is '... a category of standardized behavior (custom) in which the relationship between the means and the end is not intrinsic, ie. is either irrational or non-rational.'¹⁵ In the traditional village numerous areas of life are governed by such 'non-rational' symbolic activity. These areas include the previously mentioned rites of passage and purification rituals as well as numerous fasts, feasts, and acts of individual worship (pūja). In general, most rituals include as part of their content the acting out of certain symbolic formulas (according to the specific circumstance) and the offering of a gift, often food or flowers, to a given deity in return for the god's blessing and protection.

As stated above, both the content and objects of ritual activity vary from caste to caste. While many castes worship common deities, each

¹⁴ Srinivas, p. 122

¹⁵ Jack Goody, 'Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem', British Journal of Sociology, vol. XII, 1961, (London), p. 159

caste generally has its own specific deities to whom its members offer pūja. There are also variations in the procedure of worship. 'These are particularly striking in the matter of food offered to the deity, the caste of the officiating priest, and the hymns or incantations recited in honour of the deity.'¹⁶ For example, Brāhmaṇ rituals would contain many more sanskritic elements than would rituals of lower castes, and Śūdra rituals would be devoid of such elements. Rituals even vary according to different clan groups within the village. As Adrian Mayer has pointed out, different clans have different mother goddesses and corresponding rituals.¹⁷ Traditionally, variation in ritual content has symbolized the relative position of each caste in the religio-cosmic hierarchy; the more elaborate and sanskritic the ritual, the purer and therefore higher the caste performing it.

As in other spheres of village life, the world of ritual is experiencing some noteworthy changes. In addition to the changes taking place in purity and pollution rituals, there seems to be a decline in both the elaborateness and frequency of other rituals. For example, the rites of passage rituals, which for higher castes were traditionally characterized by both their number and complexity, are being simplified.¹⁸ Even daily worship patterns are beginning to alter. I was told by a Rājput village informant that the young men of his village did not frequent the local temples as often as had their forefathers. According to K.S. Mathur's findings in village Potlodi, the number of persons visiting the temple everyday was very small, ie. the number of devotees regularly visiting any of the four temples being in no case more than ten, seems to support this claim.¹⁹

¹⁶ Mathur, p. 168

¹⁷ Mayer, p. 184

¹⁸ See Srinivas' chapter 'Secularization' in Social Change in Modern India.

¹⁹ Mathur, p. 165

Even in those cases where ritual activity has taken on a more important role in village life (the process of 'sanskritization',²⁰ whereby lower castes try to raise their ritual status by adopting the ritual conduct of higher castes) the traditionalization can in some ways be understood as a result of modernization; lower castes in an attempt to attain social equality, a predominantly modern and secular concept, revert to traditional channels of change as a means of reaching their goal. Seen in this light the increased emphasis on ritual behavior is not a conservative backlash but a secular ideal dressed in religious clothing.

In addition, the rise of new secular oriented categories of behavior, ie. political activity, has caused a shift in the importance of ritual identity. At one time caste was primarily viewed in terms of ritual-cosmic meaning. However, in the last thirty years castes have also become viable political units. In this regard one student of village India has gone as far as to say that modern political ideology has changed caste identity from an essentially ritual-cosmic base to a more secular political orientation.²¹ While this may be somewhat of an overstatement, it is no doubt true that the filtering of modern secular concepts into rural India has undermined the extent and scope of ritual activity in the contemporary village.

Anyone who sets foot into a Hindu village is sure to notice almost immediately the numerous religious images and symbols that permeate the environment. Rural Hinduism has always been characterized by its graphic representation of the Sacred (to which the large number of icons inhabiting village temples and shrines are ample testimony), a fact which has often brought down upon it the wrath of religious iconoclasts.

²⁰ For a more detailed explanation of 'sanskritization' see Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India and A.P. Barnabas, 'Sanskritization', The Economic Weekly, vol. 13, #15, April 15, 1961, p. 613-618.

²¹ S.N. Eisenstadt, 'prologue: Some Remarks on Patterns of Change in Traditional and Modern India', Change and Continuity in India's Villages, ed. by K. Ishwaran, (New York and London, 1970), p. 32-34

While as in caste ranking, the stratification of deities may vary according to the region one is investigating, in general the highest positions are reserved for a select group of All-India deities. In Malwa the figures of Rāma, Śiva, Hanumant, and Gaṇeśa are included in the highest assemblage. These gods inhabit the village temples and are worshipped daily by a 'clean' caste priest, generally a Brāhmaṇ. 'Nobody except the priest is allowed to touch the image, and the "unclean" and "untouchable" castes are prohibited from entering the temple premises by express sacred laws of Hinduism.'²² The lesser gods and local deities are not housed in the main village temples but find their lodging in smaller shrines. In contrast to the carved figures of the All-India deities, these gods are usually represented by a pile of painted stones and are often associated with particular castes. Some of the more prominent members of this classification of gods in Malwa are Śītalā, Bhairu, Nāg, and Polīā Mahārāj. The shrines of these deities are open to all castes and usually do not have officiating priests; the worshipper is allowed to approach the god directly.

Each deity has specific areas of influence for which he or she is well known. If an individual is embarking on a business venture he will generally make an offering to Gaṇeśa, the god of prosperity. Likewise, women often approach the Śiva liṅgam or one of the local mother goddesses when they desire a new offspring. In this regard one cannot help but notice the similarities in division of labor that exist between the caste system and the Hindu pantheon.

Perhaps more than any other aspect of village life the realm of religious representation has changed the least with the advent of modernism. While many reform groups, such as the Ārya Samāj, and in a more radical manner anti-Hindu factions like the previously mentioned Neo-Buddhist

²² Mathur, p. 31 (Although this sanction was banished by the Indian Constitution, it has often been adhered to by conservative Hindus.)



A Temple of Śītalā Mātā

Movement, have disdained graphic symbolism as a corruption of 'pure' religion, their ideas have not been able to penetrate India's villages. Consequently, Hinduism in rural Malwa is still characterized by its representation of the Sacred in numerous symbols and images.

Commentators on Indian society have always noted the relative isolation of the local village. In this regard Sir Charles Metcalf's *Minute* immediately comes to mind in which he referred to India's villages as independent republics:

The Village Communities are little Republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; Hindu, Pathan, Mughul, Mahratta, Sikh, English, are masters in turn; but the village communities remain the same.²³

While the Englishman's emphasis on the isolation of the traditional village may have been somewhat of an oversimplification, it does point out the relative localism that has characterized the outlook of the Indian villager. Although Hinduism has over the millennia spread its influence throughout the subcontinent, it is the local region that has demanded the villager's allegiance. Differences in regional dialects, customs, and even deities reflect this phenomenon. Furthermore, the fact that the experiential world of the Indian villager rarely spread beyond one of his own kinsman's villages - which he might visit for marital or other religiously oriented celebrations - of necessity resulted in his perspective being limited, causing him to identify himself primarily as a member of a certain caste, sub-caste, and clan, rather than as member of a nation or adherent to a particular religious tradition.

With the advent of British rule, the logistic latitude of the traditional village began to undergo adjustment. Numerous forces,

²³ Sir Charles Metcalfe, 'Minute of the Board of Revenue, November 17, 1830', quoted in Percival Spear, Twilight of the Mughals, (Cambridge, 1951), p. 117



A village shrine

inhabitant what he thought about Watergate!*

While brief, the above critique hopefully exemplifies the various forces, both traditional and modern, that are affecting the contemporary Malwa village. All aspects of the system have not been dealt with. Only those spheres of village life that are most directly related to the activities of the Bahá'í Faith, namely, caste exclusiveness, ritual specialization, graphic representation of the Sacred, hierarchical ranking of gods and status groups, and dimensions of world view have been examined. Even then, the social 'schizophrenia' that characterizes these areas of life must be apparent; the conflict between traditional values and institutions and modern ideals has resulted in the corroding of one system but has not been complete enough to allow the thorough adoption of another. Thus, the contemporary village stands between two worlds, and while the ties of tradition are still the stronger force in the struggle, like a ship in a storm that is only kept in place by the weight of its anchor, the winds and waves of change may eventually separate it from its moorings.²⁷ As one interpreter of socio-economic change in rural India has stated:

The spectacle of social change in rural India during the last one hundred years, is truly engaging. While many institutional and valuational forms which thrived for millennia have been tenaciously holding on, modern social forces are making an onslaught which is unprecedented in power and speed.²⁸

It is into this battleground of competing social forces that the Bahá'í Faith is making its entrance. However, before turning to an examination of the movement's various administrative institutions, it

* A crisis in United States government leading to the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon in August of 1974.

²⁷ This is not to imply a simple dichotomy of 'modern' and 'traditional' which would deny the possibility of Indian society evolving its own unique responses. Rather, it is to posit that such responses might be so distinct as to bring about qualitative structural change in village society.

²⁸ Indra Deva, 'The Changing Pattern of Rural Society and Culture: Significance of the Rural-Urban Nexus', Trends of Socio-Economic Change in India 1871-1961, ed. by M.K. Chaudhuri, (Simla, 1969), p.162

is appropriate, since the local village is under discussion, to introduce at this time the five 'model villages' whose Bahá'í communities provided the author with the majority of his data regarding the implementation of Bahá'í values and institutions in rural Malwa.

As of January 1974, there were 113,692 declared Bahá'ís in Malwa proper²⁹ scattered among 6,572 localities. The following table reveals by district the number of Bahá'ís and the types of communities in which they live:

Table 3³⁰

District	Believers	Isolated	Groups	Local Spiritual Assemblies
Dhar	4,163	34	193	104
Dewas	12,235	25	399	341
Indore	2,892	22	102	75
Mandsaur	15,179	27	485	358
Rajgarh	3,538	21	168	89
Ratlam	9,612	13	203	281
Shajapur	30,789	66	1,109	501
Ujjain	35,554	77	1,062	607
	113,962	285	3,721	2,356

As can be gleaned from the above table there are three types of Bahá'í communities: the isolated believer, the Group, and the Local Spiritual Assembly. The isolated believer, as the title suggests, is an individual who is the only Bahá'í in a given locality. As such, he does not really participate in a community but tries to live up to Bahá'í

²⁹ It will be interesting to note when the 1971 Census figures are published how many of the declarants listed themselves as Bahá'ís. Since they are not made to denounce Hinduism, it is my contention that most would still consider themselves Hindus. For further discussion on this matter see Chapter 7.

³⁰ The above figures were obtained from the office of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee.



A village belle

traditional and modern values. However, unlike the majority of villages in the area they are also harboring within their midsts the seeds of a social system that may provide the institutional and valuational changes needed to alleviate the friction of colliding worlds. Short descriptions of five such villages are given below.

Garabelī

Village Garabelī is located in Ujjain district, just fifteen miles from the city of Ujjain.* Its inhabitants are in constant contact with the city, as much of their produce is sold in her markets. While the average population of the other villages cited in this study is between two and three hundred, Garabelī's inhabitants number more than a thousand. Their caste distribution is as follows: 400 Mālvī Balāis, 300 Deśa Chamārs, 165 Kumārs, 100 Gujarātī Chamārs, 50 Kurmīs, 25 Rājputs, 25 Nāyaks, 15 Jāts, 10 Sutars, 6 Darjīs, and 6 Nāīs. In addition, there are 25 Muslims living in Garabelī.³² As the figures reveal, the village consists predominantly of scheduled castemen.³³

Village land amounts to approximately five thousand bīghās,³⁴ of which 80% is owned by inhabitants (ranging in distribution from 200 bīghās to none) and 20% by the government (grazing land). The main crops farmed are wheat, barley, cotton, and sugar cane.

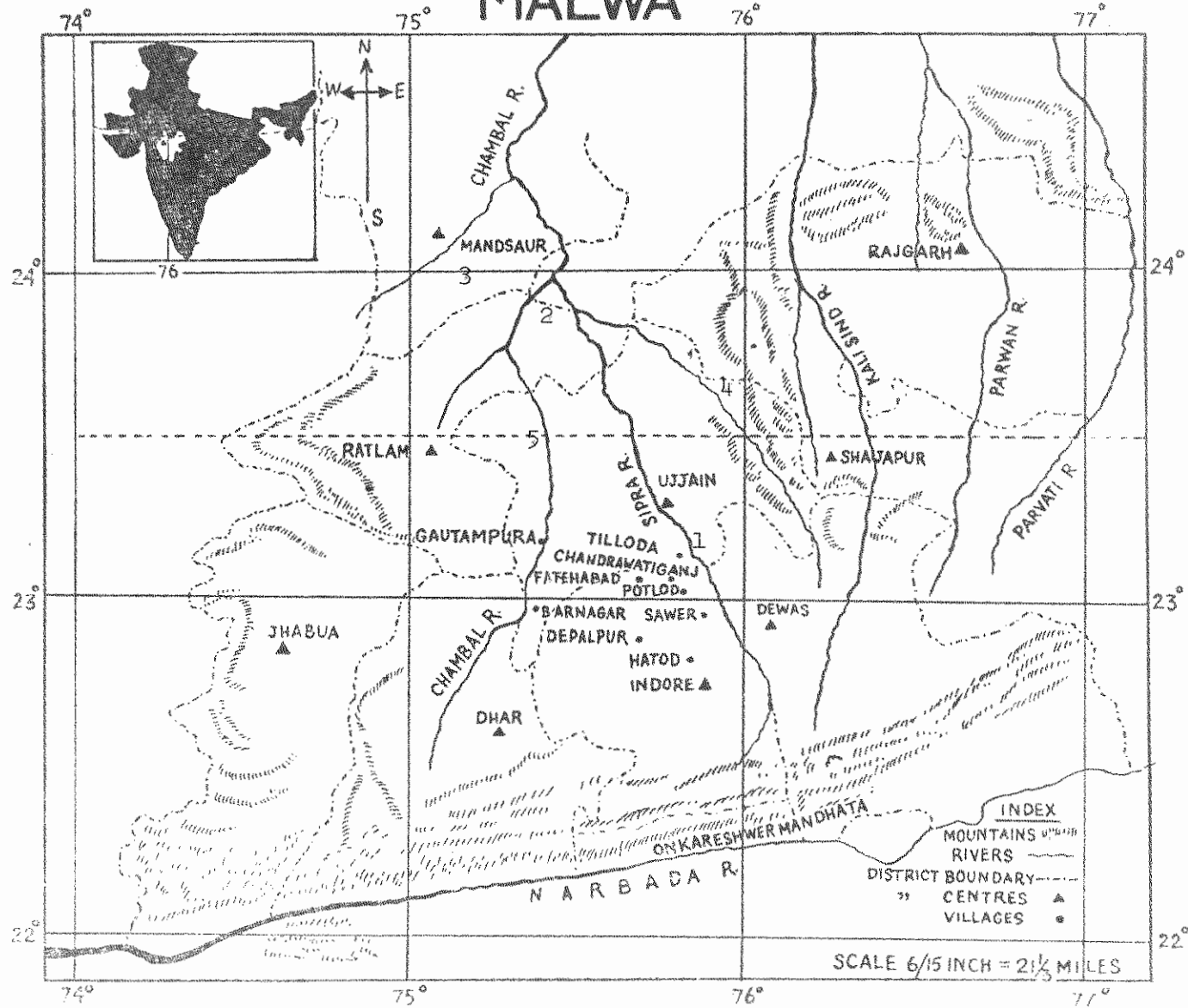
* For the location of all villages see Map # 3.

³² The size of Garabelī made it difficult to take as thorough a census as in the other villages. Village informants, however, gave a general estimate of the caste breakdown of the village, which for our purposes is sufficient.

³³ Balāis were traditionally involved with weaving cloth and were considered 'unclean'. Chamārs were leather workers and labelled 'untouchables'. In actuality many Balāis and Chamārs are laborers or cultivators, but the stigma of their traditional caste occupations has remained with them.

³⁴ One bīghā is equal to approximately 3/5 of a standard acre.

MALWA



Map 3

Garabelī is approximately a thousand years old. Its founders were Rājputs who were at one time more predominant in terms of numbers but over the centuries have been slowly displaced. During the modern era the village has been torn by antagonism between Rājputs and scheduled caste factions. Apparently, forty years ago there was an outbreak of violence when Rājputs attempted to take some land away from a scheduled caste Balāi. Garabelī was visited by Bahá'í travelling teachers during the early years of mass teaching (1961), and the village was one of the first rural communities in Malwa to establish its Local Spiritual Assembly. Today the Bahá'í community numbers 127.³⁵ Listed below is statistical information regarding caste background, educational achievement, age, and occupation of the Bahá'ís of Garabelī.

³⁵ Due to the difficulty involved in contacting women in the villages, and their general lack of participation in Bahá'í activities, only male declarants over the age of fifteen have been listed in the statistics for each village.

Table 4³⁶

Caste	No. Bahá'ís	Education				Age						Occupation			
		Ill	P	S	T	15/20	21/30	31/40	41/50	51/60	61 ⁺	fm	lab	crft	std
Mālvi Balāi (ucl)	91	65	15	10	1	8	31	16	20	10	6	69	20	0	2
Deśa Chamār (untch)	13	10	3	0	0	0	2	3	3	4	1	7	6	0	0
Gujarātī Chamār (untch)	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	3	0
Nāyak (ucl)	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Kurmī (cl)	5	0	5	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	5	0	0	0
Jāt (cl)	4	0	0	3	1	1	0	2	1	0	1	4	0	0	0
Rājput (cl)	4	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	4	0	0	0
Darjī (cl)	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	0
Kumār (cl)	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0
Sutar (cl)	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	0
TOTAL	127	79	33	13	2	9	33	27	31	19	9	89	27	9	2

Key

cl = 'clean'
 ucl = 'unclean'
 untch = 'untouchable'
 ill = illiterate
 P = primary
 S = secondary
 T = tertiary
 fm = farmer
 crft = craftsman
 std = student
 tchr = teacher

³⁶ Statistical information was obtained from
 members of the Local Spiritual Assembly in each village.

Manāsā

Approximately three miles west of the town of Alot (forty-five miles north of Ujjain) lies the village of Manāsā. The village is joined to Alot by an unmettled road which is traversed daily by a local bus. Of the 202 inhabitants, 188 are Rājputs; the remaining 14 members belong to 'unclean' and 'untouchable' castes (8 Mālvi Balāis and 6 Deśa Chamārs). Its lack of numerous castes (many of which perform essential services) means that Manāsā relies on nearby villages to supply sweepers, barbers and craftsmen. In addition, a neighboring Brāhmaṇ offers daily pūja in Manāsā's temple.

Close to nine hundred bīghās of land produce harvests of wheat, barley, millet, and cotton. Land distribution ranges from approximately one hundred bīghās, owned by the village headman (Rājput), to a small five bīghā plot farmed by a Balāi family.

The village is very young, having been founded only ninety years ago by Rājputs who left a nearby community because of land shortage. There are no written records concerning Manāsā's history, and it seems that besides the occasional feast or wedding party and the intermittent boundary quarrel, no outstanding event marked its existence until the coming of Bahá'í teachers early in 1963. At that time Mr. K.H. Vajdí and Mrs. Shírín Boman Meherabání were touring the districts of Malwa by jeep. During their first visit to Manāsā nine inhabitants declared (all Rājputs), and thus in April of 1963 the communities first Local Spiritual Assembly was established. In 1968 a Bahá'í primary school was built, and today it is officially recognized by the government of Madhya Pradesh. At present there are fifty-two declared believers in Manāsā.

Table 5

Caste	No. Bahá'ís	Education				Age						Occupation		
		Ill	P	S	T	15/20	21/30	31/40	41/50	51/60	61+	fm	lab	tchr
Rājput (cl)	42	30	11	1	0	3	9	12	14	4	0	41	0	1
Mālvi Balāi (ucl)	6	6	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	0	0	6	0
Deśa Chamār (untch)	4	4	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	2	2	0
TOTAL	52	40	11	1	0	3	15	14	16	4	0	43	8	1

Karāṅkanī

Karāṅkanī is located twenty miles northwest of the small town of Tal in Mandsaur district. It is the most isolated of the villages cited in this study - one must travel over twenty miles of winding dirt roads to reach its first fields. The village is inhabited by 230 souls who are distributed among eight castes: 90 Gūjars, 89 Rājputs, 18 Brāhmaṇs, 7 Darjīs, 16 Gujarātī Chamārs, 7 Mālvī Balāis, and 3 Pañjābīs.

Karāṅkanī's main crops are similar to those grown in other Malwa villages. In addition, a large opium crop (which is grown under government contract) brings lucrative returns to many families. Land holdings are fairly well distributed, the largest amount of land owned by a single cultivator being fifty bighās.

The village is over seven hundred years old. It was founded by Gūjars, a wandering people who gave their name to the state located to the northwest of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat. In 1968 a Bahá'í travelling teacher from Mehidpur (a small local town) came to Karāṅkanī to give the message of the Bahá'í Faith. He met with the village headman (patel) and explained about the coming of Bhagavān Bahā (Bahá'u'lláh). After spending the night in the village, the teacher enrolled the patel, a member of the Gūjar caste, and a Rājput. Two months later, having obtained assistance from the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, these two men constructed a small building which was subsequently used as both a Bahá'í bhavan (center) and a primary school. Over the next five years twenty-two inhabitants declared themselves believers in Bahá'u'lláh, and today the Bahá'í community totals twenty-four.

Table 6

Caste	No Bahá'ís	Education				Age						Occupation		
		Ill	P	S	T	15/20	21/30	31/40	41/50	51/60	61+	Farm	lab	tchr
Gūjar (cl)	12	5	7	0	0	1	4	4	3	0	0	12	0	0
Rājput (cl)	4	2	2	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	4	0	0
Brāhmaṇ (cl)	4	0	4	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	4	0	0
Mālvi Balāi (ucl)	3	2	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	2	0
Pañjābī (cl)	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
TOTAL	24	9	14	1	0	4	9	6	5		0	21	2	1

Kāsod

Village Kāsod is located in Shajapur district, approximately ten miles south of the small town of Agar (forty-five miles north-east of Ujjain). It is connected to the main highway that runs between Ujjain and Agar by a series of winding dirt roads which at times are not more than footpaths. The village has a population of 299, among which there are 206 Rājputs, 46 Deśa Chamārs, 38 Mālvi Balaīs, and 9 Brāhman. Hence, Kāsod is divided into two main groupings; Rājputs are ranked near the top of the caste hierarchy, while the Balāi and Chamār castes are categorized as 'unclean' and 'untouchable' respectively. Since there are no middle range castes in Kāsod, many of the services provided by these status groups must be obtained in nearby villages or in Agar.

Village lands amount to fifteen hundred bīghās. The largest landholding is that of the headman who owns almost a hundred bīghās. On the other hand, the local Chamārs own no land, their livelihood being earned from laboring in higher castemen's fields. The main crops farmed are wheat, barley, red pepper, sugar cane, and opium.

While there are no written records concerning the history of the village, the patel claimed Kāsod was several hundred years old and that it was founded by his Rājput ancestors. In 1967 a travelling Bahá'í teacher from Tarana came to Kāsod. He met with the patel and a meeting was arranged for that evening. After the meeting, ten persons signed declaration cards, and the village's Local Spiritual Assembly was formed in April of the next year. Another ten inhabitants declared in 1968, and by the time a Bahá'í primary school was established in 1971, there were twenty-five Bahá'ís in Kāsod.

Table 7

Caste	No. Bahā'īs	Education				Age						Occupation			
		Ill	P	S	T	15/20	21/30	31/40	41/50	51/60	61+	Farm	lab	crft	tch
Brāhmaṇ (cl)	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Rājput (cl)	11	6	4	1	0	1	3	2	3	1	1	11	0	0	0
Mālvi Balāi (ucl)	5	4	0	0	1	0	3	1	1	0	0	1	2	1	1
Deśa Chamār (untch)	8	8	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	1	0	0	7	1	0
TOTAL	25	18	5	1	1	1	12	4	5	2	1	13	9	2	1

Rīchā

Situated ten miles north of the small town of Nagda (a main junction on the Bombay-Delhi line) in Ujjain district is the village community of Rīchā. Like Kāsod it is linked to the outside world by a rugged unpaved road which during the rainy season - late June to mid-September - is virtually impassable. Rīchā is inhabited by 324 people including 78 Brāhmaṇs, 58 Rājputs, 42 Gujarātī Balāis, 40 Gujarātī Chamārs, 32 Muslims, 21 Sādhus, 20 Gujarātī Lohārs, 18 Telīs, 7 Bhaṅgīs, 4 Nāīs, and 4 Jains. Of the five villages, Rīchā and Garabelī maintain the widest range of castes. Also like Garabelī, Rīchā harbors a small Muslim community, and therefore, in addition to Hindu temples, Muslim shrines dot the landscape.

Like other rural communities in Malwa, Rīchā's fields yield ample harvests of wheat, barley, cotton, and sugar cane. Thirteen hundred bighās of land are owned by the inhabitants, and only a small number of families from among the scheduled castes fail to own any land.

Rīchā was founded over a thousand years ago by Brāhmaṇs, and the patel traces his ancestry back to these original settlers. The village contains a large shrine dedicated to Śītalā Mātā, and inhabitants claim it dates from the time of the community's founding. The shrine is quite well-known throughout the Nagda area, and numerous members of nearby villages come to offer pūja at its threshold. In 1971 a Bahá'í travelling teacher from Ujjain visited Rīchā. During his stay he managed to convert a young tertiary-educated Rājput who subsequently attended 'deepening' classes in Ujjain. Upon returning he was able to enlist another eight persons into the movement, and thus in April of 1972 the first Local Spiritual Assembly in Rīchā was formed. During the next year forty additional inhabitants declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh, and today there are forty-eight declarants in Rīchā.

Table 8

Caste	No. Bahá'ís	Education				Age						Occupation			
		ill	P	S	T	15/20	21/30	31/40	41/50	51/60	61↑	farm	lab	shop keeper	sweeper
Brāhman (cl)	15	0	10	5	0	0	13	2	0	0	0	15	0	0	0
Rājput (cl)	3	0	1	1	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
Gujarātī Balāi (ucl)	13	8	5	0	0	0	8	5	0	0	0	11	2	0	0
Gujarātī Chamār (untch)	10	10	0	0	0	1	3	5	1	0	0	7	3	0	0
Bhangī (untch)	2	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Jain (cl)	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Muslim	4	0	2	2	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	1	3	0	0
TOTAL	48	20	18	8	2	1	31	14	2	0	0	37	8	1	2

It is not the intention of this study to present the above communities as 'ideal types' of Bahá'í 'model village' communities in Malwa. Rather, the primary purpose for presenting the reader with a short description and statistical synopsis of each village has been to put before him a general sociological picture of the five communities from which the author's later examples of the implementation of Bahá'í doctrines and institutions in rural Malwa were taken, and thereby provide him with an existential base to which he can orient himself. It seems apparent, however, that the data reveals certain facts about each community which might shed some light on the variety of sociological factors that characterize Bahá'í 'model villages' in general. Consequently, before closing this chapter a few remarks concerning the dominant sociological characteristic of each community will be made.

The outstanding sociological characteristic of the Garabelī Bahá'í community is its large number of low caste constituents. The community was established during the early years of mass teaching in Malwa when the Bahá'í teaching approach was oriented towards the scheduled castes. In addition, intra-village strife seems to have alienated many lower castemen from their social superiors, thus creating a situation in which the Bahá'í Faith provided a symbol for scheduled caste grievances. Consequently, Garabelī appears to be a good example of scheduled caste attraction to the movement.

In Rīchā a different factor predominates. Unlike Garabelī, there is a greater balance between high and low caste membership. However, in terms of declarant's age distribution, Rīchā's community is characteristically young. For example, 66% of the members are under thirty years of age, and 95% under forty. Here it seems the Bahá'í Faith speaks to the idealism of youth, as the village teacher - who is himself only twenty-seven years old - has been able to enlist many of his own age group from among both high and low castes.

The other communities appear to revolve around specific individuals. Karankani, Manasa, and Kasod's headmen are Bahá'ís, and accordingly, a number of people under their influence have enrolled. Similarly, the Balai teacher in Kasod has been able to enrol a number of his fellow castemen.

Consequently, there appear to be three main sociological agents affecting the composition of Bahá'í communities in the five villages: caste background, age, and personal status. While it is not possible to draw finalized conclusions from these examples as to the nature of Bahá'í 'model village' communities in general, they do provide some insight into the types of factors influencing the declarations of Hindu villagers in Malwa (a theme which will be explored at greater length in Chapter 12), and therefore they deserve to be noted.

It is into village communities like Garabeli, Manasa, Kasod, Karankani, and Richa that Bahá'í doctrine and institutions are being introduced. This chapter has attempted to present a general picture of the sociological milieu in which such villages function. It is now time to look at the structure that is directing the activities of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa: the Bahá'í Administrative Order.

Chapter 5 The Bahá'í Administrative Order

The Bahá'í Faith is an international movement, and hence its administrative institutions act like links in a chain; they help connect individual Bahá'í communities with the larger body of believers throughout the world. The administrative system is multi-levelled in construction, containing local and regional, national, and international institutions. It is this system that is conducting the world-wide advancement of the Bahá'í Faith, and its influence can be seen wherever Bahá'í communities exist. This is no less true in Malwa where mass teaching has resulted in strenuous organizational activity on all three administrative levels. Therefore, it is essential that we take a closer look at the administrative institutions of the Bahá'í Faith.

The heart of the Bahá'í Administrative Order is the Universal House of Justice, a body of nine whose headquarters is located in Haifa, Israel. The members of this body are elected every five years by the members of the various national spiritual assemblies throughout the world. The first Universal House of Justice was elected in 1963, six years after the death of Shoghi Effendi; the second in 1968; and today the Bahá'í world community is under the guidance of the third duly elected Universal House of Justice.

The authority of the Universal House of Justice is derived from the Faith's scriptures. According to the official Bahá'í translation of The Tablet of Ishráqát, Bahá'u'lláh states:

The affairs of the people are in charge of the men of the House of Justice of God. They are the trustees of God among His servants and the sources of command in His countries... It is incumbent upon all to obey them.¹

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Tablet of Ishráqát, trans. by Shoghi Effendi, in The Bahá'í Revelation, p. 159

Elaborating upon this theme 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

By this House is meant that Universal House of Justice which is to be elected from all countries, that is, from those parts in the East and West where the loved ones are to be found, after the manner of the customary elections in Western countries such as those of England.²

Being the supreme institution in the Bahá'í world, the Universal House of Justice has the right to interpret the Faith's scriptures, that is, the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and to legislate on any matter not found in the writings. Again, this right is claimed from scriptural authority: 'It is incumbent upon the Trustees of the House of Justice to take counsel together regarding such laws as have not been expressly revealed in the Book. Of these whatever they deem advisable and proper that must they enforce.'³

Unlike elected representatives of contemporary parliamentary systems, once elected, members of the Universal House of Justice are not responsible to those they represent; they have no constituency to whom they must answer. In fact, the election process is devoid of any type of electioneering or campaigning. Rather, the assembled members of the various national spiritual assemblies cast nine votes, each containing the name of any person they feel worthy of holding such a position. The nine who receive the most votes then form the Universal House of Justice. In this regard Shoghi Effendi stated:

In the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith, the enactment of the legislation necessary to supplement the laws of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the members of the Universal House of Justice, it should be borne in mind, are not, as Bahá'u'lláh's utterances clearly imply, responsible to those whom they represent, nor are they allowed to be governed by the feelings, the general opinion, and even the convictions of the mass

² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, trans. by Shoghi Effendi, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1944), p. 20

³ Bahá'u'lláh, Words of Paradise, in Bahá'í World Faith. Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 2nd ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1966), p. 182

of the faithful, or to those who directly elect them. They are to follow, in a prayerful attitude, the dictates and promptings of their conscience... "God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willith," is Bahá'u'lláh's incontrovertible assurance.⁴

Thus, the decisions of the Universal House of Justice are considered free from all error.⁵

Included among the duties of the Universal House of Justice are the following: to analyze, classify, and co-ordinate the Bahá'í writings; to defend and protect the Faith and emancipate it from the fetters of repression and persecution; to propagate and teach its message; to expand and consolidate its institutions; to enact laws and ordinances not found in the scriptures; and to provide for the arbitration and settlement of disputes between peoples.⁶

Some of the Universal House of Justice's most active work is rendered in the areas of propagation and consolidation, and it is in reference to these activities that the institution most directly influences Bahá'í work in Malwa. The systematic programs of expansion that characterize the world-wide Bahá'í teaching effort are both conceived and guided to fruition by the Universal House of Justice. For example, in 1964 the Universal House of Justice issued to the Bahá'í world its first international teaching project. Known as the Nine-Year Plan, it set out goals to be achieved in every part of the world. In terms of the Indian community the Plan called for, among other things, the raising of the number of localities where Bahá'ís resided to 20,000,⁷ which in effect meant the continuation of the mass teaching campaign in the subcontinent. Between the years

⁴ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 153

⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 14

⁶ The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice, (Haifa, 1972), p. 5-6

⁷ Nine-Year Plan for the Bahá'ís of India 1964 - 1973, (New Delhi, n.d.), page numbers not listed.

1964 and 1973 Bahá'í activities in Malwa, therefore, were geared to mass teaching.

During the course of the Nine-Year Plan the Universal House of Justice gave constant support and advice to the Indian Bahá'í community. By means of written as well as personal communication⁸ the Universal House of Justice encouraged the Indian National Spiritual Assembly to outline and execute small teaching plans of their own which would help bring about the overall objectives. For example, in November of 1968 they wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly:

Your six-month teaching plan by which specific goals are assigned to various centres made us very happy and reassured us that the beloved friends in India are once again determined to seize the palm of victory and go on to new heights of achievement in the path of the Cause of God.⁹

Consequently, it is the Universal House of Justice that determines the pace and direction of Bahá'í teaching activities throughout the world, and its decisions have a direct influence on propagation activities in Malwa.

The Universal House of Justice is also involved in supervising the consolidation efforts of the movement in Malwa. All major decisions in the area of mass education, such as the creation of teaching institutes and the development of village primary schools, must be ratified by the Universal House of Justice before they can be put into effect. In addition, the Universal House of Justice advises the national and regional administrative bodies as to the best way of using such institutions. In general, they outline the purpose and function of each institution and ensure that it is used in the most efficient manner. For example, concerning the institution of the travelling teacher (see Chapter 6),

⁸ This refers to the Hands of the Cause, see p. 146-147

⁹ 'Message of Nov 3, 1968', Extracts from Communication of the Universal House of Justice, unpublished, p. 152

the Universal House of Justice has written:

One of the most important duties of such travelling teachers should be to develop nuclei of devoted and active believers in the many centres who would inspire and assist the friends in active participation in the work to be done in their villages and towns.¹⁰

The dimension of the Universal House of Justice's influence in the formulation of consolidation plans in India can be gleaned from their new Five-Year Plan¹¹, in which they call on the Indian community to:

Plan and carry out a program for the training of one or more believers from local communities having a Local Spiritual Assembly which will enable them to assist their fellow believers to deepen in the Cause and to work for the consolidation of the community; ... increase the number of village tutorial schools, ... and organize correspondence courses for deepening the friends in the knowledge of the Cause.¹²

While the Universal House of Justice is the focal point around which all administrative activity revolves, the administrative system of the Bahá'í Faith is by no means characterized by an overt centralism; national, regional, and local institutions play a profound role in directing the affairs of the movement. In India these institutions are particularly oriented towards the phenomenon of mass teaching, and consequently they greatly influence activities in Malwa.

The most prominent Bahá'í administrative institution in India is the National Spiritual Assembly. Like the Universal House of Justice, the National Spiritual Assembly is composed of nine members elected annually in convention by delegates who represent the various local Bahá'í communities throughout the country (see Chapter 10). The first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India and Burma was elected in 1923, and in 1973 the Indian Bahá'í community celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of this institution in the subcontinent.

¹⁰ 'Message of Feb 13, 1968', Extracts from Communication of the Universal House of Justice, p. 154

¹¹ The Five-Year Plan was initiated in April, 1974

¹² Five-Year Plan for the Bahá'ís of India, unpublished manual, page numbers not listed

The immediate purpose of the National Spiritual Assembly as outlined by Shoghi Effendi:

... is to stimulate, unify and co-ordinate by frequent personal consultations, the manifold activities of the friends as well as the local Assemblies; and by keeping in close and constant touch with the Holy Land, initiate measures, and direct in general the affairs of the Cause in that country.¹³

Specifically, these purposes, as stated in the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws of a National Spiritual Assembly are to be realized by means of:

... devotional meetings; by public meetings and conferences of an educational, humanitarian and spiritual character; by the publication of books, magazines and newspapers; by the construction of temples of universal worship and of other institutions and edifices for humanitarian service; by supervising, unifying, promoting and generally administering the activities of the Baha'is of (India) in the fulfilment of their religious offices, duties and ideals; and by any other means appropriate to these ends, or any of them.¹⁴

As the fountainhead of the movement within India, the National Spiritual Assembly both unifies and directs the work of Bahá'ís throughout the country. What the Universal House of Justice does on the international level, the National Spiritual Assembly does on the national level.¹⁵

The headquarters of the Indian National Spiritual Assembly is located in New Delhi. Some of its meetings, however, are held in other cities of the subcontinent, as it is generally the desire of the National Spiritual Assembly to be present in a specific area when special projects or programs relating to that area are being discussed. Consequently, the National Spiritual Assembly occasionally meets in the cities of Gwalior and Ujjain where the need for teaching and consolidation plans is the greatest.

¹³ Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1968), p. 39

¹⁴ Declaration of Trust and By-Laws of a National Spiritual Assembly, Article II, para. 2

¹⁵ The National Spiritual Assembly, however, is not considered infallible. The Universal House of Justice has the right to revoke their decisions.

The current National Spiritual Assembly¹⁶ is composed of members from four religious backgrounds: Parsi (4), Hindu (3), Jain (1), and Muslim (1). Of these nine, two are women, and six live in either of the two mass teaching areas of Madhya Pradesh.

The Indian National Spiritual Assembly is one of a group of national spiritual assemblies in the Bahá'í world that have been designated 'mass teaching' assemblies, as 90% of its work is directed towards the mass teaching effort. Accordingly, the National Spiritual Assembly's consultative sessions are largely consumed by hours spent in both formulating teaching plans to fulfill the Universal House of Justice's conversion goals and outlining specific projects designed to bring new declarants into direct contact with the Faith's institutions. For example, it was the National Spiritual Assembly that formulated the original mass teaching program in Malwa whereby paid travelling teachers took to rural pathways to announce to the common people the arrival of the new avatāra. Likewise, the development of the Indore Teaching Institute, where numerous early converts were 'deepened' in the knowledge of the Faith, was largely the work of the Indian National Spiritual Assembly.

The National Spiritual Assembly appoints numerous committees to help it carry out its designated functions. The most important of these committees as they influence Malwa are the State and Regional Teaching Committees, the Publishing Trust Committee, and the National Youth Committee.

The National Youth Committee is composed of five members whose main functions are to co-ordinate and develop Bahá'í groups in colleges and universities throughout India, and direct the movement of Bahá'í youth to vital areas of the country where assistance in teaching and consolidation work is required. In terms of Bahá'í activities in rural Malwa the latter of these two functions is the more important. Periodically,

¹⁶ Elected in April, 1973

Bahá'í youth from Poona and Bombay travel to Malwa to help in specific teaching and consolidation projects. As shall be seen in Chapter 6, such groups form one of the communicative links between the Bahá'í village communities in Malwa and the greater administrative system.

Another of the National Spiritual Assembly's committees which has a direct influence on 'deepening' and consolidation work in Malwa is the Publishing Trust Committee. This committee is responsible for making decisions concerning the type and amount of material to be printed and its subsequent publication into various regional languages. One of the committee's main tasks since the advent of the mass teaching campaign has been to develop suitable educational materials for a largely illiterate population. Consequently, it has seen fit to produce large numbers of books and pamphlets written in clear and simple Hindi for semi-literate individuals as well as pictorial publications for those members of Bahá'í communities who are unable to read. Since it is difficult for Bahá'í administrative institutions to maintain continuous personal contact with the numerous village communities in Malwa, written and visual teaching aids have assumed a strategic position in the Administrative Order's overall teaching objectives, and therefore the Publishing Trust Committee continues to play an integral role in propagation and consolidation programs in Malwa.

While the National Spiritual Assembly formulates national propagation and consolidation strategy, it is the various teaching committees that are the arms of the administrative structure in India. These institutions work at the grass root levels in the mass teaching areas and are largely responsible for the implementation of both the Universal House of Justice's and the National Spiritual Assembly's plans and programs.

Individual teaching committees were first created by the National Spiritual Assembly during the mass teaching era. Before this time a single teaching committee was in charge of propagation and consolidation

activities for the entire country. However, after the sudden increase in declarations the National Spiritual Assembly decided that special teaching committees whose jurisdiction would cover specific areas of the country were necessary to the overall development of the Faith, as a unitary body could no longer handle the immense amount of work required to continue mass teaching projects and develop 'deepening' programs. Consequently, in 1962 area teaching committees were formed. During the following years, however, the organization of teaching committees was rearranged, so that today there exist two types of teaching committees: the State Teaching Committee, which as its name implies is in charge of the overall direction of teaching and consolidation activities within a specific state of India; and the subordinate Regional Teaching Committee, which manages similar activities in specific regions of a given state. The latter generally exist in areas where mass teaching has resulted in a large number of declarations and the work of educating new declarants therefore cannot be accommodated by a single committee. Such is the case in Madhya Pradesh where two regional committees have been established, one for northern Madhya Pradesh (Gwalior), and another for southern Madhya Pradesh (Ujjain). Propagation and consolidation activities in Malwa are under the supervision of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee.

The primary function of these committees is to implement in the form of specific projects the teaching and consolidation goals of the National Spiritual Assembly. Although under the supervision of that body, teaching committees have been given the authority to act on all matters relating to teaching and consolidation work in their areas. For example, they can institute publications, adopt translation and printing programs, appoint teachers, and organize institutes and conferences. Therefore, the teaching

committees are the custodians of the teaching and consolidation work in India. As the Universal House of Justice wrote, they are the 'strong hands' of the National Spiritual Assembly.¹⁷

In Madhya Pradesh the State Teaching Committee is primarily a managerial body. It makes decisions concerning a wide range of activities and then passes on its resolutions to the Ujjain and Gwalior committees for consideration. Its main duties as outlined by the National Spiritual Assembly are: to assist the development of regional committees into efficient teaching centers; to help said committees in formulating teaching and consolidation plans; and to guide and assist them in the publication and translation of literature.¹⁸

The Madhya Pradesh State Teaching Committee consists of seven members appointed annually by the National Spiritual Assembly. It meets monthly in either New Delhi, Gwalior, or Ujjain. An examination of the minutes of its opening session for the year 1973 reveals the types of questions on which it consults. The first item of business concerned the sending of pioneers¹⁹ to areas in the state where local groups needed assistance in consolidating their communities. Next the members discussed sending travelling teachers to localities where mass teaching projects were to be implemented. Finally, they reviewed the questions of strengthening village administrative institutions and organizing teacher training classes and special 'deepening' sessions to be held at the Indore Teaching

¹⁷ Bahá'í News (India), # 6, July-August, 1973, (New Delhi), p. 3

¹⁸ 'Annexure to the minutes of the second meeting of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, May 19-21, 1972', unpublished, p. iii

¹⁹ In Bahá'í parlance a pioneer is a person who moves his residence to an area where a local community is in need of assistance.

Institute.²⁰ In each instance suggestions were made for the setting in motion of specific plans to fulfill the particular goal. These suggestions were then sent to the Ujjain and Gwalior Regional Teaching Committees.

The Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, like the Madhya Pradesh State Teaching Committee, is composed of seven members appointed annually by the National Spiritual Assembly. Its headquarters is located in Ujjain, where it meets bi-monthly. Its specific duties include the following: to assist local Bahá'í groups in consolidating and strengthening their communities; to supervise mass teaching activities for the region; to organize the activities of travelling teachers; to arrange deepening classes, conferences, and teacher's training classes; to implement plans for the education of village Bahá'ís in the knowledge of the laws and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith; to establish direct contact with all the localities under its jurisdiction through written and personal means of communication; and in general to implement the projects of the State Teaching Committee and the National Spiritual Assembly.²¹ These duties can be distilled into two essential categories:

- a) the generation and co-ordination of teaching activities,
- and
- b) the education of village communities in the various aspects of Bahá'í community life.

In terms of teaching work it is the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee that is responsible for organizing the manpower and assets of the Bahá'í communities in Malwa. Accordingly, it is in charge of sending pioneers and teaching teams to those districts in the region which the State Teaching Committee has selected as goal areas. In addition, it selects, trains,

²⁰ 'Minutes of the Madhya Pradesh State Teaching Committee, July 24, 1973', (Hindi), unpublished

²¹ 'Annexure to the minutes of the second meeting of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, May 19-21, 1972', unpublished, p. iii



The Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee Office - Ujjain

and supervises the activities and movements of the region's corps of travelling teachers (see Chapter 6), and earmarks funds for specific teaching projects. Consequently, the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee is the nerve-center from which all propagation activity in Malwa is directed.

The second responsibility of the Committee is to assist in the development of Bahá'í 'model village' communities in Malwa. In this regard it helps educate village declarants to understand and use the Faith's socio-religious institutions. The Committee implements its 'deepening' projects by making use of four main channels of communication: written sources, teaching institutes, travelling teachers, and consolidation teams. An entire chapter (Chapter 6) will be devoted to discussing these communicative channels. For now, suffice it to say that the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee employs such institutions to maintain contact with local communities under its jurisdiction and thereby keep an open flow of communication between said communities and the Bahá'í Faith's greater administrative system.

In short, the National Spiritual Assembly and its various committees are the driving force behind Bahá'í propagation and consolidation work in Malwa. They formulate mass teaching plans, create institutions to carry out these plans, and devise methods and means by which Bahá'í values and institutions can be introduced into village life. In so doing they direct the resources of the Indian Bahá'í community towards accomplishing the Universal House of Justice's prescribed teaching goals, and thereby fulfill their 'grave responsibilities'.²²

The bedrock of the Bahá'í Administrative Order is the Local Spiritual Assembly. In each community where there reside nine or more Bahá'ís, this locally elected body supervises and administers to the needs of believers. Since a more detailed analysis of its functions will be made

²² Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 74

in Chapter 10, where they will be discussed in light of the institution's introduction into two 'model villages', for the present it will only be pointed out that the Local Spiritual Assembly is the foundation stone of the Bahá'í national community, and its proper and efficient functioning is a pre-requisite for the development of teaching and consolidation plans within a given country.

Running parallel to the elected administrative institutions of the Faith, the Universal House of Justice, the National Spiritual Assembly, and the Local Spiritual Assembly, is a group of institutions whose members are appointed rather than elected. In descending order of authority they are: the Hands of the Cause, The Continental Board of Counsellors, and the Auxiliary Board. Individuals assigned to these institutions counsel and advise both the elected administrative bodies and individual believers in matters pertaining to the advancement of the Faith: the Hands of the Cause work at the international level; counsellors perform at the continental and national level; and board members work within specific countries.

The Hands of the Cause are a select group of appointed believers whose main function is to help propagate and protect the Bahá'í Faith on an international scale. Their origin as an institution is traced back to the time of Bahá'u'lláh. According to the Faith's records, Bahá'u'lláh appointed four Hands, about whom he said: 'Ere long will God raise up through Thee conquering Hands and subduing Helpers who will come forth from behind veils and will arise to win victory for the Manifestation of God, the All-Merciful amongst all mankind.'²³ Although 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not assign any Hands during his years of leadership, he testified to their station and provided for their appointment by Shoghi Effendi.²⁴ Hence, in December of 1951 Shoghi Effendi appointed twelve Hands of the

²³ Bahá'u'lláh, Súriy-i-Haykal, quoted in The Bahá'í World, vol. XIII, p. 333

²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 1.

Cause, and several months later he assigned another seven persons to this rank, bringing their total to nineteen. This number was maintained until 1957, when a few months before his death Shoghi Effendi added eight more names to the list of Hands of the Cause, thus finalizing their number at twenty-seven.²⁵ During the last seventeen years fifteen Hands have passed away, and since only the Guardian had the authority to appoint them, no further Hands of the Cause have been or will be appointed.²⁶

The Hands of the Cause form a personal communicative link between the Universal House of Justice and the various Bahá'í communities throughout the world. Each Hand has been assigned a specific area of the world in which he meets and consults with national spiritual assemblies and oversees the general range of Bahá'í activities. Hands are especially instrumental in advising national spiritual assemblies concerning the formulation of teaching plans. This duty was assigned to them by Shoghi Effendi during the Ten-Year Crusade. In June of 1957 he cabled: 'TO ITS NEWLY ASSUMED RESPONSIBILITY ASSIST NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLIES BAHÁ'Í WORLD SPECIFIC PURPOSE EFFECTIVELY PROSECUTING WORLD SPIRITUAL CRUSADE...',²⁷ Since that time, Hands of the Cause have been actively involved in helping national spiritual assemblies develop national teaching projects.

²⁵ Between the years 1952 and 1957 five Hands of the Cause passed away, and their positions were filled by another five appointees. Thus, there were in all thirty-two Hands of the Cause appointed by Shoghi Effendi.

²⁶ In its message of June 24, 1968, the Universal House of Justice said it saw no way in which additional Hands of the Cause could be appointed. (Wellspring of Guidance, p. 140)

²⁷ The Bahá'í World, vol. XIII, p. 338 (In the same cable Shoghi Effendi emphasized the necessity of the Hands working with such national bodies for the protection of the Faith: 'EVIDENCES INCREASING HOSTILITY WITHOUT, PERSISTENT MACHINATIONS WITHIN, FORSHADOWING DIRE CONTESTS DESTINED RANGE ARMY LIGHT FORCES DARKNESS, BOTH SECULAR RELIGIOUS... NECESSITATE THIS CRUCIAL HOUR CLOSER ASSOCIATION HANDS FIVE CONTINENTS BODIES ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES NATIONAL BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITIES...')

Periodically the Hands return to the Holy Land where they apprise the Universal House of Justice of the current state of affairs in the countries under their jurisdiction. Hence, the Hands of the Cause provide a direct channel of communication between the International Center and the various national administrative bodies throughout the world.

One Hand of the Cause who has been intimately involved with the mass teaching movement in Malwa is Dr. Rahmatu'lláh Muhájir. Being assigned his position by Shoghi Effendi in 1957, he was one of the last Hands of the Cause to be appointed. During his years of service he has worked closely with the Indian National Spiritual Assembly, and (as was mentioned in Part I of this study) it was his decision to hold a village teaching conference in Malwa in early 1961 that set the mass teaching movement in Madhya Pradesh in motion. For years he had advocated taking the message of the Faith to India's masses. With the breakthrough in Malwa his vision became a reality, and from that time on the entire orientation of the Bahá'í Faith in India changed; after 1961, teaching plans, consolidation activities, and communicative channels were all steered in the direction of mass teaching.

Dr. Muhájir has also been active in advising the Indian Bahá'ís how to consolidate and strengthen their new village communities. He played an instrumental role in both the establishment of India's first teaching institute in Indore and the purchase of a Bahá'í Center in Ujjain. In addition, he makes occasional trips to the mass teaching areas to meet with and encourage local Bahá'ís in their teaching work. For example, in March of 1974 he made a special visit to Ujjain to help organize a consolidation project whereby teams of Bahá'í youth visited selected village communities in order to encourage local believers to attend 'deepening' classes at the Indore Teaching Institute.

The increasing responsibilities that fell on the Hands of the Cause as a result of the continuous growth of the movement throughout the world led the Universal House of Justice in 1968 to create a new institution designed to aid the Hands in the performance of their dual duties of propagating and

protecting the Bahá'í Faith. In June of that year the Universal House of Justice announced to the Bahá'í world that they had established eleven continental boards of counsellors which would be responsible for the propagation and protection of the Faith in their respective zones. The activities of the continental boards were to follow the pattern of the relationship between the Hands of the Cause and national spiritual assemblies as outlined by the Guardian in various communications.²⁸ Thus, counsellors were to carry out many of the same activities that had at one time been the sole responsibility of the Hands of the Cause.

India is under the jurisdiction of the Continental Board of Counsellors for South Central Asia. The four members who make up this body meet periodically with the Indian National Spiritual Assembly in order to consult on the range of Bahá'í activities within the country. In addition to their capacity as advisors, counsellors are often directly involved in specific teaching and consolidation projects. In both instances they maintain close contact with the Hands of the Cause to whom they supply information and with whom they consult and collaborate..

Counsellor Shírfín Boman Meherabání has been personally involved for many years with the development of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa. She was the first Bahá'í to settle in Malwa, establishing residence in Ujjain in 1942, and years later she was in the forefront of the region's mass teaching campaign. After her appointment as a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors for South Central Asia in 1968, her role in the mass teaching areas became one of general overseer. While not directly involved in the formulation of teaching and consolidation projects, she offers advice regarding their implementation and on several occasions has taken to the field to help carry them out. For example, in January of 1974 she consulted with the National Spiritual Assembly concerning the formulation of a consolidation project whereby groups of more experienced Bahá'ís would travel to several village communities in Malwa to meet with and instruct

²⁸ Wellspring of Guidance, p. 144

the local declarants in the workings of Bahá'í community institutions. Following the National Spiritual Assembly's framing of a definite plan, Mrs. Meherabání headed one of the consolidation teams.

The continental counsellors have at their disposal another institution - the Auxiliary Board. This institution was established by Shoghi Effendi in October of 1952. In a cablegram dated October 8, 1952, he relayed the following:

CALL UPON FIFTEEN HANDS FIVE CONTINENTS, VIRTUE SUPREME
FUNCTION CHOSEN INSTRUMENTS PROPAGATION FAITH, INAUGURATE
HISTORIC MISSION THROUGH APPOINTMENT, DURING RIDVÁN, 1954,
FIVE AUXILIARY BOARDS ONE EACH CONTINENT, NINE MEMBERS
EACH, WHO WILL, AS THEIR ADJUNCTS, OR DEPUTIES, AND
WORKING IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE VARIOUS NATIONAL
ASSEMBLIES FUNCTIONING EACH CONTINENT, ASSIST, THROUGH
PERIODIC SYSTEMATIC VISITS BAHÁ'Í CENTRES, EFFICIENT,
PROMPT EXECUTION TWELVE PROJECTED NATIONAL PLANS.²⁹

Today there are two auxiliary boards for South Central Asia. The first contains three members who are primarily concerned with protecting the movement from external attack and internal division, while the second, composed of fifteen members, is responsible for helping propagate the Faith. Members' activities are directed by the Continental Board of Counsellors for South Central Asia (by whom they have been appointed), and they report to this body on a regular basis. In Malwa, auxiliary board members are especially instrumental in stimulating and encouraging local communities to implement teaching and consolidation projects, and hence they perform on the regional level many of the same functions that counsellors fulfill on the continental and national levels.

Being in direct contact with regional and local institutions, auxiliary board members submit recommendations concerning teaching and consolidation projects in their areas of jurisdiction to the Continental Board of Counsellors which can in turn approach the National Spiritual Assembly. The National Spiritual Assembly may then decide whether or not to act on the recommendation.

²⁹ The Bahá'í World, vol. XIII, p. 335

Continental counsellors and auxiliary board members are not initiators of teaching and consolidation projects, neither do they personally implement these activities; this is the function of the National Spiritual Assembly and its appointed committees. While they can give advice to the National Spiritual Assembly, the latter is by no means bound by their suggestions. Rather, the main function of these individuals is to help the elected institutions implement their projects by providing personal communicative links between the movement's various administrative levels. Consequently, they maintain the flow of information and ensure that the efforts of the Indian Bahá'í community will result in consistent and unified action. For example, 'If a National Spiritual Assembly has adopted one goal as pre-eminent in a year, the Auxiliary Board members should bear this in mind in all their contacts with the believers and should direct their attention to the plans of the National Assembly and stimulate them to enthusiastically support them.'³⁰

As can be gleaned from the foregoing outline, the administrative machinery of the Bahá'í Faith is organized towards the propagation and implementation of the movement's doctrines and ideals. In order to better understand how these institutions interact with one another, and to exemplify the influence their decisions have on the local village communities of Malwa, the evolution of a specific project will be traced from its origin in the Holy Land to its actualization in central India.

Several times during the course of this study reference has been made to the important station the Local Spiritual Assembly occupies within the overall framework of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Accordingly, the

³⁰ Bahá'í News (United States), # 474, September, 1970, (Wilmette, Illinois), p. 2

establishment of these institutions in various countries throughout the world is one of the Bahá'í Faith's primary teaching goals. In 1964 the Universal House of Justice issued to the Bahá'í world the Nine-Year Plan, in which the Indian Bahá'í community was called upon to raise the number of local spiritual assemblies in the subcontinent to 4000.³¹ At the time of the Plan's initiation there were barely a thousand local spiritual assemblies in India, and therefore the Universal House of Justice had given the Indian National Spiritual Assembly the task of directing a teaching campaign that within a nine year period would quadruple the number of local spiritual assemblies within the country.

Having received the Nine-Year Plan goals from the Universal House of Justice, the Indian National Spiritual Assembly consulted on the means and methods by which the number of local spiritual assemblies could be increased. During the course of the Plan they mapped out several smaller plans which lasted anywhere from six months to two years. In these plans different areas of the country were assigned specific teaching goals, and communities were called upon to support travelling teachers and pioneers within the boundaries of their various states. Meanwhile, Dr. Muhájir and the Continental Board of Counsellors for South Central Asia maintained frequent communication with the National Spiritual Assembly, offering their advice and guidance. Periodically, Dr. Muhájir notified the Universal House of Justice as to the progress of the Nine-Year Plan in India.

The teaching committees were assigned the responsibility of implementing the National Spiritual Assembly's various teaching plans. Before 1973 this meant that local spiritual assembly objectives were given directly to the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee. The committee would then draw up specific proposals designed to fulfill their assigned goals.

³¹ Nine-Year Plan for the Bahá'ís of India, page number not listed

Having calculated the number of travelling teachers needed to accomplish a particular objective, the Committee would begin to mobilize the resources under its sway: veteran teachers would be assigned specific localities; training courses for new teachers would be arranged; and follow-up groups to help in the formation of new assemblies would be organized.

At the same time, the Continental Board of Counsellors for South Central Asia would direct auxiliary board members to visit local communities such as Ujjain, Indore, and Shajapur where they would encourage individual believers and local spiritual assemblies to give their support to the teaching effort by offering prayers, financial assistance, manpower, or whatever additional help they could offer.

Travelling teachers would then be dispatched to their assigned areas. For the duration of the project they would keep the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee informed of the numbers of declarations they had obtained and the names and locations of the villages in which these declarations had taken place. The Committee would in turn inform the national office in New Delhi. Subsequently, plans for officially forming the new assemblies would be drawn up, and on the first day of Ridván (April 21),³² specially designated teachers, often under the supervision of an auxiliary board member, would be sent to those villages in which nine or more declarations had been received, and there supervise the election of the local spiritual assemblies.

In this way, working through its system of elected and appointed institutions, the Bahá'í Administrative Order carries out its teaching and consolidation projects. What begins as a general goal in Haifa

³² The day Bahá'u'lláh declared his mission in Baghdád.

is rareified by means of multi-levelled consultative planning and finally transformed into a social reality in the rural tablelands of Malwa.

In the preceding pages the essential features of the administrative system that is directing the advancement of the Bahá'í Faith both in Malwa and in numerous countries of the world have been surveyed. Before closing, however, it would be appropriate to say a few words concerning the metaphysical and sociological assumptions that underlie the system, for although they will be elaborated upon at greater length in Part III, the timeliness of the occasion warrants a brief discussion.

The administrative institutions of the Bahá'í Faith reflect in their structure and modes of operation some of the basic ideals found in the movement's 'world view.' Just as a direct relationship can be seen between the values and ideals that constitute the 'world view' of popular Hinduism and its corresponding institutional manifestations, a similar correlation can be observed between Bahá'í ideals and social institutions.

The Bahá'í view of man as a social being is influenced by both authoritarian and egalitarian ideals; while all believers are considered equal, they are held to be subservient to a higher authority.

As in Islām, the faithful are conceived to be equal in the eyes of God; 'In the estimation of God all men are equal...' ³³ On the institutional plane this has resulted in the structure of the Faith's administrative system being strongly marked by democratic features. ³⁴ For example, members of local spiritual assemblies are selected by means of popular election, the vote of each believer in the community holding the same weight. Moreover, although they are not chosen by direct democratic election, members of both national spiritual assemblies and the Universal

³³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 240-241

³⁴ By democratic is meant majority rule.

House of Justice are elevated to their positions of authority by electors whose powers can be traced back to the votes of individual believers (see Chapter 10). Even the appointed institutions are indirectly linked to the democratic principle. Except for the Hands of the Cause (of which no more can be appointed) the members of these institutions are appointed by elected bodies and are responsible to them.

The democratic principle is not just limited to the selection of administrators; it is also part and parcel of the decision making process within council chambers. All Bahá'í administrative institutions from the Universal House of Justice to a local committee are organized around the concept of Bahá'í consultation whereby each member of the said body equally presents his or her opinion on a given matter. 'When meeting for consultation, each must use perfect liberty in stating his views and unveiling the proof of his demonstration.'³⁵ After discussion, all decisions are reached by majority vote.

It would be incorrect, however, to perceive Bahá'í administrative institutions only in the light of democratic ideals. In the first place, they are all subservient to higher laws - the laws of God as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and interpreted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Accordingly, the powers of any given Bahá'í institution are limited by scriptural revelation; an assembly cannot change the laws of the Book. Likewise, members of appointed institutions are bound by the laws of their office. Only the Universal House of Justice has the right to interpret the laws of Bahá'u'lláh, but even this institution cannot change the divine text.³⁶ Secondly, as previously mentioned, once elected, assembly members are not responsible to those who elect them. As Shoghi Effendi aptly stated:

³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 406

³⁶ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Baha'u'llah, p. 149-150

The Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh must in no wise be regarded as purely democratic in character inasmuch as the basic assumption which requires all democracies to depend fundamentally upon getting their mandate from the people is altogether lacking in this Dispensation.³⁷

Consequently, while the administrative system is characterized by democratic principles in terms of method of election and means of decision making, as a whole it must be viewed as a type of autocracy in which the law of Bahá'u'lláh stands supreme.

Since the beginning of mass teaching, Bahá'í administrative institutions in India have not only directed propagation activities in Malwa; they have also been responsible for maintaining contact with the new declarants and educating a number of them in the various aspects of Bahá'í community life. In performing these tasks they rely on several important channels of communication, the operation of which will be the subject of Chapter 6.

³⁷ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 153

One of the foremost obstacles facing the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India is the maintenance of regular channels of communication with individual Bahá'í village communities. The large number of communities, the slow means of transportation, and lack of manpower have all added to this difficulty. In an attempt to mitigate this problem, the Bahá'í Administrative Order has established four channels of communication. The principal function of these institutions is to keep village Bahá'ís in contact with the movement's regional, national, and international administrative institutions, and thereby help facilitate the implementation of Bahá'í concepts and values into their lives. The four channels of communication include written material, teaching institutes, travelling teachers, and consolidation teams.

Not being dependent on the movement of specific persons, the written word provides the most extensive communicative link in Malwa; circulars and newsletters can be produced in great quantity and then mailed to numerous communities. Bahá'í communities in Malwa receive written communication from two sources: the national office in New Delhi, and the Regional Teaching Committee office in Ujjain. It takes several forms, ranging from letters and memos to newspapers and books.

The villagers' initial contact with written communication takes place when they declare their belief in Bahá'u'lláh. At that time Bahá'í teachers read to them the official Bahá'í declaration form which they must sign by either applying their signature or impressing their thumbprint. In cities, where converts are generally literate, individual enrolment cards are used, but in the mass teaching areas one large sheet for each village is employed. The following is a translation of the declaration sheet used in Malwa.

Declaration Sheet

O God, Guide me, protect me, illumine the lamp of my heart and make me a brilliant star. Thou art the powerful and the mighty.

On signing this form I make a declaration of my faith in Bahá'u'lláh, the manifestation (avatāra) of the Bahá'í Faith. I believe in the spiritual station of his herald the Báb and the ideals of the religion of God, and in the revealed teachings of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh. I accept the sacred station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

With this knowledge I knowingly submit for enrolment in the Bahá'í community, of which the principles, laws and institutions were founded by Bahá'u'lláh, and are compulsory to the faith of every loyal believer.

These forms are collected by village teachers and returned to the Regional Teaching Committee office in Ujjain from where they are forwarded to New Delhi. In some cases the forms are not gathered up immediately but are left behind with a responsible person in the village so that the villagers can have sufficient time to make their decision.¹ The forms are later returned by mail to the Regional Teaching Committee office.

Upon receiving the declaration sheets, the Regional Teaching Committee Secretary addresses a letter to the declarants, welcoming them into the Bahá'í community and again reminding them of their new responsibilities as Bahá'ís. The following is a translation of a typical welcoming letter:

¹ Unpublished correspondence of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, 'Letter to the Universal House of Justice, July 16, 1966'.

Dear friend (name)
village

Allāh'u'Abhá (God is most great)

The knowledge of your acceptance of the supreme manifestation (yugavatāra) of this age is very joyous. On this holy and sacred occasion please accept in a personal way the cordial congratulations of the Bahá'í community.

Having made manifest our faith in the divine teachings of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh, our responsibility as Bahá'ís is not finished, rather it increases. Because, after becoming a Bahá'í, it is our sacred duty, having obtained this message, to inform others of the sheltering canopy of Bahá'u'lláh so that his spiritual message can progress.

It is hoped that after becoming a Bahá'í, while receiving the benefits of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh, you will give the proper time to all of your Bahá'í duties, and that you will prove yourself to be of an ideal devotee of Lord Bahá'u'lláh.

In His service

Secretary RTC

Once a community has been established within a village, the group receives on a regular basis two newsletters: one from the national office in New Delhi, and the other from the Regional Teaching Committee.

The national office publishes quarterly a small circular entitled Bahá'í Samācār Patra (Bahá'í Newsletter). Its main purpose is threefold: to introduce villagers to some of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá; to familiarize them with Bahá'í principles; and to inform them of Bahá'í activities both in India and throughout the world. For example, the Bahá'í Samācār Patra for February, 1974, contained a passage from The Hidden Words, a commentary on meditation and reflection by 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

several references to the duties of the Local Spiritual Assembly, and news of Bahá'í activities in other parts of the country. To give an example of just one of these items, reproduced below is a translation of part of an article written to inform village believers of the Universal House of Justice's new Five-Year Plan initiated in India in May of 1974:

The supreme institution the Universal House of Justice addressing the Bahá'í world by means of their message to the national spiritual assemblies dated November 26, 1973, has made the announcement of the auspicious news that on the holy occasion of Ridván 1974 (April 21 - May 2) the next plan for the spiritual conquest of the world will be launched, whose duration will be five years.

To inform the friends concerning the significance and aims of this five year plan your National Spiritual Assembly has made preparations for the arrangement of a series of conferences in all parts of the country.²

The Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee also produces a news bulletin which is distributed to local Bahá'í village communities in Malwa. Its form is essentially the same as Bahā'ī Samācār Patra, except, being a local publication, more emphasis is placed on Bahá'í activities in the immediate areas of Malwa and Madhya Pradesh. The importance of this bulletin as a means of keeping contact with the villages was emphasized by the Universal House of Justice when they wrote:

The strength of the Regional Teaching Committees in India is one of the important matters to which your National Spiritual Assembly must constantly pay attention. The contact of these communities with the believers is vital and we are therefore doubly appreciative of the frequent publication and circulation among thousands of Centres of this Bulletin by the Regional Teaching Committee of Ujjain.³

Furthermore, the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee periodically publishes a newspaper entitled Bahā'ī Darsān which contains a variety of articles, ranging in content from Bahá'í history to techniques of agricultural production, and is distributed in numerous village communities. The

² Bahā'ī Samācār Patra, Feb 25, 1974, (New Delhi), p. 8

³ 'Message of July 25, 1972', Extracts from Communication of the Universal House of Justice, p. 30

popularity of the newspaper among local inhabitants prompted the National Spiritual Assembly to write to the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee:

We are happy to receive your letter of the 6th of 'Izzat and to note that each issue of Baha'i Darshan is read with great interest by the friends and that you have been able to add more deepening material to it. Please rest assured that all possible assistance and co-operation will be given by the National Office to make your efforts more fruitful and effective.⁴

In addition to the newsletters and Bahā'ī Darśan, the Bahā'ī Administrative Order in India also produces books and pamphlets printed in simple language for semi-literate readers and picture cards and visual aids for those who are unable to decipher the written word. In all cases, however, the main purpose of these publications is to keep an open channel of communication between the infant communities and the Bahā'ī Administrative Order, and in the process help deepen new declarants in the teachings of the Bahā'ī Faith.

In return, Bahā'ī village communities are requested to send written communication to the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee or the National Spiritual Assembly informing those bodies of their activities. In this way the administrative institutions learn which communities are actively functioning and which are not - information which enables them to organize future consolidation plans.

Written communication, however, faces one serious problem in Malwa - illiteracy. As is revealed in the statistics of the five model villages cited in Chapter 4, less than half of the members would be competent enough to read even simple Hindi with any degree of efficiency. The Bahā'ī Administrative Order has long been aware of this situation. From the beginning of the mass teaching campaign in Malwa serious thought was given to the problem of developing means of communication that would not be

⁴ Unpublished correspondence of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahā'īs of India, 'Letter to the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, December 13, 1973'

completely dependent on the written word. This consultation eventuated in October of 1961 in the purchase of a building and grounds in Indore and the subsequent establishment on that site of a Bahá'í teaching institute, the first of its kind in the Bahá'í world. One of the main functions of the Institute was to educate new village declarants in the finer teachings of the movement.⁵ During visits to village communities Bahá'í teachers would encourage specific believers to attend weekend or week-long classes in Indore. Transportation costs were paid for by the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, and participants were provided with free room and board. During their stay they were instructed in all aspects of Bahá'í life. 'The subjects taught usually consist of Bahá'í History, Laws and Teachings, and the Administrative Order. Special emphasis is laid upon living the Bahá'í life, the importance of teaching, prayer, fasting, Nineteen Day Feasts, Bahá'í elections, and contribution to the Fund.'⁶

In 1964, following the success of the Indore Teaching Institute, three more institutes were established in India: one in Gwalior, one in Devali, and one in Mysore. Also, as mentioned earlier, in 1965 grounds were purchased in Ujjain, and many declarants from surrounding villages began attending similar classes at this site.

In December of 1973 a special nine-day 'deepening' session was held at the Indore Teaching Institute. In order to better understand the institution's educational function, a short account of the session will be given.

⁵ While being limited in the number of declarants it can accommodate, the Indore Teaching Institute provides the most thorough form of Bahá'í education in Malwa. Hence, the general policy of the Administrative Order has been to extensively educate a limited number of declarants from key villages who can in turn act as community leaders in rural areas thereby helping to educate a larger number of believers than the Institute can personally reach.

⁶ 'Letter of the Universal House of Justice, December 2^h, 1964', Bahá'í Institutions. A Compilation, (New Delhi, 1973), p. 103



Villagers at 'deepening' session

The Indore Teaching Institute is located in the Mill section of the city of Indore. Situated on several acres of land, the one-story, seven-room building provides the class rooms and sleeping quarters for participating villagers. Between December 25, 1973, and January 2, 1974, a special 'deepening' session was conducted in which twenty-eight English speaking members and twenty-five Hindi speakers took part. The English speaking group was composed of persons primarily from urban areas, while the Hindi classes were comprised of Malwa villagers. The form and content of both classes was identical.

The daily format of the session was as follows: 8 am to 9 am individual prayer and meditation; 9 am to 10 am group prayer (individuals take turns saying prayers - not congregational prayer)⁷; 10 am to 12 am class; 12 am to 2 pm free time; 2 pm to 3pm individual prayer and meditation; 3 pm to 4 pm group prayer; 4 pm to 6 pm class. In the evening general social intercourse between the participants took place. During the nine-day session individuals did not leave the Institute grounds. The effect of this stipulation was that the session became a type of 'retreat', where believers could concentrate on what the instructors termed 'the spiritual realities of the world'.

The classes during the session were centered around the study of several of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, with the most emphasis being placed on the examination of a small volume of his utterances - The Hidden Words (Kalimát-i-Maknúnih). For several years the National Spiritual Assembly has been advising teaching committees and institute teachers to make use of this volume in their 'deepening' sessions. As was stated in a letter dated

⁷ For an explanation of Bahá'í group prayer see Chapter 8.

March 5, 1971:

National Assembly in its recent sessions, while considering the subject of Deepening [sic] the believers in their Faith and of educating the friends in living the Bahá'í life, thought that during this year, we encourage all the Bahá'ís to study and memorize "Hidden Words" so that the creative words of God could help us in our efforts to live the Bahá'í life.⁸

The classes were conducted orally so that those who could not read would still be able to participate in the program. The institute teacher would read a given passage from The Hidden Words, after which, discussion as to its meaning and implications commenced. The teacher directed the discussion, emphasizing those points in the passage which he felt were particularly significant. For example, the following passage from The Hidden Words was read:

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.⁹

During the discussion that followed, the instructors presented the points listed below:

- 1) the essence of justice is obedience to the commands of Bahá'u'lláh;
- 2) justice is relative to time and place and therefore justice in a given age is determined by the revelation of the avatāra; and
- 3) justice in terms of social action (group or community action) should be implemented by Bahá'í institutions and not by individuals.

⁸ Unpublished correspondence of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, 'Letter to the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, March 5, 1971'

⁹ Baha'u'llah, Hidden Words, trans. by Shoghi Effendi, rev. ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1963), p. 3-4

In these elaborations one can notice two main lines of thought being stressed. First, individuals are reminded that social harmony is dependent on their obedience to the prophet's utterances; only by living the Law can the maintenance of justice be assured. Second, social justice is dependent on the proper functioning of Bahá'í institutions; without the benefit of a strong administrative superstructure the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are rendered useless. Consequently, one of the principal purposes of such classes is to instil into the minds of village declarants the importance of adjusting their lives both individually and collectively to the commandments of Bahá'u'lláh so that new patterns of behavior will begin to manifest themselves within village communities in Malwa.

In addition to acting as a center for the dissemination of Bahá'í concepts, both metaphysical and social, the Indore Teaching Institute also provides for the education of villagers by means of exemplary conditioning; within the Institute all activities are governed by Bahá'í principles and rules of conduct. Accordingly, participants study, worship, and eat together, with no distinction being made according to caste backgrounds. Even in terms of sleeping arrangements there is no such distinction made, and as a result 'high' and 'low' castemen can find themselves sharing the same room.¹⁰

During the nine day session various aspects of Bahá'í life were discussed (the study format being the same as the one mentioned above), and at the conclusion of the course trainees were instructed to share the knowledge they had acquired with their fellow village believers. It is in this regard that the Indore Teaching Institute serves its most important function, for while the number of students who pass through its courses are relatively small in comparison to the total number of declared

¹⁰ During the first few years these provisions caused some friction, as high caste declarants were often unwilling to dine at the same table as 'untouchables'. At present, however, this barrier seems to have been broken - the author saw Brāhmans and Chamārs eating side by side.

Bahá'ís in Malwa, the information they disperse in various village communities ensures that a larger number of declarants will come into contact with the 'deepening' efforts of the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India. Hence, it is as a channel of communication that the Indore Teaching Institute provides its greatest service to consolidation work in Malwa.

Perhaps the most effective channel of communication linking Malwa Bahá'í village communities and the movement's greater administrative system is the travelling teacher. It is the most effective for several reasons. In the first place, while written communication is plentiful and distributed on a regular basis, it faces two difficulties: illiteracy, and lack of personal contact. As previously mentioned, even in the better educated communities the majority of believers cannot read. In this vein it has been estimated that on the whole, less than 25% of the declarants in Malwa can read sufficient Hindi to be able to understand the contents of Bahá'í written material.¹¹ Consequently, any written material received by village communities must be read to the group by those members who can read, and therefore communication is indirect and often ineffective. Furthermore, even when bulletins, newspapers, and other forms of written communication are read to village believers, the lack of personal contact weakens their effect. A letter received from New Delhi or Ujjain does not carry the emotional impact that characterizes the spoken word, and thus the human aspect of communication is lost. Secondly, while teaching institutes contain within their structure a means for establishing the personal contact so vital to successful communication, they are unavailable to the majority of rural followers; the mainstream of village declarants cannot afford the time away from their fields to attend instructional sessions. Also, the lack of financial resources in the Indian Bahá'í community reduces not only the size but number of institutes. There

¹¹ This is the estimate of the Chairman of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee.

are only two such centers for the entire Malwa mass teaching area, a region which includes within its boundaries over a hundred thousand declared believers, and consequently the Administrative Order has had to use them primarily for educating a few community leaders. In an attempt to overcome these difficulties, the institution of the Bahá'í travelling teacher has been created. About such teachers the Universal House of Justice in a letter dated October 26, 1967, said:

It must be realized that people who are mostly illiterate cannot have the benefit of reading for themselves the written word and of deriving directly from it the spiritual sustenance they need for the enrichment of their Baha'i lives. They become dependent, therefore, to a large extent on their contacts with visiting teachers. The spiritual calibre or moral quality of these teachers assumes, therefore, great importance. The National Spiritual Assembly or the Teaching Committees responsible for the selection of these teachers should bear in mind that their choice must depend, not only on the knowledge or grasp of the teachings on the part of the teachers, but primarily upon their pure spirit and love for the Cause, and their capacity to convey that spirit and love to others.¹²

The duties of travelling teachers fall into two main categories: propagating the Faith, and assisting the consolidation efforts of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee by acting as channels of communication between the Committee's office in Ujjain and various village communities. This chapter is primarily concerned with their role as channels of communication; their activities as propagators of the Bahá'í Faith will be more thoroughly developed in Chapter 11.

As communicative links between the village communities and the Bahá'í Administrative Order, travelling teachers' duties are basically three. First, they carry general information from the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee to the various villages in their assigned localities, an assignment which often involves conducting 'deepening' programs in the villages.

¹² 'Letter to all national spiritual assemblies engaged in mass teaching, October, 26, 1967', Arise to Serve, p. 118-119

Second, they meet periodically with specific local spiritual assemblies in order to help them better understand the administrative dimensions of the Faith. Third, they keep the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee apprised of the general condition of Bahá'í communities in the rural areas.

Each travelling teacher is assigned a number of key villages within the immediate vicinity of his own town or village. In each village (some of which are the aforementioned 'model villages') he executes his assignment and in turn directs specific believers to carry the given information to surrounding communities, thus establishing a small scale network of verbal communication.

There are thirteen such travelling teachers presently working in Malwa, all of whom come from villages and towns throughout the region. All are literate in Hindi; one or two can converse in English; and several are college graduates. Every month the teachers assemble in Ujjain to submit written reports outlining their previous month's work and to receive their briefing instructions from the Secretary of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee. After being examined on their instructions they return to their various districts.

An example of the travelling teacher can be seen in the person of Bakṣī Rām Varmā, a twenty-six year old Bahá'í who lives in a rural community located in Ujjain district, not far from the small railway junction of Nagda. He comes from a Rājput family, and together with his two brothers farms ten acres of land. He attended Mādhav College in Ujjain where he received his B.A. in Arts in 1971.

Bakṣī Rām first came into contact with the Bahá'í Faith in 1971 when he met a travelling teacher in his village. After declaring his belief in Bahá'u'lláh he took part with fifteen other new believers in a three week 'deepening' course designed to familiarize declarants with all aspects of the Bahá'í Faith from ritual and devotion to administrative

organization. Upon passing a written examination the participants were qualified to carry out teaching and consolidation activities in village areas.

Bakṣī Rām has in his charge a number of village communities (located near Nagda junction) spread out over a radius of approximately fifteen miles. Each month he visits a certain number of them, often spending the night in the visited community. Every month he receives the equivalent of ten Australian dollars to help support his field work. The type of activity in which Bakṣī Rām engages is exemplified in the following paragraphs.

Bakṣī Rām's specific assignment for the month of January, 1974, was to inform local spiritual assemblies in his area to promote two projects in their respective communities: to implement the use of the phrase 'Allāh'u'Abhā'; and to encourage individual contribution to the Bahá'í Fund.¹³ His journey began in Ujjain where in conjunction with the other travelling teachers he received his briefing instructions from the Secretary of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee. He then travelled by train to Nagda from where he took a bus to his village. The next day he set out for his assigned destinations.

The importance of prayer as a preparatory act for commencing teaching and consolidation work has been greatly stressed by the Universal House of Justice, and the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee therefore instructs every teacher to engage in one hour of prayer before starting his mission. Accordingly, during his travels Bakṣī Rām spends much time chanting prayers and singing Bahá'í devotional songs. As he stated, 'I am doing the work of Bhagavān Bahá'u'lláh, therefore I prepare myself by singing his verses.'

The next evening Bakṣī Rām met with the assembly members in the first of his designated communities. As is the rule, the meeting began with a prayer read by the chairman of the assembly, a Rājput farmer:

¹³ The propagation and consolidation activities of the Bahá'í Faith are sustained by funds contributed by individual believers. In each country of the Bahá'í world there exists a national fund which supports the work of the movement within its boundaries. Only Bahá'ís are allowed to contribute to the Bahá'í Fund - money from outside sources is not accepted.

O God, refresh and gladden my spirit. Purify my heart, illumine my powers. I lay all my affairs in Thy hand. Thou art my Guide and my Refuge. I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved, I will be a happy and joyful being. O God, I will no longer be full of anxiety, nor will I let trouble harass me. I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life. O God, Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself. I dedicate myself to Thee, O Lord.¹⁴

Having expressed the well-wishes of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, Bakṣī Rām proceeded to elaborate upon his assigned topics. First, he relayed the Committee's wish that the phrase 'Allāh'u'Abhā' be employed by assembly members when greeting each other, and that its use among all village declarants be encouraged. The phrase means 'God is most great', and it used by Bahá'ís throughout the world as a greeting, just as in the rural areas of Malwa Hindus greet each other with the traditional 'Jay Rāma' (long live Rāma).¹⁵ Second, Bakṣī Rām explained the significance of the Bahá'í Fund, emphasizing that the amount of money given by the community was not important, but that universal participation was desirable. He also stressed that the donated money was used for paying teachers, supporting schools, printing books and pamphlets, and generally promoting the movement in India.

During the next week Bakṣī Rām carried these instructions to the local spiritual assemblies of several nearby villages. In each instance he met members of the assembly individually in their fields and again collectively in the evening. In some of these communities he also stressed to assembly members the importance of maintaining written communication with the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, as regular contact with the higher

¹⁴ Bahá'í Prayers. A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, The Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1967), p. 80-81

¹⁵ From a sociological point of view the object of inducing new village declarants to use this expression is to give the Bahá'í Faith a separate identity within village life. The Bahá'í Administrative Order hopes the active use of the phrase by villagers, both in their meetings and during their daily routines, will hasten this phenomenon thus giving new believers a feeling of brotherhood in Bahá'u'lláh.

administrative institutions of the movement was essential to the development of the Faith in Malwa.

While a major part of Bakṣī Rām's duties are involved in relaying information and directives from the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee to local communities, this is not his only function; he also carries communications from the villages to the Committee. In this respect he notifies the Committee's members of specific problems and concerns of individual communities. For example, in one village, community leaders notified Bakṣī Rām that their Bahá'í bhavan had been damaged during the rainy season and was in need of certain repairs. They requested the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee give them assistance in paying for reconstruction costs. Accordingly, in his monthly report Bakṣī Rām reiterated the request.

Bakṣī Rām's activities exemplify the work being carried out by the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee's travelling teachers. Yet, because 'deepened' Bahá'í villagers can afford little time away from their fields, the number of such teachers in Malwa is few, and therefore all of the local spiritual assemblies in the region cannot be personally contacted. As a result, travelling teachers must concentrate their efforts on those villages which the Bahá'í Administrative Order feels have the greatest potential for developing strong communities. Although the process is a slow one, and the range of contact limited, the personal communication they provide establishes the travelling teachers as the best source of communication between village communities and the Bahá'í Administrative Order, and consequently in the future their numbers will be increased.¹⁶

The final channel of communication employed by the Bahá'í Administrative Order in Malwa is the consolidation team. This institution is somewhat akin to the travelling teacher in that it moves within the rural areas, meeting with local Bahá'í assemblies and community members and

¹⁶ This was the opinion of Hand of the Cause Dr. Muḥájir.

helping with consolidation and 'deepening' programs. It is different to the travelling teacher, however, in that while the latter comes from the villages and is paid for his work on a regular basis, the consolidation team generally consists of individuals (often youth under the age of twenty-five) from outside areas who come to Malwa or other mass teaching areas for specific periods to perform specific tasks. Therefore, unlike the travelling teacher the consolidation team does not provide a continuous and on-going communicative link, but acts as a temporary channel designed to implement particular programs or projects. In addition, a consolidation team generally travels by jeep; since time is limited and the National Spiritual Assembly and the Regional Teaching Committee want a team to meet with as many communities as possible during its stay in the region, travel time must be shortened.

Three consolidation teams were in the field in Malwa between February 12 and February 23, 1974. Each team was composed of two Bahá'í youth from Poona and Bombay and one village teacher from the Malwa region. Their specific task on this occasion was to help administer the unit elections whereby local communities select delegates for the National Convention.¹⁷ They were to see that village believers understood the meaning and methods of Bahá'í elections and ensure that delegates were properly elected. Also, they were asked to select certain villagers whom they felt could act as village teachers and invite them to attend the next training session at the Indore Teaching Institute.

The teams assembled at the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee office where they met with Hand of the Cause Dr. Muhájir and Continental Counsellor Mrs. Shírín Boman Meherabání. Following a round of prayers they were reminded of the importance of proper methodology in the Bahá'í electoral process and advised to make sure that no campaigning or electioneering took place. In addition, Dr. Muhájir emphasized the importance of

¹⁷ For details concerning this event see Chapter 10.

finding suitable believers who could be trained as travelling teachers, as the large number of communities in Malwa was making the use of consolidation teams less practical each year, and therefore in the future, activities such as election supervising would have to be carried out by local inhabitants. Furthermore, since the new Five-Year Plan called for great increases in the number of communities in India, he felt it imperative that the ranks of India's travelling teachers be increased. After consultation the three groups left for their assigned districts.

An examination of one of the group's written reports evidences the type of service the consolidation team renders. In four villages in Ratlam district they co-ordinated election procedures and saw that the name of the elected delegate was safely conveyed in writing to the region's Auxiliary Board member. In addition, they visited six other villages for the purpose of assessing the district's corps of travelling teachers and school teachers. In this regard they subsequently made recommendations to the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee and National Spiritual Assembly for the recall of one teacher for further training and the addition of another to the list of full-time travelling teachers.¹⁸ Furthermore, they left instructions with the district's travelling teachers to send outstanding literate Bahá'ís from the surrounding villages to the Indore Teaching Institute for special training classes.¹⁹

As has been stated both in the introduction to this work and several times throughout the preceding chapters, the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India is energetically involved in directing a process of communication which is primarily educational in nature. Over the last decade a large number of rural villagers in Malwa have declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh

¹⁸ 'Unpublished consolidation team report written to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, March, 1974', p. 4

¹⁹ 'Consolidation team report', p. 3

as an avatāra. From this starting point - the declaration of an individual - the process begins. The role of the Administrative Order now becomes one of introducing declarants to Bahá'í values, institutions, and modes of behavior, for the movement is not primarily concerned with the question of personal salvation through belief in an avatāra, but with the construction of a system of values and corresponding institutions which will change the behavior patterns of men and thereby provide the basis for a future society whose scope will be universal and whose laws will be the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

Part III Aspects of Community Life

Chapter 7 Beliefs and Doctrines

The task which the Bahá'í Administrative Order has set for itself in Malwa is to educate new declarants in the various dimensions of Bahá'í community life. As stated earlier, since the beginning of the mass teaching campaign in India the sole requirement for becoming a Bahá'í has been acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as a manifestation of God. Consequently, when travelling teachers approach a new village they emphasize the claims of Bahá'u'lláh as a manifestation of the Sacred and not the intricacies of the Faith. While the basic social principles are also expounded, it is the station of Bahá'u'lláh that is always stressed. This point was made clear by the Indian National Spiritual Assembly when it reminded the local communities that:

An over-simplification of the Cause in the minds of the hearers cannot be avoided if our teachers present the Cause of God as a world movement, with noble principles, for removing prejudice and promoting World Peace. Such an approach may have its justification for stimulating inquiry and interest, but in the context of our villages, we should portray the Cause with simplicity of heart and directness of truth:¹

Therefore, new believers are not expected upon declaring to immediately manifest within their lives the teachings and principles, both individual and social, of the Bahá'í Faith. Rather, becoming a Bahá'í is viewed as a process. As Shoghi Effendi stated:

The process of becoming a Bahá'í is necessarily slow and gradual. The essential is not that the beginner should have a full and detailed knowledge of the Cause, a thing which is obviously impossible in the vast majority of cases, but that he should, by an act of his own will, be willing to uphold and follow the truth and guidance set forth in the Teachings, and thus open his heart and mind to the reality of the Manifestation.²

¹ Bahá'í News (India), # 6, July-August, 1973, p.6

² Bahá'í News (United States), # 213, November, 1948, (Wilmette, Illinois) p. 2

It is the responsibility of Bahá'í administrative institutions in India, namely, the National Spiritual Assembly and the State and Regional teaching committees to see that the new declarants are guided in the process of becoming Bahá'ís, and hence in accordance with the directives of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice these institutions are attempting to direct a 'deepening' campaign in Malwa. The lack of funds and manpower, however, has meant that the efforts of this campaign have had to be directed towards a number of 'model village' communities. The aim of the program has been to introduce into the 'model village' communities the essential aspects of Bahá'í community life, with the hope that these communities will develop into catalysts for further institutional implementation in the rural areas.³ The essential elements of community life can be divided into five categories: beliefs and doctrines, ritual and ceremony, social principles, administration, and education and propagation.

Part III will examine each of the above categories in detail. In each case the teaching or institution in question will first be examined in its theoretical form, that is, as it is presented in Bahá'í literature, and then as it is being implemented and adapted to the Indian cultural environment. Finally, a few examples of Bahá'í activity in the 'model village' communities will be cited. It should be pointed out, however, that greater emphasis will be placed on the theoretical and adaptive aspects of Bahá'í teachings, as even in the 'model villages' change has not been revolutionary, and thus the center of Bahá'í activity in Malwa is still

³ This is not to say that contact is only maintained with a select group of villages. Rather, it is to point out that in terms of implementing Bahá'í institutions in the rural areas more time has been given to those communities which Bahá'í administrators in India feel have greater potential for development. It would appear that this choice often depends on whether the community has a core of 'deepened' believers who can organize Bahá'í activities and thereby act as community leaders. It is felt that if these villages can develop functioning Bahá'í communities they will be able to serve as examples and resource centers for other rural communities.

the educational process rather than independent community development. Less than fifteen years have elapsed since the beginning of mass teaching in India, while the traditional values and institutions of the Indian village have roots that reach back thousands of years. Consequently, systematic change is of necessity a slow and arduous process, and the Bahá'í movement has just begun to enter the arena.

The belief dimension is perhaps the most important aspect of religious life; it forms the psychological source of an adherent's view of himself and the cosmos. In addition, the modes of action and patterns of behavior in any given society are directly related to the system of beliefs to which its members adhere. Putting aside the argument of whether beliefs and values are manifestations of socio-economic forces or the source of the former, the author will be satisfied in acknowledging the direct relationship existing between values and beliefs and social action. On this point he agrees with Peter Berger that the interaction is a dialectical one. As Berger states:

The dialectical relationship between religion and society thus precludes the doctrinaire approaches of either "idealism" or "materialism". It is possible to show concrete instances how religious "ideas", even very abstruse ones, led to empirically available changes in the social structure. In other instances, it is possible to show how empirically available structural changes had effects on the level of religious consciousness and ideation. Only a dialectical understanding of these relationships avoids distortions of the one-sidedly "idealist" and "materialist" interpretations.⁴

Thus an examination of the belief dimension or 'world view' of the Bahá'í Faith is essential to an understanding of the values and institutions its leaders are attempting to introduce into village life.

⁴ Peter Berger, The Social Reality of Religion, (London, 1969), p. 4-5

The beliefs and doctrines of the Bahá'í Faith are religious in nature, as they are claimed to be derived from the Sacred.⁵ The form which the Sacred takes in Bahá'í literature is that of a transcendent and omnipotent God. He is indivisible and unchanging, and His essence is eternal:

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even to hint at the nature of Thine Essence.⁶

Moreover, He is above all names and free from all human likeness. According to The Kitáb-i-Íqán, 'To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress.'⁷ Consequently, all things are known by God, but He is concealed from all men.⁸

Through His will God created the universe which has had no beginning in time and shall have no end:

Know assuredly that God's creation hath existed from eternity, and will continue to exist forever. Its beginning hath had no beginning, and its end knoweth no end.⁹

Commenting on this apparent contradiction, E. G. Browne explained: 'This Emanation of Creation was produced by the Primal Will (Mashiyyat-i-U'lá),

⁵ See footnote 1 in Introduction.

⁶ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 3-4

⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 98

⁸ 'Ten thousand Prophets, each a Moses, are thunderstruck upon the Sinai of their search at His forbidding voice, "Thou shalt never behold Me!"; whilst a myriad Messengers, each as great as Jesus, stand dismayed upon their heavenly thrones by the interdiction, "Mine Essence thou shalt never apprehend!"' (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 62)

⁹ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 150

and though eternal in duration, is subsequent to the latter as to causation.¹⁰ Consequently, all creatures including man emanate from God, and it is by His grace that they have entered the realm of existence.

While the God of the Bahá'í Faith is beyond all human understanding or reproach, He is a personal God, not a neutral ground of being. In this sense the Bahá'í conception of God closely follows the pattern of conceptual development to be found in the historical religions of the Near East, Judaism, Christianity, and Islám, in which the Sacred in its most exalted ideation retains certain anthropomorphic attributes and is capable of communing with His creation in an I-Thou relationship. This 'love' relationship is revealed in the following passage taken from The Hidden Words:

O SON OF MAN!

Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient
eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee;
therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee
Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.¹¹

Furthermore, like Muḥammad, Bahá'u'lláh's showering of the Sacred with such descriptive attributes as the All-Merciful, the Most-Compassionate, the Giver, the Gracious, the Loving, testifies to the fact that God is conceived as being a personal deity.

Since it is impossible for created things to comprehend the Divine Essence, from time to time God sends forth messengers or manifestations who serve as a liason between Him and His creation. In this process God is an active agent; through the power of His will He reveals Himself to the manifestation. Moreover, it is only through the manifestation that man can know of His will: 'He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of men can never be known except through His Manifestation,...'¹² In the

¹⁰ E. G. Browne, 'The Bábís of Persia. II. Their Literature and Doctrines', p. 914

¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, p. 4

¹² Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 49

Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas this theme is explained in the following manner:

By this Word it is intended that no one hath any access to the Invisible Essence. In this world all men must turn their faces toward "Him-whom God-shall manifest". He is the "Dawning-place of Divinity" and the "Manifestation of Deity".¹³

Hence, a manifestation acts as a communicative link between the Sacred and the profane, an idea which shares much in common with the Islamic concept of the prophet.¹⁴

The relationship between God and a manifestation in Bahá'í doctrine is one of revelation and not incarnation. The Divinity reveals Himself unto His manifestation, but he does not take human form.¹⁵ Consequently, a manifestation acts like a mirror; he reflects the sun, but he is not the embodiment of the sun itself. According to Bahá'u'lláh:

These Tabernacles of Holiness, these Primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles.¹⁶

A manifestation is a composite of three realities: the physical, the human, and the divine. In the first two forms he shares similarities with his fellow men; he has a physical body and a rational soul.¹⁷ However,

¹³ Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol. III, (New York, 1940), p. 485

¹⁴ As opposed to the Christian concept whereby the Sacred enters the profane sphere.

¹⁵ 'Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men.' (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 49)

¹⁶ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 47-48

¹⁷ Again similarities can be seen between the Bahá'í concept of manifestation and the Islamic concept of prophet. Thus Muḥammad says in the Qur'án, 'I am but a man like you.' See Qur'án, 41: 6. For Bahá'í reference to this dual station of the manifestation see Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 67

he also has a divine side - He is the spokesman for God. Accordingly, only through him does the divine word flow.

According to the Bahá'í view a manifestation is necessary because the human intellect by itself is incapable of solving the basic problems of life. Only by obtaining the knowledge of God's creative purpose can man come to an understanding of himself and thereby fulfill his ordained station in life. Consequently, human unity depends on men following the teachings of the manifestation,¹⁸ and failure to do so results in the decay of society. Hence Bahá'í literature often depicts the manifestation as a physician whose patient is sick humanity. For example, the Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas record that:

Each Manifestation is the heart of the world and the proficient Physician of every patient. The world of humanity is sick, but that skilled Physician hath the healing remedy and He bestoweth divine teachings, exhortations and advices which are the remedy of every ailment and the dressing for every wound.¹⁹

Consequently, only through obedience to his commands can mankind progress.²⁰

During the course of human history God has revealed Himself through a series of manifestations. Just as the sun that rises and sets each day is in reality the same sun, so the numerous messengers through whom God has manifested Himself are one and the same.²¹ Although in their

¹⁸ 'The Divine Messengers have been sent down, and their Books revealed, for the purpose of promoting the knowledge of God, and of furthering unity and fellowship among men.' (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 12)

¹⁹ Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol. III, p. 538

²⁰ 'The beginning of all things is the knowledge of God, and the end of all things is strict observance of whatsoever hath been sent down from the empyrean of the Divine Will...' (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 5)

²¹ 'The Divine Manifestations are so many different mirrors, because they have a special individuality, but that which is reflected in the mirrors is one sun.' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, trans. by Laura Clifford Barney, rev. ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1968), p. 178)

ignorance men speak of Abraham, the Buddha, Moses, Zoroaster, Christ, Kṛṣṇa, and Muḥammad as separate and distinct realities, in truth the voice which spoke in each of them was the one and indivisible God:

Nay, all the Prophets of God, His well-favoured, His holy and chosen Messengers, are, without exception, the bearers of His names, and the embodiments of His attributes. They only differ in the intensity of their revelation, and the comparative potency of their light.²²

Therefore, the Bahá'í Faith adheres to a concept of progressive revelation whereby from the dawn of human history to the present day manifestations have revealed to mankind the commandments and laws of God which have subsequently become the catalysts for the advancement of civilization. While the teachings of the manifestations vary according to the needs of the time (thus making religious truth relative), they always come from the same Source.

According to Bahá'í scripture, manifestations have often spoke of future revelations. However, once a prophet appears and makes his claim, he is rejected. Thus the Jews were told to expect a Messiah, but they rejected Jesus because he did not fulfill their expectations. Similarly, Christians were told to expect the return of their Lord, yet when he appeared in the personage of the Arabian prophet, Muḥammad, they disdained him. Likewise, Muslims were expecting the arrival of the mahdí yet when the Báb made his claim they imprisoned and finally killed him. The Báb in turn had spoken of the coming of a universal manifestation, mentioned by all the manifestations of the past, whom he referred to as 'Him whom God shall manifest'. Bahá'ís believe this universal manifestation was Bahá'u'lláh.

²² Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 103-104

²³ Both Sunní and Shí'ah theologies posit the appearance in the last days of a figure who will make justice triumph, although this expectation has been more fully developed among the latter, particularly with reference to the return of the 'hidden imám'.

To Bahá'ís Bahá'u'lláh is the latest manifestation of God. He is the universal teacher, the promised one of all ages, whose religion will provide the spiritual base for a new world civilization.²⁴ Shoghi Effendi aptly summarized the scope of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation in the following passage:

In conclusion of this theme, I feel it should be stated that the Revelation identified with Bahá'u'lláh abrogates unconditionally all the Dispensations gone before it, upholds uncompromisingly the eternal verities they enshrine, recognizes firmly and absolutely the Divine origin of their Authors, preserves inviolate the sanctity of their authentic Scriptures, disclaims any intention of lowering the status of their Founders or of abating the spiritual ideals they inculcate, clarifies and correlates their functions, reaffirms their common, their unchangeable and fundamental purpose, reconciles their seemingly divergent claims and doctrines, readily and gratefully recognizes their respective contributions to the gradual unfoldment of one Divine Revelation, unhesitatingly acknowledges itself to be but one link in the chain of continually progressive Revelations, supplements their teachings with such laws and ordinances as conform to the imperative needs, and are dictated by the growing receptivity, of a fast evolving and constantly changing society, and proclaims its readiness and ability to fuse and incorporate the contending sects and factions into which they have fallen into a universal Fellowship, functioning within the framework, and in accordance with the precepts, of a divinely conceived, a world-unifying, a world-redeeming Order.²⁵

After the manifestations the gem of creation is man, without whom existence would be meaningless.²⁶ Man stands out from the rest of creation

²⁴ 'The Revelation which, from time immemorial, hath been acclaimed as the Purpose and Promise of all the Prophets of God, and the most cherished Desire of His Messengers, hath now, by virtue of the pervasive Will of the Almighty and at His irresistible bidding, been revealed unto men.' (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 5)

²⁵ Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 100

²⁶ 'We consider man as the greatest member because, among the creatures, he is the sum of all existing perfections. When we speak of man, we mean the perfect one, the foremost individual in the world, who is the sum of spiritual and apparent perfections, and, who is like the sun among the beings. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 206)

by virtue of his rationality. Like the animal, man has a physical body and senses which allow him to experience hunger, thirst, heat, and cold, but his superior intelligence permits him to understand in varying degrees himself, the world, and the spiritual realities of existence.²⁷ Man's power of rationality is a result of his possessing a soul - a non-material reality connected to the body through the functions of the mind.²⁸ The soul comes into existence when the body is created, but it is independent of the latter and survives after its demise. Moreover, it is not affected by the infirmities of the body or mind.

Man's soul allows him to understand the realities of existence, and it is the knowledge and love of the source of that existence (ie. God) that is the sole aim of his being created.²⁹ Accordingly, in the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith the purpose of man's life on earth is to know and love God.³⁰

Each man, therefore, is created with the ability to love God, but this ability is dependent on free will.³¹ Accordingly, man requires a teacher whose guidance will bring his potentialities to fruition. As man requires a perfect guide, the master must be at the same time '...not only

²⁷ For a discussion on man and nature see Bahá'í World Faith, p. 235-241.

²⁸ 'The temple of man is like unto a mirror, his soul is as the sun, and his mental faculties even as the rays that emanate from that source of light.' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 346-347)

²⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 46-47

³⁰ By knowledge of God is not meant an understanding of His essence, but an awareness of His attributes, such as love, justice, compassion, etc.

³¹ 'All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition.' (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 149) For a further discussion on free will see Some Answered Questions, p. 287-289.

a material, but also a human and spiritual educator; and he must possess a supernatural power, so that he may hold the position of a divine teacher.'³², and it is for this reason that God reveals Himself to a manifestation. Knowledge of God's attributes alone, however, is not deemed sufficient, for love of God implies that man manifest his knowledge in the realm of action:

If we are true Bahá'ís speech is not needed.
Our actions will help on the world, will spread
civilization, will help the progress of science,
and cause the arts to develop. Without action
nothing in the material world can be accomplished,
neither can words unaided advance a man in the
spiritual Kingdom.³³

The emphasis placed on action in the Bahá'í teachings demonstrates that the world is not to be negated or renounced. Rather, the Bahá'í Faith teaches that far from seeking to abandon the world and withdraw into a spiritual domain where material concerns are suppressed, man should develop his spirituality by actively participating in the building of an ever-advancing civilization. In this sense the Bahá'í 'world view' contains an element of what Max Weber termed 'inner-worldly asceticism',³⁴ whereby the world is seen to be a workshop for doing God's work. However, unlike the Christian variety of this phenomenon, namely, the Calvinistic form of Puritanism, the aim of work in the world is not the winning of individual salvation but the uplift of humanity. As Bahá'u'lláh states:

I confess that Thou hast no desire except the
regeneration of the whole world, and the
establishment of the unity of its peoples, and
the salvation of all of them that dwell therein.³⁵

³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 12

³³ Paris Talks. Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911 - 1912, 11th ed., (London, 1969), p. 80

³⁴ Weber, p. 166

³⁵ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 243

Therefore, man's growth depends on the way he conducts his life in the world, and for this reason the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith place greater emphasis on ethical activity than ritual observance. The primary goal of man's life is not to purify himself from the dross of the world by means of periodic withdrawal into a realm of symbolic activity but to enter the profane sphere with the intention of regenerating it through consciously directed moral activity based on the teachings of the manifestation of God.

While in Bahá'í doctrine the world is not seen as a place to be shunned or renounced, neither is it viewed as an end in itself. It is an arena for manifesting God's glory and developing man's soul; otherwise it is meaningless. Thus in one passage the worth of the world is compared to the black in the eye of a dead ant.³⁶ Man's true reality is his spirit (soul), for which the world is but a training ground. After death the soul continues to exist,³⁷ traversing the innumerable worlds of God and slowly gaining in perfection in a process that has no end.³⁸

At first glance the beliefs and doctrines of the Bahá'í Faith appear to be far removed from those of popular Hinduism: the Faith's strong emphasis on monotheism seems to clash dramatically with Hinduism's well-populated pantheon; the ethical prophet of revelation appears to find no place in the Hindu tradition; and the Bahá'í view of man and his role in

³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 56

³⁷ 'There is only the human reality and the spirit of man which, after the disintegration of the members, dispersing of the particles, and the destruction of the composition, persists, and continues to act and have power.' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 262) For another reference to the soul's immortality see Cleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 155-156.

³⁸ Paris Talks, p. 89

the world seems to contradict the doctrines of samsāra, karma, and moksa,³⁹ and their implications of fatalism and life negation. However, closer examination reveals that within the Hindu tradition there are certain elements that, if not parallel to Bahá'í beliefs, are at least similar to them. By reason of its age and liberal attitude towards metaphysical speculation, Hindu thought has over the centuries traversed the span of theological concepts from atheism to monism. As a result, doctrines regarding monotheism, revelation, and 'inner-worldly asceticism' are by no means foreign to Hinduism, even at the popular level. For example, two of the largest sectarian groups within the Hindu fold, Vaiṣṇavites and Śaivites, have from the beginning of the Christian era, if not earlier, looked on Viṣṇu or Śiva as the only God.⁴⁰ In addition, many of the bhakti⁴¹ cults which have periodically flourished in India have held to a concept of monotheism. Even today villagers believe in one Supreme Force who has numerous forms, an expression of qualified monotheism.⁴² Similarly, the concept of revelation is not unknown to Hinduism. It is commonly believed, even by villagers, that the Vedas were revealed to the ancient ṛsis by the gods. As regards fatalism, which has often been claimed to lie at the base of the Indian character, a well-known scholar of Indian civilization states:

³⁹ These three concepts form the core of most Hindu religious and philosophical systems of thought. Samsāra poses a world of continual birth and rebirth (transmigration); karma determines one's position in the world (see Chapter 4); and moksa is the state of final release. For an elaboration on these doctrines see A. L. Basham, The Wonder that was India, 3rd rev. ed., (London, 1969).

⁴⁰ Basham, p. 311-312

⁴¹ One of Hinduism's four traditional paths to God characterized by devotion to a personal deity.

⁴² Mathur, p. 168

The belief in karma does not necessarily involve fatalism. A fatalist strain often appeared in Hindu thought, but most teachers disapproved of it. Our present condition is inevitable, but only because of the karma accruing from our past deeds. We cannot escape the law of karma any more than we can escape the law of gravity or the passage of time, but by judgement and forethought we can⁴³ utilize the law of karma to our own advantage.

Indeed, the Bhagavad Gītā, one of the best known Hindu religious texts, constantly stresses the importance of action in life:

Do thou thy allotted work, for action is better than inaction; even the maintenance of thy⁴⁴ physical life cannot be effected without action.

Within the Hindu tradition, however, there is one particular doctrine that displays many parallels to the Bahá'í concept of manifestation, and as a result Bahá'í teachers in India have made a conscious effort to identify their own doctrine with it. This is the concept of the avatāra. As it is this doctrine that has provided the Bahá'í Faith with its breakthrough in terms of comparative theological conceptualization, it should be examined more thoroughly.

Avatāra means descent, or a coming down, and it is used in Hindu terminology to refer to the phenomenon of a deity incarnating itself. The concept is most clearly developed in the doctrines of the Vaiṣṇavite sect, one of the largest sub-groups within the Hindu fold, but it is by no means limited to this sect. It is commonly believed that the god Varuṇa appeared out of the point of an arrow⁴⁵, and in some instances followers of Śiva have made references to their god's appearance in the form of an avatāra.⁴⁶

⁴³ Basham, p. 324 - 325

⁴⁴ Bhagavad Gītā, III, 8

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Parrinder, Avatar and Incarnation, (London, 1970), p. 19

⁴⁶ Basham, p. 311

In fact, practically all Hindus are familiar with the concept, as it is expounded in the two great epics, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana, as well as in many of the Purāṇas (religio-mythical legends), which together form the source of many popular religious beliefs. S. N. Dasgupta goes so far as to say that while the doctrine of the incarnation of God is not elaborated upon by any of the speculative systems of thought in India, it still forms the corner-stone of most systems of philosophy and religion.⁴⁷

In the same vein, Aurobindo Ghose claims:

India has from ancient times held strongly a belief in the reality of the Avatar, the descent into form, the revelation of the God-head in humanity. In the West this belief has never really stamped itself upon the mind because it has been presented through exoteric Christianity as a theological dogma without any roots in the reason and general consciousness and attitude towards life.. But in India it has grown up and persisted as a logical outcome of the Vedantic view of life and taken firm root in the consciousness of the race.⁴⁸

The most ancient elaboration of the avatāra doctrine can be found in the Bhagavad Gītā, one of the books of the Mahābhārata, often referred to as the New Testament of Hinduism. It is here that Viṣṇu, the Supreme Being of Vaiṣṇavite theology, manifests himself in the form of Kṛṣṇa for the purpose of revealing to Arjuna, one of the five brothers of an Indian princely line, the true nature of reality. During their discourse many of the central ideas relating to the concept of the avatāra are presented, and it is around these ideas that the principal doctrines of Vaiṣṇavite theology revolve.

One of the more important beliefs relating to the doctrine of the avatāra is the assertion that the Divine actually appears in animal or

⁴⁷ S. N. Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, vol. II, (Cambridge, 1932), p. 525

⁴⁸ Sri Aurobindo Ghose, Essays on the Gita, (Pondicherry, 1966), p. 10

human form.⁴⁹ In the Bhagavad Gītā Kṛṣṇa is Arjuna's comrade, and although he is a divine figure, he has the same bodily^{functions} as do the purely human characters in the Mahābhārata; he eats, drinks, and sleeps with his companions. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, he also dies. According to the epic, Kṛṣṇa is fatally wounded by the arrow of a hunter.⁵⁰ Likewise, the avatāra of the Rāmāyana, Rāma, is a man possessing the full range of human needs and emotions, and like Kṛṣṇa he dies, his death being symbolized by a flowing river.⁵¹ However, while the Supreme Being manifests Himself in material form, He is not limited by this imminence. In essence God is formless, and it is only through His will that Viṣṇu enters the profane sphere.⁵² Moreover, in both epics the avatāras perform supernatural feats and are always victorious, another sign of their divinity. For example, even in his childhood Kṛṣṇa performed the miracle of lifting Mount Govardhana over the heads of the cowherds, thus sheltering them from a storm,⁵³ and later it was through his aid that the Pāṇḍavas (Arjuna's family line) were victorious in battle.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ 'The Unknown, the Incomprehensible, That which cannot be described except in negatives, That indeed appears in human form, speaks through human lips, is concerned about human affairs.' (Bharatan Kumarappa, The Hindu Conception of Deity, (London, 1934), p. 58)

⁵⁰ Mahābhārata, XVI, 4, 106, 110, 114, 125, English trans. by Pratap Chandra Roy, vol. XII, (Calcutta, n.d.)

⁵¹ Rāmāyana, VII, 110, 1-12, Hindi trans. by Rāmanārāyanadatta Shāstrī, vol. II, (Gorakhpur, 1961)

⁵² 'Though (I am) unborn, and Myself (is) imperishable, though (I am) the lord of all creatures, yet establishing Myself in My own nature, I come into (empiric) being through My power (māyā).' (Bhagavad Gītā IV, 6)

⁵³ Basham, p. 306

⁵⁴ With Kṛṣṇa's help the Pāṇḍavas defeated the evil Kauravas in the great Mahābhārata war, which according to tradition took place in the year 3102 B.C., although other sources list it as taking place in fifteenth century B.C. and the ninth century B.C.

Similarly, during the course of the Rāmāyana Rāma slays many demons, and when he kills Rāvaṇa⁵⁵ a rain of flowers falls from heaven.⁵⁶ Thus, the avatāra represents a mingling of human and divine elements, an assertion that God is simultaneously transcendent and imminent.

A central teaching of Vaiṣṇavite theology adhered to by most Hindus is the belief that Viṣṇu continually incarnates Himself - He has not limited His appearance on earth to one time and place. According to the most popular classifications there have been nine chief incarnations of Viṣṇu. The first five avatāras were mythical representations, while the last four were semi-historical if not historical figures. The first was Matsya, the fish, who warned Manu⁵⁷ of an impending flood and subsequently carried him and his family to safety in a ship, thereby saving the Vedas from destruction. The fish incarnation was followed by Kūrma (the tortoise), Varāha (the boar), Narasimha (the man-lion), and Vāmana (the dwarf), all of whom carried out specific deeds for the benefit of mankind. The sixth avatāra was Paraśurāma, the son of a Brāhmaṇ, who is best remembered for his slaying of all Kṣatriya males after his father had been killed by a wicked king who was a member of this class. However, it is not until the seventh avatāra of Viṣṇu, the aforementioned Rāma, that the doctrine of the incarnation takes on any real import for contemporary Hinduism, for as the hero of the Rāmāyana he is known across the length and breadth of India. Viṣṇu incarnated Himself in the form of Rāma, Prince of Ayodhyā, in order to stem the activities of the demon Rāvaṇa. The Rāmāyana recounts the events of this divine deed and in the process extols the virtues of Rāma as an ideal king and husband. After much

⁵⁵ A demon who stole Rāma's wife, Sītā.

⁵⁶ Rāmāyana, VI, 108, 28

⁵⁷ The Hindu Adam

hardship and travail Rāma slays the demon and rescues Sītā, and thus like previous avatāras Rāma saves the world from impending danger.

The most important of the incarnations of Viṣṇu was the eighth avatāra, Kṛṣṇa. He has already been mentioned in the preceding pages as being the central figure of the Bhagavad Gītā, but since it is primarily with this figure that the Bahā'ī movement has sought to establish identity, an outline of the legend surrounding Kṛṣṇa will be made here.

According to tradition, Kṛṣṇa was born at Mathura, his parents being members of the Yādava tribe. He was the second cousin of the tyrannical king Kamsa who in an attempt to dispel a prophecy which said that he would be killed by his cousin's eighth son set out to kill all of her children. Kṛṣṇa and his brother escaped, however, and grew up in the care of a cowherd called Nanda. Upon reaching manhood Kṛṣṇa slew Kamsa and subsequently founded a new kingdom. During his reign he killed many demons and wicked kings and, as mentioned earlier, aided the Pāṇḍavas in their struggle with the Kauravas. It was on the eve of the great battle between the two princely clans that Kṛṣṇa, while acting as Arjuna's charioteer, revealed to him that he was an avatāra of the Supreme Lord and compelled the doubting prince to uphold his rightful dharma (duty) by joining battle with the usurpers. It is this episode that forms the story-line of the Bhagavad Gītā and provides the setting for Kṛṣṇa to inform the dismayed Arjuna of the eternal verities. After the Pāṇḍava's victory Kṛṣṇa returned to his kingdom only to see it marred by internal dissension. After years of attempting to quell the feuding Kṛṣṇa, while wandering in the forest, was mistaken for a deer and shot in the heel. Like Achilles, this was his one vulnerable spot, and the wound resulted in his death.

The Kṛṣṇa story as it is known today is no doubt strongly flavored by myth, although it seems certain that there is some historical basis to

the legend of the hero-god.⁵⁸ The actual historicity of Kṛṣṇa, however, is not of paramount importance. Rather, it is the teachings and doctrines presented in the Bhagavad Gītā, those elements which contribute to the Hindu's view of himself and the cosmos, that are of real consequence. Whether Kṛṣṇa really existed is not critical; the fact that millions of people believe he did is the important factor, and therefore the true significance of Kṛṣṇa is to be found in his symbolization of the interest of the Divine in the affairs of men.

The ninth and most recent of the incarnations of Viṣṇu was the Buddha, who lived in the sixth century B.C. He is most remembered for his compassion, particularly to animals, as he is supposed to have put an end to the practice of animal sacrifice. However, having denied the authority of the Vedas he was not elevated to a high rank in Vaiṣṇavite theology, and many scholars argue that he was only included in the list of avatāras for the purpose of assimilating heterodox elements into Vaiṣṇavism.⁵⁹

The essential reason for the appearance of avatāras in the material world is the maintenance of justice and the destruction of evil. This theme is stated in the Bhagavad Gītā in the following way:

Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and a rise of unrighteousness, O Bhārata (Arjuna), then I send forth (create incarnate) Myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age.⁶⁰

Consequently, avatāras come with a specific purpose; they do not appear in the physical world without reason. For example, Kūrma dived to the bottom of the cosmic ocean to save many of the divine treasures lost in

⁵⁸ Ghose, p. 12

⁵⁹ For example, this is the opinion of A. L. Basham. See The Wonder that was India, p. 309.

⁶⁰ Bhagavad Gītā, IV, 7-8

the great flood; Varāha saved the earth from destruction by raising it with his tusks from the bottom of the cosmic ocean where it had been hurled by the demon Hiranyākāṣa; and Narasimha slew the demon Hiranyākāśipu, who was persecuting both gods and men. Moreover, as has already been mentioned, the human avatāras killed numerous demons in order that the world could once again be brought back to a state of equilibrium. Thus, avatāras' great purpose is '...to establish dharma, to restore right and put down wrong.'⁶¹

Finally, the avatāras (especially the human incarnations) reveal a personal God who cares for man. He is a God of love who personally sets an example for human beings to follow. According to Radhakrishnan:

The emphasis of the Gītā is on the Supreme as the personal God who creates the perceptible world by His nature (prakṛti). He resides in the heart of every being; He is the enjoyer and lord of all sacrifices. He stirs our hearts to devotion and grants our prayers. He is the source and sustainer of values. He enters into personal relations with us in worship and prayer.⁶²

Moreover, the birth, suffering, and death of human avatāras disclose a God who is aware of the human condition. Thus, while avatāras are divine teachers, their discourses go beyond the realm of systematic philosophy and reach out to the existential realities of life. According to S. N. Dasgupta:

In the Gītā abstract philosophy melts down to an insight into the nature of practical life and conduct,...For the God in the Gītā is not a God of abstract philosophy or theology, but a God who could be a man and be capable of all personal relations.⁶³

Hence, Rāma has become the epitome of righteous conduct; beyond his heroic

⁶¹ Parrinder, p. 124

⁶² Radhakrishnan, p. 25

⁶³ Dasgupta, p. 525

and miraculous deeds he is regarded as the ideal ruler and husband.

Similarly, Kṛṣṇa is not only remembered for his supernatural acts but for his erotic exploits with the gopīs (cowherds' wives), a symbol of the love relationship between God and man.

In reaching the rural masses of Malwa the Bahá'í Faith has used the concept of the avatāra as a cultural bridge; it has become the primary conceptual vehicle by which the movement's teachers present its doctrines. In this regard India is not an exception, as the practice of presenting its doctrines in terms and symbols that are culturally meaningful to the inhabitants of the particular country in which propagation activities are being implemented has been a marked characteristic of the movement's missionary work throughout the world. In Christian countries Bahá'u'lláh is referred to as the return of Christ; in the Islamic world he is 'The Great Announcement'; and in Buddhist countries he is known as the fifth Buddha. This approach was indorsed by Shoghi Effendi when he wrote:

Nor should any of the pioneers, at this early stage in the upbuilding of Bahá'í National Communities, overlook the fundamental prerequisites for any successful teaching enterprise, which is to adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles of their Faith to the cultural and religious backgrounds, the ideologies, and the temperament of the divers races and nations whom they are called upon to enlighten and attract.⁶⁴

The main link in the identification of the concept of the manifestation with that of the avatāra has been the personage of the kalkin avatāra. In Vaiṣṇavite doctrine there is a belief in a future avatāra (kalkin) who will appear at the close of the kali-yuga, the last of the four great ages

⁶⁴ Shoghi Effendi, Citadel of Faith. Messages to America, 1947 - 1953, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1970), p. 25

in each cosmic aeon.⁶⁵ Mention of this figure has been made in several of the Purāṇas⁶⁶ as well as in the Mahābhārata. As the tenth avatāra of Viṣṇu, kalkin will appear for the purpose of destroying the wicked and re-establishing righteousness in the world. Having purified all things, he will usher in a new age. While John Hinnells and W. Weaver claim that the kalkin avatāra has never assumed an important place in Hinduism,⁶⁷ A. L. Basham points out that many simple Hindus take kalkin very seriously,⁶⁸ and Sir Monier-Williams noted that 'Some of the degraded classes of India comfort themselves in their present abject condition by looking to Kalki as their future deliverer and the restorer of their social position.'⁶⁹

In Hindu cultural terms Bahá'í teachers claim that Bahá'u'lláh was the fulfillment of the kalkin prophecy. His advent in nineteenth century Persia, the symbol of the decadence that characterized the kali-yuga, marked the beginning of a new age in the history of mankind in which righteousness will flourish and dharma will be restored. Through Bahá'u'lláh, the same Lord that was manifest in Kṛṣṇa has once again communed with man and re-established the eternal truths of religion.*

In using this approach the Bahá'í movement is following much the same procedure adopted by Ismá'ílí missionaries in India who during the

⁶⁵ In Hindu cosmogony a cosmic cycle (kalpa) equals 4,320 million years. Each kalpa is in turn subdivided into secondary cycles (manvantaras), aeons (mahāyugas), and ages (yugas). We are presently living in the kali-yuga, a time of breakdown and confusion.

⁶⁶ See Chapter 3, note 20.

⁶⁷ W. Weaver and John R. Hinnells, 'The Doctrine of Avatars', Hinduism, ed. by John R. Hinnells and Eric J. Sharpe, (Newcastle, 1972), p. 39

⁶⁸ Basham, p. 309

⁶⁹ Sir Monier Monier-Williams, Hinduism, (London, 1897), p. 108

* Although the Bahá'í Faith teaches that religious truths are relative, the source of these truths is eternal, ie. God.

ninth century presented 'Alí as the promised kalkin avatāra.⁷⁰ It should be made clear, however, that while the Bahá'í Faith speaks of Bahá'u'lláh in terms of the avatāra tradition, it does not do so at the cost of its original doctrines. While the doctrines of the Faith are explained in terms and concepts that have meaning to a Hindu villager, a compromise is not made with ideas and beliefs that are contrary or at odds with its fundamental principles. In this regard Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice continually warned Bahá'í teachers that the doctrines of the Faith should not be altered for the benefit of others.⁷¹ Therefore, the Bahá'í Faith is not eclectic in its teaching approach: the movement's strength lies in its ability to present the essential doctrines of its founders in the language of various cultural traditions without changing their original meaning.

Theoretically there are several differences between the Bahá'í concept of manifestation and the doctrine of the avatāra. First, as noted earlier, in Bahá'í belief God does not descend into the physical world, as this would limit His omnipotence. Instead, His word is revealed through a human messenger. In contrast to the concept of revelation, the avatāra doctrine seems to suggest the actual incarnation of the Sacred in human form. Hence Geoffrey Parrinder in his work Avatar and Incarnation concludes that '...Krishna is not a "human messenger", and his successive appearances are not human geniuses but divine theophanies.'⁷² Second, the avatāra doctrine

⁷⁰ T. W. Arnold, The Preaching of Islam, (Lahore, 1961), p. 215

⁷¹ 'The believers, and particularly those who have not had sufficient experience in teaching, should be very careful in the way they present the teachings of the Cause. Sincerity, devotion and Faith are not the sole conditions of successful teaching. Tactfulness, extreme caution and wisdom are equally important. We should not be in a hurry when we announce the message to the public and we should be careful to present the teachings in their entirety and not to alter them for the sake of others.' (Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Directives from the Guardian, p. 11)

⁷² Parrinder, p. 231

is an Indian doctrine; that is, its list of divine personages does not go beyond the pale of the Hindu cultural heritage (with the exception of the Buddha), whereas the Bahá'í concept of manifestation, although strongly oriented towards Near Eastern messengers, recognizes revelations from other cultural traditions. However, on the existential level, on a plane of meaning that is significant to the hopes and expectations of the majority of men who are not involved in intellectualizing concepts into abstractions, these differences diminish in importance. To the Indian villager the distinction between incarnation and manifestation would be a technical point that might be of some import to philosophy but not a concern of religion. The fact that the Sacred has communed with the profane displayed concern for man, and preached a message of love and hope, is the real issue, and not the technicalities of how this communion occurs. Moreover, the distinction between the two concepts is not always as clear as it may at first appear. There is much room in the avatāra doctrine for interpreting the avatāras as outstanding human beings or manifestations of the God-head rather than divine theophanies. The modern saint, Rāmakrishna, called them human beings with extraordinary powers and entrusted with a Divine Commission.⁷³ From the other side, some of the passages from Bahá'í scripture seem to indicate that the Sacred is present in the personage of a manifestation. For example, one verse reads: 'Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: "I am God", He, verily, speaketh the truth, and no doubt attecheth thereto.'⁷⁴ Consequently, the Bahá'í approach in India is not a dogmatic one. While Bahá'í teachers assert that God is unlimited and beyond all physical form, they do not demand new believers to distinguish between philosophical concepts. Instead, they emphasize that Bahá'u'lláh is the latest representative of God; that

⁷³ Quoted in Parrinder, p. 230

⁷⁴ Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 54

he has appeared as a fulfillment of Hindu prophetic expectations; and that he has come for the specific purpose of regenerating a moribund world. Consequently, what is required of the new declarant is that he accept the authoritative station of Bahá'u'lláh as the representative of the Sacred in the world.

Moreover, the fact that the Bahá'í Faith makes mention of avatāras outside the Hindu cultural tradition is not a real deterrent to the movement's promotion in India.⁷⁵ The freedom of theological conceptualization which has characterized religious thought in India allows for easier acceptance of extraneous beliefs than does the dogmatism that has dominated metaphysical speculation in other cultures. For example, Rāmakrishna found no difficulty in including Jesus as an avatāra, and Gandhi could speak of Kṛṣṇa, Christ and Muhammad in the same context.

While the Bahá'í Faith's scriptures give more emphasis to the manifestations of Near Eastern origin, when speaking to Malwa villagers teachers place greater emphasis on the Indian messengers, especially the Buddha and Kṛṣṇa. Both of these figures are officially recognized manifestations of God, and as such their names appear on any list of manifestations published by the Bahá'í Faith. In addition, teachers often use the example of Rāma who, although not recognized as a manifestation, finds a place as a minor prophet.⁷⁶ The other avatāras of Vaiṣṇavite theology, however, receive no mention.

⁷⁵ The one exception to this rule is the personage of Muhammad. Because of historical circumstances Islām has become an evil word to many Hindus, and as a result Bahá'í teachers try to avoid any direct correlation between the Faith and Islām.

⁷⁶ Bahá'í teachings also contain references to minor prophets. 'Abdu'l-Bahá distinguished between them as follows: 'The other Prophets are followers and promoters, for they are branches and not independent; they receive the Bounty of the independent Prophets, and they profit by the light of the Guidance of the universal Prophets. They are like the moon, which is not luminous and radiant in itself, but receives its light from the sun.' (Some Answered Questions, p. 188)

While the Bahá'í Faith's publications of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh contain no references to either the Buddha or Kṛṣṇa, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made mention of them, and Shoghi Effendi confirmed their positions as manifestations of God. In Some Answered Questions 'Abdu'l-Bahá is recorded as referring to the Buddha in the following way:

Buddha also established a new religion...The founder of Buddhism was a wonderful soul. He established the Oneness of God, but later the original principles of his doctrines gradually disappeared, and ignorant customs and ceremonies arose and increased until they finally ended in the worship of statues and images.⁷⁷

Shoghi Effendi maintained that the Buddha was a manifestation, but added that his followers did not possess his authentic writings.⁷⁸ Concerning Kṛṣṇa 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have said that 'The Message of Krishna is the message of love. All God's prophets have brought the message of love.'⁷⁹ and Shoghi Effendi referred to Bahá'u'lláh as 'the Immaculate Manifestation of Krishna'.⁸⁰

As a result of these interpretations, Bahá'í teachers in Malwa make continual reference to both Indian avatāras. For example, during her trip to India Hand of the Cause Rúhíyyih Khánum always stressed to her audiences the oneness of the manifestations. As she stated in Barhana:

The Bahá'í Faith is a new World Religion; when you become a Bahá'í you do not give up anything, you add to it; the Hindu adds faith in Christ, Muhammad, Buddha and the other great Prophets, to his faith in Krishna. The same is true of the Christian or the Muslim when he becomes a Bahá'í, he has to accept Buddha and Krishna.⁸¹

⁷⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 189

⁷⁸ 'Letter to an individual believer, December 26, 1941', Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand, (Sydney, 1970), p. 41

⁷⁹ Paris Talks, p. 35

⁸⁰ Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 95

⁸¹ Nakhjavani, p. 105

Similarly, the most popular introductory book on the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa, The New Garden, a source specifically designed as a teaching guide for the Indore Teaching Institute, says of Kṛṣṇa:

Krishna, the Manifestation of God, brought a new civilization. He delivered man from evil and sorrow. He assured His followers that in future also God would manifest Himself to repeat what Krishna had done.⁸²

Concerning the Buddha the book states:

Buddha knew that the way to God was only through His Manifestation. He was the Manifestation of God, therefore, He did not want people to fight against each other in the name of God Whom they could not know except through Him.⁸³

It would be incorrect, however, to think that previous avatāras receive paramount importance in the educational programs of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa. While an attempt is made to correlate the station of 'Him who God shall manifest' with the positions of Indian manifestations, the greatest emphasis is placed on the role of the yugavatāra, the kalkin of Hindu prophecy, Bahá'u'lláh.

As in other parts of the world, teachers in India emphasize that the purpose of God's manifestation in this era is no less than the unification of the entire planet. While previous manifestations have triumphed over evil and restored righteousness and dharma, they have all been limited to specific spheres of influence. Hence Rāma and Kṛṣṇa were not universal manifestations. Bahá'u'lláh, on the other hand, is depicted as a manifestation for all humanity, in whose yuga righteousness will be established throughout the world. However, as in the past, the victory of the manifestation over the forces of darkness requires a struggle. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh suffered for humanity, subjecting himself to imprisonment

⁸² Hooshmand Fatheazam, The New Garden, (New Delhi, 1971), p. 18-19

⁸³ Fatheazam, p. 20

and banishment:

The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of the earth may attain unto abiding joy, and be filled with gladness.⁸⁴

Yet, truth is always victorious. Just as Rāma succeeded in slaying Rāvaṇa, Bahá'í teachers claim that Bahá'u'lláh's mission will be accomplished, and it is for the purpose of bringing about this victory that they are spreading his message to the masses of India.

In village teaching the doctrine of the manifestation is given the most emphasis, as it is the feeling of the movement's administrators in India that this concept embodies the essence of the Faith's teachings, and therefore if the authority of the manifestation can be incorporated into new declarants' 'world views', other doctrinal elements will eventually follow. Consequently, while the essential doctrines outlined in the first part of this chapter are currently being taught, they are generally presented as adjuncts to the doctrine of the manifestation and not stressed independently of that doctrine. In the following paragraphs a few examples of this approach will be given.

The God of which the Bahá'í Faith teaches is a personal God who communes with men. He is the Lord (Bhagavān), and His message is a message of love. At this point, however, one may ask, 'How does the strict monotheism of Bahá'í scripture find a place in the villages of Malwa where the Sacred has traditionally been seen to reside in numerous forms?' In answering this question it must be realized that at this point in time the Bahá'í Administrative Order is not overly concerned with the way individuals conceive of the Divine. The fact that any human conception

⁸⁴ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 99

of God is realized to be only a partial understanding of the Sacred leads to a tolerant attitude towards conceptualization.⁸⁵ This is not to say that Bahá'í teachers in Malwa accept the doctrine of polytheism and try to include it in their presentation of Bahá'í beliefs. To the contrary, the oneness of God is always preached. Rather, it means that in the Bahá'í Faith individual interpretation is not condemned: the approach to metaphysics is a positive one whereby the relativity of religious truth is accepted. Historically, concepts of the Sacred have differed because room for speculation about the nature of the Divine is infinite. This being the case, man's purpose is not to contemplate the unanswerable but to follow the teachings of the manifestation, and consequently Bahá'í teachers do not spend time negating traditional doctrines but constantly return to the concept of the manifestation and his authority. Emphasis is placed on listening to his words and following his commands. Thus it is believed that the combination of education and role repetition will in time result in new believers coming to understand and accept a more transcendent concept of the Sacred.

There is, however, one way in which many teachers attempt to explain the unity of the Divine to villagers and that is by describing individual deities as expressions or attributes of the one Supreme Lord. For example, the author was informed by one village teacher that he portrayed God as the Divine Being whose three most outstanding attributes are represented by the figures of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva : Brahmā represents God's creative aspect; Viṣṇu symbolizes His preserving powers; and Śiva exemplifies His destructive

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'The Divine Reality which is purified and sanctified from the understanding of human beings and which can never be imagined by the people of wisdom and of intelligence is exempt from all conception.' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 129) ' "How bewildering to me, insignificant as I am, "... is the attempt to fathom the sacred depths of Thy knowledge! How futile my efforts to visualize the magnitude of the power inherent in Thine handiwork..." ' (Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 113)

energy.⁸⁶

Regarding man, villagers are taught that his purpose is to know and love God, and that this is best achieved through proper action in the world. In this vein, the Bahá'í teachings greatly resemble those of the Bhagavad Gītā in which Kṛṣṇa advances a doctrine of action devoid of personal desire. According to Radhakrishnan:

The Gītā insists not on renunciation of action but on action with renunciation of desire. This is true saṁnyasa...The Gītā urges that the liberated soul can remain in service even after liberation and is opposed to the view which holds that, as all action springs from ignorance, when wisdom arises, action ceases.⁸⁷

If proper action is the goal of man's life, the natural question which arises is: 'What is proper action?' In the villages of Malwa the sources of proper action (dharma) have traditionally been three: sacred books; myths and legends; and traditions of the ancestors, and of the three the last in the most universally accepted guide. Bahá'í teachers, however, define proper action as adhering to the teachings of the manifestation.⁸⁸ Thus the New Garden cites Kṛṣṇa's demanding Arjuna to surrender himself as an example of man's duty to follow the commands of the manifestation:

When we find the Manifestation of God and embrace His faith, we must obey His commands. This is what Krishna taught us in the Gita..."Surrendering in thought all actions to Me, regarding Me as the Supreme and restoring to Steadfastness in understanding, do thou fix thy thought constantly on Me"⁸⁹

Of the doctrines being taught by the Bahá'í movement in Malwa the denial of reincarnation or transmigration of souls is at greatest odds with traditional village belief. According to the doctrine of samsāra, the

⁸⁶ This approach is by no means new. As early as Gupta times (fourth and fifth centuries A.D.) the trimūrti (triple form) had been propounded.

⁸⁷ Radhakrishnan, p. 351

⁸⁸ However, to this date they have not challenged conventional social norms. See Chapter 9.

⁸⁹ Fathea'zam, p. 18

the present life is only a link in a chain of births reaching back into the past and extending into the future. Movement along this chain is determined by karma, a type of spiritual law of cause and effect. Every action has its reaction, and thus if one acquires bad karma through improper action the consequences will become manifest in the future, which on the popular level means being born as a member of a lower caste or as a member of the animal kingdom. Concerning this belief K. S. Mathur reported that a Brāhman from village Potlodi told him:

A worldly existence is a stage of transition from past existence towards future worldly lives. Life is a process. It does not start with a child's birth; it does not end with a person's death. Birth and death are merely landmarks in one of a series of phases of worldly existence... Lord Krishna said in the Gitāji that just as a man discards old clothes and wears new ones, the soul discards worn and torn physical bodies and assumes new forms.⁹⁰

As may be recalled, the Bahá'í Faith teaches that man has a soul which upon passing from the body does not re-enter the temporal sphere of existence but continues to evolve in other worlds of God. Bahá'í teachings do, however, contain a doctrine of the return of qualities. For example, every year a tree will bring forth flowers. The flowers of this year are the same as the flowers of last year in terms of their qualities, but they are not the same individual flowers that actually bloomed. So in the human world qualities can be said to return, but the individual soul does not.

In clarifying this position Shoghi Effendi stated:

The Baha'i view of "reincarnation" is essentially different from the Hindu conception. The Baha'is believe in the return of the attributes and qualities, but maintain that the essence or the reality of things cannot be made to return. Every being keeps its own individuality, but some of his qualities can be transmitted. The doctrine of metempsychosis upheld by the Hindus is fallacious.⁹¹

⁹⁰Mathur, p. 79

⁹¹Quoted in James Heggie, Bahá'í Concordance, vol. II, unpublished, p. 82

Consequently, Bahá'í teachers explain the clothes referred to by Kṛṣṇa as realities of the different worlds of God and not the physical bodies of this world. Moreover, while it is agreed that the karma one obtains in life influences his spiritual growth in future worlds, it is not accepted that an individual's position in the world is predetermined by the actions of past lives. Accordingly, one's dharma should not be determined by birth status but by the teachings of the manifestation of God.

In reflecting on the fact that numerous Hindu villagers have declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh, three factors must be kept in mind: first, the relative freedom of thought in Hinduism; second, the historico-synthetic approach of the Bahá'í Faith; and third, the awareness, even at the village level, of the decline of religion.

As noted earlier, theological speculation has always been tolerated to a greater degree in Hinduism than in other religious traditions. The new student of Hinduism is often amazed at the variety of 'religions' that are contained within the Hindu fold, for unlike Christianity or Islām there is no 'church' which controls doctrinal thought. While in Semitic religions acceptance of specific creeds has played an important role in determining one's position in the community, in Hinduism it has been the adherence to specific modes of action as determined by an individual's social status that has been considered crucial. Hence, what is believed is not as important as what is done. A man can be an atheist, a monist, a theist, a Vaiṣṇavite, a Śaivite, or a Vedāntin, and still be a Hindu, but if he violates his caste rules regarding marriage and commensality or assumes a ritual role which is not his by birth, he can be excommunicated from the community. Consequently, the fact that many Malwa villagers have accepted the claims of a new avatara and are learning his doctrines does not mean that they are violating the laws of Hinduism. Moreover, since the Bahá'í movement—unlike other religions which have sought

converts in India - does not demand that a Hindu negate his past heritage (to the contrary, Hinduism is accepted as a historically valid religious tradition of which Bahá'u'lláh is the prophetic fulfillment), many declarants still consider themselves Hindus: they are Hindus who believe in the yugavatāra, Bahá'u'lláh.

In addition to villagers not having to denounce their Hindu heritage, a general awareness of the decline of religion has aided the teaching efforts of the Bahá'í Faith.⁹² A villager from Garabelī expressed this feeling in the following words:

I used to watch the so-called believers of religion. They always spoke about religion, and they always uttered the name of God, but for their own selfish ends they cheated others in every way. Having seen these things I became very sad. I thought, why has God created such people who receive benefits from cheating and deceiving others.

As a result of such feelings, many villagers, especially the downtrodden, are open to doctrines and concepts which they feel are advocating a return to 'true' religion.

As a result of these factors, the belief dimension of the Bahá'í Faith has not been difficult for village teachers to introduce into 'model village' communities. However, on the other hand, Bahá'í beliefs and doctrines have not completely replaced traditional beliefs. Rather, for the majority of declarants in the five 'model village' communities examined in this study, Bahá'í and traditional views have become integrated. According to village teachers,⁹³ while declarants will admit to the belief in one God, most of them will still offer pūjā at various village shrines and temples. Similarly, most accept the concept of heaven (parlok), but they also accept their predestined dharma. Consequently, it appears that

⁹² As mentioned earlier, Hindu cosmology asserts that we are presently living in the kali-yuga, a time of religious decline.

⁹³ In the five communities the village teachers along with several declarants from each village who have been participants in 'deepening' programs are the most steeped in Bahá'í doctrines.

for the great majority of declarants in the five 'model villages' the role of Bahá'í beliefs and doctrines is at the present time one of a 'half-way house' whereby certain categories of thought are reserved for Bahá'í concepts while others are the domain of traditional views. In this respect the categorization of Bahá'í and traditional beliefs into distinct spheres of thought seems to some degree to reflect the social schizophrenia mentioned in Chapter 4 which has become more characteristic of many village communities as they try to adjust to the strain and stress brought on by the forces of a changing world. However, this phenomenon is also indicative of the Bahá'í teaching approach in rural areas where greater emphasis is placed on acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh as an avatāra than on such concepts as the nature of the Sacred or life after death. As a result, it is this concept that finds universal acceptance in the 'model village' communities, and one can hear the name Bahá'u'lláh as often as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, or Śiva. It is on this fundamental belief that the Bahá'í Administrative Order is attempting to build, and thus, as we shall shortly see, all activities in the rural communities are in some way related to the personage of the yugavatāra.

Chapter 8 Ritual and Ceremony

In Chapter 4 it was noted that behavior patterns of Malwa villagers have traditionally been influenced by a rigid system of ritual observance, ritual being defined as a category of standardized behavior in which the relationship between means and ends is either irrational or non-rational, or in other words, conventional activity based on mystical notions, whereby a specific action and its implied end cannot be inferred from observation.¹ Even today ritual activity is part and parcel of villagers' life patterns, and it can be manifestly observed on numerous occasions. For example, when making an offering to a god a devotee will follow a prescribed formula in belief that the proper performance of symbolic activity will result in beneficial consequences. Similarly, specific events in an individual's life cycle, such as birth, marriage, and death are commemorated by ritual observances (samskāras), whose proper enactment insure the participant(s) of a successful transition. Thus, the cremated remains of a dead man are often thrown into holy waters (in Malwa the Sipra river), an act which is believed to guarantee the individual's salvation. Ritual mentality even influences the domain of dining, as it is believed that the improper performance of eating - ie. eating certain foods which have been prepared by a member of a caste lower than one's own - will result in personal pollution, a state requiring the enactment of another ritual (often bathing in special water) to remove the taint.

In contrast to popular Hinduism the Bahá'í Faith is notably lacking in ritual content. In terms of a definition of ritual which implies standardized activity based on irrational or non-rational connections between ends and means, one would conclude that the principal modes of behavior in

¹ Max Gluckman, 'Les Rites de Passage', Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations, ed. by Max Gluckman, (Manchester, 1962), p. 22

the Faith's teachings that could be termed ritualistic would be prayer and fasting.² In addition, its scriptures prescribe two 'passage' rituals which although not as elaborate as the Hindu samskāras, require specific modes of standardized behavior whose enactment implies a type of mystical relationship between ends and means.

There is, however, another type of standardized group activity in the Bahá'í Faith, the primary purpose of which is not the achievement of specific ends based on participants' performance of symbolic action but the development of group solidarity or social cohesion through commemoration of important events in the movement's past. For our purposes this type of activity will be referred to as 'ceremonious', following Max Gluckman's definition which says that ceremony refers to any complex organization of human activity which is not specifically technical or recreational, and which involves the use of modes of behavior which are expressive of social relationships, but which is not characterized by the implementation of mystical notions.³

In the following pages various Bahá'í rituals and ceremonies will be examined in greater detail, first in their normative forms, and then as they are being adapted to conditions in rural Malwa. Finally, a few examples of their implementation in several 'model village' communities will be cited.

The core of ritual activity in the Bahá'í Faith is prayer. While God only reveals Himself to a manifestation, Bahá'ís believe that

² Chanting or reading prescribed prayers and abstaining from food for a given period of time are believed to be spiritually beneficial, a belief whose results cannot be inferred from observation.

³ Gluckman, p. 22-23

individuals can have limited communication with the Sacred:

There is a "language of the spirit", which is independent of speech or writing, by which God can commune with and inspire those whose hearts are seeking after truth, wherever they are, whatever their native race or tongue.⁴

Therefore, in the Bahá'í Faith prayer belongs to that dimension of religious life that is concerned with 'spiritual experiences', '...those feelings, perceptions, and sensations which are experienced by the actor or defined by a religious group (or a society) as involving some communication, however slight, with a divine essence, that is, with God, with ultimate reality, with transcendental authority.'⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed this connection with the Sacred in the following passage:

The wisdom of prayer is this: That it causeth a connection between the servant and the True One, because in that state man with all heart and soul turneth his face towards His Highness the Almighty, seeking His association and desiring His love and compassion.⁶

The attitude of prayer, moreover, should be one of devotion. God is the beloved whom the believer longs to praise, and in so doing receives the spiritual benefits of His returned grace. Thus prayer is not only communication with the Sacred but a form of worship inspired by feelings of respect and love. The true devotee is detached from the bondage of self and seeks his joy in exalting the Lord.⁷

There are essentially two types of prayer in the Bahá'í Faith:

⁴ J. E. Esslemont, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, 3rd rev. ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1970), p. 88

⁵ Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, American Piety: the Nature of Religious Commitment, (Berkely and Los Angeles, 1968), p. 15

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 368

⁷ 'Happy the days that have been consecrated to the remembrance of God, and blessed the hours which have been spent in praise of Him Who is the All-Wise.' (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 138)
'The essence of wealth is love for Me. Whoso loveth Me is the possessor of all things, and he that loveth Me not is, indeed, of the poor and needy.' (Bahá'u'lláh, Words of Wisdom, in The Bahá'í Revelation, p. 138-139)

individual devotion, and communal worship.

Individual prayer consists of the devotee chanting, reading, or meditating upon the revealed verses of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, or 'Abdu'l-Bahá.⁸ Bahá'ís are supposed to pray individually at least once each day, and thus prayer is considered an obligatory act, a requisite for man's spiritual growth.⁹ The most important aspect of prayer, however, is not the words but the devotional attitude of love within the worshiper. Consequently, Bahá'í prayers are not viewed as magical mantras whose repetition alone can bring about a state of communion with the Divine but as objects of concentration which help elicit the feelings of selflessness necessary for such communication.

Bahá'í scriptures prescribe three obligatory prayers. The believer is free to choose from among these, but he is under obligation to recite at least one each day. The most commonly used obligatory prayer is the short prayer, which is reproduced below:

I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I **testify**, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy **might**, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.¹⁰

In addition, the believer is encouraged to chant and sing a variety of verses throughout the day.

The second type of devotional activity in the Bahá'í Faith is communal worship. In Bahá'í communal worship members of the local community gather together to share in the chanting of prayers and the reading of scriptural verse. At these meetings there is no congregational prayer, that is,

⁸ Believers can also offer their own prayers, but the revealed verses of the three prominent figures of the movement are considered to be of special spiritual significance.

⁹ Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol. III, p. 683

¹⁰ Bahá'í Prayers, p. 117

'...formal prayer which is to be recited in accordance with a prescribed ritual,...'¹¹, this practice being reserved only for the burial of the dead.¹² Furthermore, there is no leader who directs devotional activities; unlike Islám, the Bahá'í Faith has no imáms behind whom the faithful stand to recite their prayers. In fact, there are no priests or spiritual leaders of any kind in the Bahá'í community.¹³ Rather, members of the faithful take turns reciting prayers and reading scripture, each believer being considered spiritually equal to the next.

The occasion on which community members gather for communal worship is known as the Nineteen-Day Feast. This gathering of the faithful was established by the Báb,¹⁴ and as its title implies it takes place every nineteen days. The meeting also signifies the beginning of each month of the Bahá'í year, the calendar being divided into nineteen months of nineteen days each.

The Nineteen-Day Feast is held in a community's Bahá'í center, or in those communities where a center does not exist it is convened in any spot where the group can assemble, an individual home, or the open air. 'Attendance at Nineteen-Day Feasts is not obligatory but very important, and every believer should consider it a duty and a privilege to be present on such occasions.'¹⁵ Feasts occur on the following dates:

¹¹ A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, (Haifa, 1973), p. 57

¹² As Shoghi Effendi's secretary wrote: 'Regarding the practice of congregational prayer, the Guardian wishes you to know that this form of prayer has been enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh only for the dead. In all other circumstances there is no obligation whatever imposed upon the believers.' (Bahá'í News (United States and Canada), # 79, November, 1933, (West Englewood, New Jersey), p. 3)

¹³ For a further discussion of this matter see Chapter 9.

¹⁴ Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 17

¹⁵ Bahá'í News (United States and Canada), # 210, August, 1948, (Wilmette, Illinois), p. 3

Table 9

<u>Date</u>	<u>Feast Name</u>
March 21	Splendour (Bahá)
April 9	Glory (Jalál)
April 28	Beauty (Jamál)
May 17	Grandeur ('Azamat)
June 5	Light (Núr)
June 24	Mercy (Rahmat)
July 13	Words (Kalimát)
August 1	Perfection (Kamál)
August 20	Names (Asmá')
September 8	Might ('Izzat)
September 27	Will (Mashíyyat)
October 16	Knowledge ('Ilm)
November 4	Power (Qudrat)
November 23	Speech (Qawl)
December 12	Questions (Masá'il)
December 31	Honour (Sharaf)
January 19	Sovereignty (Sultán)
February 7	Dominion (Mulk)
March 2	Loftiness ('Alá)

In these meetings the members must:

...assemble and associate with each other in the utmost love, joy, and fragrance. They must conduct themselves (in these Feasts) with the greatest dignity and consideration, chant divine verses, peruse instructive articles, read the Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, encourage and inspire each other with love for the whole human race, invoke God with perfect joy and fragrance, sing the verses, glorifications, and praises of the Self-Subsistent Lord, and deliver eloquent speeches.¹⁶

The Nineteen-Day Feast is divided into three distinct parts, only one of which is devotional in nature. Future pages will discuss the administrative and social portions of the meeting. As for now, only its devotional aspects will be examined.

¹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Principles of Baha'i Administration, p. 17

The devotional portion of the Nineteen-Day Feast is considered the core of Bahá'í communities' spiritual activity, for it is at this time that members regularly share in the experience of communal worship. The devotional period takes place at the beginning of each meeting and consists of prayers and verses from the sacred writings¹⁷ read by individual believers. As there are no spiritual leaders who select the verses to be read, the designated host (a duty which alternates between the members of the community) organizes the program, but individual participants are free to offer their own prayers and verses as they feel inspired. The session generally lasts between fifteen minutes and half an hour, but there is no prescribed limit to the length of the devotional period, and it is not concluded until all those who so desire have taken part.

The mood of the devotional period is meant to be one of communion between the believers and the Lord. It should be an experience in love and unity, the faithful freely partaking of the choice wine of the word of God and thereby becoming one in fellowship with Bahá'u'lláh. Hence, Bahá'í communal worship reflects the ideal of the equality of believers, a value which lies at the core of Bahá'í social norms.

As the above description reveals, Bahá'í communal devotion is completely lacking in symbolic drama (a traditional element of ritual activity), its only mode of action being the verbalization of the sacred word. Thus, in the Bahá'í Faith ritual performance is centered on the abstract word, and goal achievement does not depend on the enactment of sacramental gestures but on the experience of the 'mystery of the Holy Utterance'.¹⁸

¹⁷ Concerning the sacred writings Shoghi Effendi wrote: '...these should be regarded as the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and only these should be read during the purely devotional part of the Feast.' ('Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia and New Zealand, May 11, 1948', Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand, p. 71)

¹⁸ Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 52

A second ritual in the Bahá'í Faith is fasting. The author has classified this abstention from food and water as a ritualistic act because it is a standardized form of behavior - all Bahá'ís are required to fast during the same period - and its enactment is believed to develop, strengthen, and purify the soul, an implied end which cannot be verified by observation.¹⁹

Regarding the regulations related to the Bahá'í fast, A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, a publication of the Universal House of Justice which outlines the various laws and ordinances set down by Bahá'u'lláh and is used by Bahá'ís throughout the world, cites the following:

...We have enjoined upon you fasting during a brief period, and at its close have designated for you Naw-Rúz as a feast...The traveller, the ailing, those who are with child or giving suck, are not bound by the fast...Abstain from food and drink, from sunrise to sundown, and beware lest desire deprive you of this grace that is appointed in the Book.²⁰

The fast is an annual event which starts on the second day of March and ends on the twentieth day of the same month. During this nineteen day period the believer is meant to abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset.²¹ 'It is essentially a period of meditation and prayer, of spiritual recuperation, during which the believer must strive to make the

¹⁹ The author is well aware of the numerous references in Bahá'í publications to the fact that abstention from food alone does not have any effect on the spirit. For example, 'But mere abstention from food has no effect on the spirit. It is only a symbol, a reminder.' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in Esslemont, p. 184). However, he still feels justified in making the statement, because the proper fasting attitude of abstinence from 'selfish and carnal desires' (Directives from the Guardian, p. 29) is deemed beneficial to one's spiritual development, an opinion which is beyond the bounds of rational verification.

²⁰ Shoghi Effendi's translation of Bahá'u'lláh, in A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 13

²¹ All Bahá'ís between the ages of fifteen and seventy are enjoined to keep the fast.

necessary readjustments in his inner-life, and to refresh and reinvigorate the spiritual forces latent in his soul.'²²

The prescribed manner for starting each day of the fast involves arising before dawn to offer prayers of thanksgiving to God.²³ Having taken food and drink before the sun rises, the believer abstains from both during the daylight hours, breaking his fast at sunset after once again chanting prayers.

Like Bahá'í communal devotion, the fast accentuates the spiritual equality of believers; all members of the community regardless of social rank are required to humble themselves before the Lord in uniform abstention from the desires of the world. As a circular distributed by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India aptly stated: 'We must fast because we will then in deed demonstrate our willingness to participate in unity with the entire Bahá'í world.'²⁴

The final categories of behavior in the Bahá'í Faith that can be termed ritualistic are the 'passage'rites. In Bahá'í teachings there are no prescribed rituals to mark the birth of a child or to symbolize the transformation of an individual from the state of adolescence to that of maturity. According to the Bahá'í concept of independent investigation of truth, a child is not born a Bahá'í. Rather, each person must decide at the age of fifteen^{*} whether or not he or she desires to become a member

²² Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Bahá'í News (United States and Canada), # 98, March, 1936, (West Englewood, New Jersey), p. 1

²³ 'For Thine ardent lovers Thou hast, according to Thy decree, reserved, at each daybreak, the cup of Thy remembrance, O Thou Who art the Ruler of rulers! These are they who have been so inebriated with the wine of Thy manifold wisdom that they forsake their couches in their longing to celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy virtues, and flee from sleep in their eagerness to approach Thy presence and partake of Thy bounty.' (Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í Prayers, p. 169)

²⁴ Special circular relating to the Bahá'í fast, February, 1973, p. 3

* The age of maturity in the Bahá'í Faith.

of the community. Accordingly, there is no ritual to denote social status until after one has become part of the community, and hence there are only two life cycle rituals in the Bahá'í Faith: the marriage ceremony, and the service for the dead.

The Bahá'í Faith upholds marriage as a fundamental institution of civilization,²⁵ and consequently there is no room within the community for celibacy or asceticism.²⁶ The scriptures enjoin monogamy,²⁷ the requirements for marriage including the mutual consent of the individuals involved as well as the written approval of their parents. Accordingly, in the Bahá'í community there are no arranged marriages without the participants' consent, but on the other hand, marriage without the approval of parents is not permitted. In this vein, Shoghi Effendi reaffirmed that Bahá'u'lláh had clearly stated that the consent of all living parents was a requisite step in the actualization of a Bahá'í marriage.²⁸

The marriage ritual is not elaborate; it is simple and free from dogmatic form. In fact, there is only one utterance required of the participants. In front of at least two witnesses they must state, 'We will all, verily abide by the Will of God'.²⁹ Apart from this, individuals are free to include in the ceremony whatever writings they please.* However,

²⁵ 'Know thou that the command of marriage is eternal. It will never be changed or altered.' (Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol. II, p. 474)

²⁶ A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 47

²⁷ A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 39

²⁸ Bahá'í News (United States and Canada), # 202, December, 1947, (Wilmette, Illinois), p. 2

²⁹ A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 59 (For all laws concerning marriage, including those which have not as yet come into use in many parts of the Bahá'í world, see p. 39-41 of above mentioned synopsis).

* These can conclude selections from other religions' scriptures.

'There should be no comingling of the old forms with the new and simple one by Bahá'u'lláh, and Bahá'ís should not be married in the church or any other acknowledged place of worship of the followers of other faiths.'³⁰ Consequently, a Bahá'í marriage generally takes place in a Bahá'í center or a private home. Again, as there are no priests in the Bahá'í Faith no one marries the couple. Rather, by stating their vow in front of God and friends the individuals pronounce themselves married. Then follows a joyous celebration at which guests partake of food, music, and song.

The prescriptions regarding the means of disposing of the dead in the Bahá'í Faith are more elaborate than those regarding marriage. The dead are buried, and there is a prohibition against cremation.³¹ As it is believed that the body should be interred as soon after death as circumstances permit, there is also an interdiction against carrying it more than an hour's journey from the place of death.³² Having been wrapped in a shroud of either cotton or silk, and having had a ring placed on its finger bearing the inscription 'I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate',³³ the body should be placed in a coffin of stone or hard wood.

The observance should reflect attitudes of solemnity and respect, but there should be no wailing or lamenting on the part of attendants. Having gathered at the gravesight, community members hear the one congregational prayer in the Bahá'í writings - the obligatory prayer for the departed - read by a selected individual from among them. After paying

³⁰ The Bahá'í Community. A Summary of Its Organization and Laws, rev. ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1963), p. 44

³¹ A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 62-63

³² A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 62

³³ A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 62

their respects the friends leave, and, there being no post-internment rites associated with Bahá'í burial, the ritual is completed.

Besides the three categories of ritual: prayer and devotion, fasting, and rites of passage, Bahá'ís also observe certain occasions which are ceremonious in nature. These events are known as holy days, and they are nine in number:

Table 10³⁴

<u>Date</u>	<u>Holy Day</u>
March 21	Feast of <u>Naw-Rúz</u>
April 21	Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh
April 29	Ninth Day of <u>Ridván</u>
May 2	Twelfth Day of <u>Ridván</u>
May 23	Declaration of the Báb
May 29	Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh
July 9	Martyrdom of the Báb
October 20	Birth of the Báb
November 12	Birth of Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'í ceremonies can be divided into two main categories: those which are joyous and are referred to as festivals; and those which are more solemn, the latter being commemorations of the deaths of the Faith's founders. Both types, however, present opportunities for believers to be made more aware of their religio-historical heritage, a process which strengthens and reconfirms feelings of group solidarity.³⁵

On holy days Bahá'ís are meant to suspend work, and in each community gatherings are held at which the significance of the particular observance is recounted. While the readings or talks delivered at holy day ceremonies

³⁴ According to the Bahá'í calendar sunset is considered to be the end of each day and the beginning of the next. Therefore, each holy day commences at sunset of the previous day and ends at sunset on the day listed.

³⁵ In this sense Bahá'í holy days perform one of the functions of rituals outlined by Emile Durkheim. For a discussion of these functions see Harry Alpert's essay on Durkheim and ritual in Emile Durkheim, ed. by R. A. Nisbet, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965), p. 137-141.

should be related to the event being commemorated, there are no prescribed formats for these occasions, and consequently, besides specific times at which some of them are to be celebrated, Bahá'í ceremonies are generally lacking in standardized content. Each observance does have, however, a general type of ceremonial activity associated with it, and in the following paragraphs short descriptions of the events will be presented.³⁶

The Feast of Naw-Rúz (March 21) marks the beginning of the Bahá'í year and signifies the end of the fasting period. This ceremony is one of the joyous occasions referred to in Bahá'í writings as festivals. On the prescribed day members of the local community assemble for the purpose of sharing in food, song, and general merriment. Thus, like other New Year celebrations throughout the world, the Naw-Rúz ceremony commemorates by means of joyous community interaction the passing of the old and the advent of the new.

The next three holy days (April 21, April 29, and May 2) take place during the 'days of Ridván', a twelve day period marking Bahá'u'lláh's last hours in Baghdád before his exile to Turkey. Of the three, the most important is the first, the day on which Bahá'u'lláh declared to his followers that he was 'Him whom God shall manifest'. In celebrating this festival Bahá'ís throughout the world follow the advice of The Ridván Tablet:

Rejoice with exceeding gladness, O people of Bahá, as ye call to remembrance the Day of supreme felicity, the Day whereon the Tongue of the Ancient of Days, hath spoken, as He departed from His House, proceeding to the Spot from which He shed upon the whole of creation the splendours of His name, the All-Merciful.³⁷

To commemorate the historical event that signified the beginning of a new

³⁶ Since there are no priests to arrange or direct rituals or ceremonies, it is the responsibility of the Local Spiritual Assembly to organize the programs.

³⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, The Ridván Tablet, in The Bahá'í Revelation, p. 145-146

era,³⁸ members of local communities gather to hear writings and stories of Bahá'u'lláh's declaration, an announcement that transformed the sorrow of banishment into a message of eternal joy.

May 23 (two hours and eleven minutes after sunset on May 22), signalizes the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb. On this day the community gathers to hear the story of the meeting in Shíráz of the Báb and Mullá Husayn. During the observance appropriate passages are read from Bahá'í scriptures by which followers are reminded of the significance of the Báb's station in the unfoldment of God's plan for mankind.³⁹ Like the preceding ceremonies, the Declaration of the Báb is celebrated with great joy, and after the commemoration believers share food and fellowship.

May 29, and July 9, are the occasions for more solemn ceremonies. They signify respectively the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh and the martyrdom of the Báb.⁴⁰ On these days followers assemble for the purpose of paying respect to the twin founders of their religion. While they are not

³⁸ Before Bahá'u'lláh's ordered banishment and subsequent declaration, members of the community were still living in the Bábí era. Thus, although May 23, 1844, is often cited as the movement's point of origin, April 21, 1863, is the day '...whereon "all created things were immersed in the sea of purification,..."' (Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p.154)

³⁹ Although the Báb is held to be an independent manifestation of God, he is primarily viewed as being the herald of Bahá'u'lláh. For example, Shoghi Effendi states the following: 'The "Man-Child," mentioned in the Book of Revelation, destined to "rule all nations with a rod of iron," had released, through His coming, the creative energies which, reinforced by the effusions of a swiftly succeeding and infinitely mightier Revelation, were to instill into the entire human race the capacity to achieve its organic unification,...' (God Passes By, p. 58)

⁴⁰ The Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh is to be commemorated at 3 am, and the Martyrdom of the Báb is to be observed at the noon hour. These times mark the actual hour that the occurrence took place and are therefore held to be significant - an example of the concept of sacred time.

mournful events like the Shí'ah commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn,⁴¹ they are different in tone and character from Bahá'í festivals, the mood of the participants being more reverent and subdued. During the observances believers listen to reconstructions of the events and offer verses of praise to the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

The final two holy days on the Bahá'í calendar are the Birthday of the Báb (October 20) and the Birthday of Bahá'u'lláh (November 12). Both ceremonies follow the pattern of other Bahá'í festivals, the believers coming together to voice the praises of the manifestations and to share in communal celebration.

As can be seen from the foregoing descriptions, one of the main functions of Bahá'í holy day observances is to promote group solidarity. During the ceremonies emphasis is not placed on communication with the Sacred or the performance of non-rational activity but on the common emotional response. By making followers aware of their religio-cultural heritage and allowing them to share in a communal situation the feelings of joy and sorrow, such occasions help instill in adherents' minds the attitudes of common purpose and identity. This function was understood by 'Abdu'l-Bahá when he wrote:

...it hath been decided by the desire of God that union and harmony may day by day increase among the friends of God...And the greatest means for the union and harmony of all is Spiritual Meetings.⁴²

In attempting to introduce declarants in Malwa to the ritualistic and ceremonial aspects of Bahá'í community life the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India has adopted a policy of gradualism. While on the one hand new

⁴¹ The son of 'Alí and grandson of Muhammad martyred in 680 A.D. at Kerbela.

⁴² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 413

believers are informed about the necessity of saying daily prayers, fasting, holding feasts, and celebrating holy days, Bahá'í administrators have not tried to overwhelm them by demanding sudden adherence to new patterns of behavior which are in many ways alien to Hindu culture. For example, the Bahá'í concept of prayer whereby the devotee's primary activity is a verbalization of revealed verses is essentially different from the popular form of pūjā found in Malwa which involves the use of images and elaborate modes of symbolic drama. Similarly, while Bahá'í ritual and ceremony emphasizes the equality of all members of the community, Hindu feasts and festivals are marked by caste exclusiveness. As K. S. Mathur reported:

Similar restrictions are imposed on inter-caste participation in communal festivals and domestic ceremonies. In festivals in 'clean' caste houses all 'clean' castes participate on an equal basis. Members of 'unclean' castes may be allowed to participate but only in the capacity of servants, whereas 'untouchable' castes are invariably excluded from participation.⁴³

Therefore, instead of requiring immediate and radical change in the behavior patterns of new declarants, the Bahá'í Administrative Order is trying to slowly modify ritualistic modes of activity by introducing certain aspects of Bahá'í ritual and ceremony into a number of 'model village' communities. In the process Bahá'í teachers do not malign traditional ritualistic practices, neither do they demand, as do other religious groups,⁴⁴ that new declarants completely abandon these observances. Rather, an attempt is being made to influence change through the positive process of religious resocialization whereby old forms are tolerated at the same time as new ones are being implemented. Viewing the movement's consolidation program in this light, we shall proceed to examine those aspects of Bahá'í ritual and

⁴³ Mathur, p. 138

⁴⁴ For example the Neo-Buddhist Movement

ceremony which are presently being implemented in 'model village' communities in rural Malwa.

The introduction of prayer presents a two-sided problem for Bahá'í teachers in Malwa. First, unless a verse can be memorized, Bahá'í prayer demands a literate devotee who can read from a prayerbook, and as we have seen, the great majority of declarants in Malwa are illiterate. Second, as mentioned earlier, prayer in the sense that it is understood in the Bahá'í Faith is not part of the local ritual tradition, and therefore its practice does not come easy to a Hindu declarant. In an attempt to overcome these difficulties the Bahá'í Administrative Order has adopted certain procedural methods of approach specifically designed for use in a rural context.

The main method by which Bahá'í administrators are attempting to introduce prayer into the lives of village believers is by making use of those followers in various communities who are literate. The Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee is continuously encouraging such individuals to attend 'deepening' sessions in Indore and Ujjain, and in many instances it pays for their transportation costs. At these sessions literate believers are instructed to help illiterate declarants by reading them the prayers and writings, thus allowing them to come into contact with the holy word. In addition, these believers are encouraged to help organize sessions of communal worship in their respective communities at which they can teach fellow declarants short prayers and devotional phrases.⁴⁵

The second means of introducing prayer into the village communities is through the implementation of the region's corps of travelling teachers. Of all the believers in rural Malwa this group are the most 'deepened' in the teachings and practices of the Bahá'í Faith, and they form the

⁴⁵ For example, the emphasis placed on prayer at the 'deepening' session cited in Chapter 6 was for the purpose of encouraging participants to organize similar activity in their communities.

best channel of communication between the Bahá'í administrative system and the local village communities.

It has been the general feeling among members of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee that rather than spending time teaching declarants numerous devotional verses, the travelling teachers should concentrate on encouraging new believers to recite one short prayer or devotional phrase. Consequently, during their rounds travelling teachers speak to declarants about the importance of saying the short obligatory prayer⁴⁶ or the traditional Bahá'í devotional phrases 'Alláh'u'Abhá'⁴⁷ and 'Yá Baha'u'l-Abhá'.⁴⁸ Furthermore, travelling teachers are instructed to meet with the more literate members in the various communities and to encourage them to initiate feasts and group devotions in their respective villages. The philosophy behind this approach is the same one used to justify the training of individual believers at the Indore Teaching Institute; namely, that although the majority of declarants are not able to read prayers, their presence at occasions where the holy verses are being verbalized will provide them with spiritual benefits.⁴⁹ In this vein, one specific project launched in 1971 required travelling teachers to encourage village believers to assemble for dawn prayers.⁵⁰

While the training of literate villagers to act as initiators of Bahá'í devotional activity has to some degree alleviated the problem of

⁴⁶ See page 213

⁴⁷ See page 171

⁴⁸ Known as the Greatest Name it can be translated either as 'O Glory of Glories', or 'O Glory of the All-Glorious'.

⁴⁹ 'No breeze can compare with the breezes of Divine Revelation, whilst the Word which is uttered by God shineth and flasheth as the sun amidst the books of men.' (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 42-43)

⁵⁰ Unpublished correspondence of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, 'Letter to the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, March 5, 1971'

literacy being a prerequisite for contact with the 'divine' word, the question of cultural alienation still remains. For this reason, a form of devotional activity more easily integrated into the Indian cultural context has been adopted. This is the Bahá'í bhajan

A bhajan is a style of rhythmic song which has long been popular among bhakti sects in India.⁵¹ Even today, many wandering bards and devotional singers perform these songs in towns and villages, and their voices are a familiar sound in the rural areas of Malwa. When a bhajan is performed in a group situation one of the devotees stands and sings the various verses of the song while the entire assemblage joins in unison to sing the words of the refrain. Bhajans' contents are generally devotional in nature, their verses extolling the deeds of gods, saints and heroes.

A large number of Bahá'í bhajans have arisen in India during the mass teaching era, many of them being the creations of village believers. Although technically not prayers, their verses of praise give them a definite devotional character, and as a result bhajans have been approved by the Indian National Spiritual Assembly as an acceptable form of Bahá'í activity. In order that the reader might obtain a better understanding of the form and content of Bahá'í bhajans, verses from three such songs have been translated below.

A. The Kalkin Avatāra⁵²

Refrain - Arise O children of India, the kalkin avatāra has come.
Viṣṇu's avatāra has come with the name Bahá'u'lláh.

1. Nowhere in the entire world can the influence of religion
be seen,
the wicked have obtained everything,
the truthful have lost everything.

⁵¹ 'a musical verse recounting the attributes and deeds of the Lord.'
(Manak Hindī Koś, vol. IV, ed. by Rāmacandra Varma, (Prayag, 1965),
p. 180)

⁵² Bahā'ī Gīt, (New Delhi, n.d.), p. 14

According to the Gītā the time of Viṣṇu's avatāra has come. ----- Awake! (refrain)

2. The Gītā has said when circumstances are such, religion is again established, just as it has happened today. In order to save the righteous, kalkin avatāra has come. ----- Awake! (refrain)
3. Foolish people have not recognized that Viṣṇu's avatāra has come again,
Rādhā⁵³ and Arjuna⁵⁴ knew that this (Bahā'u'llāh) was the Lord's new abode.
The eternal has once again manifested himself, the avatāra of God. ----- Awake! (refrain)

B. Bahā, Thy Love⁵⁵

Refrain Bahā, thy love and majesty are boundless
Whoever comes into thy shelter, his boat⁵⁶ crosses the shore.

1. Thou have made the sun and the moon, and caused the stars to shine.
Without the use of hands thou built the mountains and caused the beautiful flowers to blossom. ----- Bahā! (refrain)
2. Look at the rumbling clouds, the flashing lightning, the falling rain.
See the koyal⁵⁷ singing with a sweet voice

⁵³ Kṛṣṇa's favourite maiden, her relationship with the god-hero has come to symbolize divine love.

⁵⁴ One of the heroes of the Mahābhārata (see Chapter 7)

⁵⁵ Bahāī Gīt, p. 6

⁵⁶ In bhakti poetry a boat often denotes the vehicle of salvation. For example, the sixteenth century poet Sūrdās wrote:
I have heard people say that you have brought many across,
I want to board the boat, but I can't pay the boatman.
Take me across, O great king, Lord of Braj.
(S. M. Pandey and N. H. Zide, The Poems of Surdas, poem #7, University of Chicago, unpublished)

⁵⁷ The koyal (English spelling - koel) is a black cuckoo often alluded to in bhakti poetry. For example, the fifteenth century poetess Mīrābāī made use of the koyal in the following passage:
O Dark One (Kṛṣṇa) today is a colorful festival
In the rumbling masses of black rain clouds lightning flashes
Frog, peacock, papila bird speak, the koyal is calling
Mīrā's lord is clever (Kṛṣṇa), her strength is in his feet
(Mīrābāī kī Padāvalī, ed. by Ācārya Paraśurāma Caturvedī, (Prayag, 1970), p. 142)

a raga⁵⁸ of love. ----- Bahā! (refrain)

3. Saints and prophets all sing of thy attributes
Having sung all the religious scriptures, they fall exhausted.
Thy shore cannot be obtained ----- Bahā! (refrain)

C. Lord Bahā's Story⁵⁹

- Refrain Come O children let us show you a glimpse of India
Come O devotees we will tell you the story of Lord Bahā.
Having recounted his tales let us make life fruitful.
1. He was well-born, but his life was not one of pleasure
He deprived himself to serve the poor
Passing his entire life in prison, he revealed the book
of knowledge. ----- Come! (refrain)
 2. He lit his life's lamp with divine knowledge
Therefore he received from the Lord the name Bahā.
His glorifications of God resound with love
and truth. ----- Come! (refrain)

As the form and content of the above songs reveal, Bahā'ī bhajans are reminiscent of traditional Hindu bhakti poetry. Their repetition of verses of praise filled with the glorifications of God and His avatāra mirrors the form used by medieval bhakti poets. Furthermore, the numerous references to Hindu cultural images (Viṣṇu, Rādhā, Arjuna, koyal etc.) reveal an attempt to correlate Bahā'u'llāh with traditional devotional symbols. Because of this identification with traditional cultural forms and symbols, Bahā'ī bhajans are more meaningful to Hindu declarants than the standard style of Bahā'ī devotion (prayer), and consequently they have become the most popular form of devotional activity in rural Malwa, and travelling teachers often use them as a means of involving illiterate declarants in Bahā'ī communal gatherings, both feasts and holy day observances.

⁵⁸ '...the name given to a class of modal melodies which constitute the highest expression of Indian classical music.' (Benjamin Walker, Hindu World, vol. II, (London, 1968), p. 266)

⁵⁹ Bahā'ī Gīt, p. 13

While a definite effort is being made to introduce some type of devotional activity into the 'model village' communities, the emphasis placed on fasting and the observance of 'passage' rites has not been as acute. Although articles concerning these injunctions appear in the written material sent to the villages, and their significance is stressed in 'deepening' courses, there has not been an active campaign to implement them in village life. It is commonly felt by Bahá'í administrators in India that at this stage in the development of Bahá'í communities in rural Malwa the most meaningful aspects of Bahá'í life to be emphasized by village teachers are the fundamental doctrines of the oneness of God, His manifestations, and His creatures, and the communal gatherings, whether devotional, ceremonious, or administrative in nature, and not the finer laws of fasting, marriage, etc. Consequently, great import has not been attached to the latter, for they would require declarants to make radical changes in conventional behavior patterns, a process which if forced upon new believers might well act as a deterrent to the development of the more important elements of the Bahá'í educational program, if not to the entire movement. This is not to imply that within 'model village' communities there are no individuals who fast or obey the finer laws of the Faith, as in many of these communities there are persons who do so, especially among the travelling teachers and village primary school teachers (see Chapter 11). Rather, it is to point out that in terms of mass consolidation these elements are not considered to be the most important of the movement's objectives. It is interesting to note, however, that while there have been no Bahá'í burials in rural Malwa,⁶⁰ several Bahá'í weddings have taken place. In each case the ceremony was performed after the Hindu wedding, a procedure which if certain conditions are observed is permissible.⁶¹

⁶⁰ There have been Bahá'í burials in the cities of Gwalior and Ujjain.

⁶¹ Bahá'í News (United States), # 283, September, 1954, (Wilmette, Illinois), p. 2

The Administrative Order is, however, trying to introduce the Nineteen-Day Feast and holy day observances into the 'model village' communities.⁶² Behind this policy lies the assumption that if declarants can begin to identify with Bahá'í group activities, not only will their new beliefs be strengthened, but they will begin to develop a sense of Bahá'í communal identity which will in time pave the way for meaningful changes in their patterns of behavior. Consequently, all regular channels of communication linking village communities with the greater administrative institutions of the Faith are employed to help in this process. Newsletters and circulars sent to village communities list the dates of feasts and holy days and remind the declarants of the import of observing such occasions. Moreover, Baháí Darśan, the newspaper published by the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee and distributed in many of the local villages, often prints special commemorative articles to mark the holy days. For example, in October of 1973 a special issue was published in observance of the Birth of the Báb in which the major events of the young Siyyid's life were recounted.⁶³ In the same manner, the Indore Teaching Institute includes in its training classes instructions concerning the celebration of feasts and holy days⁶⁴, and travelling teachers are specifically instructed how and when feasts and holy day celebrations should be observed. In this regard, on one of the examinations periodically administered by the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee for the purpose of ensuring that travelling teachers are maintaining efficiency in their work, the latter were asked to list the date and purpose of each holy day.⁶⁵

⁶² Unpublished correspondence of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, 'Letter to all regional teaching committees, December, 30, 1972'

⁶³ Baháí Darśan, October, 1973, (Ujjain), p. 2 and 4

⁶⁴ For example, whenever an instruction session coincides with a feast day a special Unity Feast is held during which participants share prayers, bhajans, and food. See Chapter 9.

⁶⁵ The author personally perused examination questions.

In the five 'model village' communities examined in this study, the implementation of Bahá'í ritual and ceremonial activity has only been partial. According to village teachers, while devotional meetings and holy day celebrations are held with some degree of regularity, on an individual level compliance is noticeably lacking. For example, in each community individual prayer and fasting are practiced by only a handful of believers, and in most cases these persons have had extensive contact with Bahá'í institutions outside of their village; that is, they have attended teaching institutes and regional conferences or acted as either travelling teachers or village primary school teachers.⁶⁶ Such 'deepened' believers appear, however, to be ardent in their endeavors; most of them know several prayers from memory and recite them daily. One villager in Rīchā had even memorized the entire Tablet of Ahmad, a prayer of over eighty lines in length held to be invested with special spiritual potency. Moreover, while the majority of declarants in these communities do not pray daily, they do know the Bahá'í devotional phrases 'Allāh'u'Abhá' and 'Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá,' and as a result both can be heard within the villages at regular intervals.

While individual prayer and fasting are not a common phenomenon in these communities, the Nineteen-Day Feast is periodically celebrated, although according to village teachers attendance at the meetings often varies. The fluctuation in attendance would fit into the Hindu ritual idiom where, except for certain 'high' castes, there is no specific time for worship, and consequently people attend to these matters only when they feel they have a need to do so. K. S. Mathur found in his village that 'Such a view about the use of religious worship is shared by most of the young and able-bodied men of all castes.'⁶⁷

⁶⁶ In the five villages such 'deepened' Bahá'ís would total no more than fifteen in number, or approximately three declarants per community, and among these very few would keep the fast.

⁶⁷ Mathur, p. 166

An example of the celebration of the Nineteen-Day Feast in rural Malwa was the Feast of Sovereignty (Sultán) held in village Rīchā on the evening of January 18, 1974. Preparation for the meeting began during the afternoon when the resident Bahá'í travelling teacher visited the community's various declarants to remind them that the meeting would take place in the evening under one of the large trees situated on the edge of the village. At about half past seven believers began to assemble, and by eight o'clock there were fourteen men present including Brāhman̄s, Rājputs Chamārs, and Balāis, all of whom sat themselves in a circle around a small fire.⁶⁸ The devotional part of the meeting lasted approximately fifteen minutes. It began with a prayer read by the Bahá'í teacher who then proceeded to elaborate on the import of the Nineteen-Day Feast in the life of a Bahá'í community. Upon the conclusion of his talk a second member of the community (a Brāhman̄) read one of The Hidden Words. This was followed by the reading of several more verses from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (by a Brāhman̄ and a Rājput) and another short invocation by the village teacher. Before closing the devotional period the teacher reminded the participants of the importance of repeating the devotional phrase 'Alláh'u'Abhá' during the course of their daily work. He then ended the devotions with a prayer.

While short in duration the atmosphere surrounding the session was one of gaiety and friendship. Between prayers participants conversed with one another and there was no sign of caste exclusiveness - 'low' caste members were not isolated or segregated in any way. Moreover, following the termination of the session all of the members shared roasted nuts and engaged in spirited social intercourse.

⁶⁸ At the time of the feast this number accounted for approximately half of Rīchā's male declarants over the age of fifteen years, and according to the village teacher they formed the core of the village's Bahá'í community, being the most active declarants in Rīchā. The following month another twenty villagers enrolled in the Faith.

As can be gleaned from the description of the Rīchā meeting, devotional sessions in the village are not elaborate; they are usually short in duration and center around specific literate believers. According to the resident teachers in the other four villages the same pattern holds in their communities, a situation which is no doubt partially a consequence of illiteracy. It is also an indication, however, of the difficulty involved in trying to introduce a culturally alien institution into village life, and consequently it would appear that the future of communal worship in rural Malwa depends on the development of bhajan sessions which provide both a wider base for believer participation and a more intimate link with Hindu cultural forms and symbols. However, at this point in time the Bahá'í Administrative Order is primarily concerned that declarants assemble, even for short periods, and that the meetings reflect an atmosphere of unity and brotherhood. Thus, the fact that in both Kāsod and Garabelī members of the Balāī caste read from Bahá'í scriptures is considered more important than the length of meetings or the number of active participants, for in traditional Hindu practice an 'unclean' casteman is not allowed to learn or have access to the Vedas.⁶⁹ Consequently, for the moment one of the main functions of the Nineteen-Day Feast is to demonstrate to declarants that in Bahá'í communal worship there is no variation of roles based on caste lines and thereby contrast it with the assumptions of orthodox Hinduism.⁷⁰

During the author's stay in Malwa only one Bahá'í holy day arose (Naw-Rúz). However, in addition to supplementary information supplied by village teachers, a written report describing another holy day observance held earlier in the year (the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh) was obtained, and

⁶⁹ Basham, p. 145

⁷⁰ 'In the fasts and festivals they celebrate, the rites of passage they solemnise and the deities they worship variations on caste basis are visible.' (Mathur, p. 164)

consequently a few words concerning these two occasions will be mentioned here.

On the evening of March 20, 1974, the Naw-Rúz festival was celebrated by the Bahá'í community in Manāsā. The ceremony took place in the village's Bahá'í bhavan, a building which acts both as a school for children during the day and a center for community meetings and celebrations. The resident school teacher directed the observance at which 31 male believers were in attendance (29 Rājputs, 1 Chamār, and 1 Balāi). After reading a prayer and a selection from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh the teacher spoke to the assembled group about the meaning of Naw-Rúz, comparing it to Hindu festivals and pointing out that just as Divālī⁷¹, Holī⁷², and Daśahra⁷³ were times for rejoicing, the Bahá'í New Year observance was an occasion for community celebration. Following his speech bhajans were sung and participants conversed freely in an atmosphere of gaiety and friendship.

A letter written to the National Spiritual Assembly by a member of another 'model village' community recounting the events that took place at the observance of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh reveals a similar scene to the one in Manāsā:

I am very happy to inform you that in our village the birthday of Bahá'u'lláh was celebrated with great joy and spirit. On this auspicious occasion a prayer was first read by the Secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly. After this, other members of the community read from The Hidden Words, Selected Writing's of Bahá'u'lláh, and other Bahá'í books. While portraying the life of Bahá'u'lláh, Govind Prasād brought to light the important aspects of the Bahá'í Faith...After this, Bahá'í songs were sung, which made for an enthusiastic atmosphere among the believers.⁷⁴

⁷¹ A Hindu festival celebrated on the day of the new moon of Kārtik (the eighth month of the Hindu year, October - November) when lamps are lit in houses to symbolize the victory of good over evil.

⁷² A Hindu festival celebrated on the last day of the month of Phāgun (February - March) when participants throw colored water on one another.

⁷³ A Hindu festival celebrated on the tenth day of Kvār (September - October) to commemorate the victory of Rama over Ravana.

⁷⁴ Unpublished correspondence of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India.



A village bhavan

According to village teachers the formats of the celebrations cited above are typical of holy day observances in the five 'model village' communities. Thus, like devotional sessions, Bahá'í ceremonies are not elaborate affairs. Rather, when observed they appear to be simple gatherings organized by village teachers at which the assembled declarants listen to Bahá'í writings and songs and are reminded by means of instructional talks of the significance of particular events deemed sacred in the Bahá'í world, a process which Bahá'í administrators and teachers hope will provide new believers with the foundations for a new religious mythology (a mythology expressed through the revealed word rather than symbolic drama) which will act as a socio-psychological reinforcement to group identity.

Before closing it should be pointed out that with a few exceptions declarants in the five communities have not given up their traditional patterns of ritual behavior, nor has it been part of the Bahá'í Administrative Order's teaching and consolidation policy to demand this of them. Hence, while members attend Bahá'í meetings they also offer pūjā in village shrines and temples and abide by caste regulations concerning marriage and dining. For example, in Rīchā a declarant who told me he was travelling to nearby villages spreading the message of Bahá'u'lláh also displayed his sacred thread⁷⁵ and said he performed daily pūjā in the main village temple. Similarly, in Karañkanī a villager could speak of Bhagavān Bahā and offer coconut to Nārāyaṇa.⁷⁶ Moreover, in Manāsā village icons representing Rāma, Hanumant, and Gaṇeśa are housed in one corner of the Bahá'í bhavan. In all five communities teachers

⁷⁵ A cord of three threads, each of nine twisted strands, hung over the left shoulder and under the right arm, traditionally donned by 'clean' caste Hindus but today primarily worn by Brāhmans. It symbolizes one's initiation into Hindu society and has special religious significance for the orthodox.

⁷⁶ A god associated with Viṣṇu.

established the significance of these observations by confirming that declarants still functioned within the Hindu ritual idiom, the main difference between them and other villagers being their acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh and their participation in Bahá'í meetings. Consequently, it appears that in these communities feasts and holy day observances are providing believers with new socio-religious frames of reference, but they have not as yet replaced traditional forms of ritual behavior.

Chapter 9 Social Principles

One of the striking differences between the 'world view' of the Bahá'í Faith and that of traditional Hinduism is their respective attitudes towards social stratification. In Bahá'í teachings all men are considered equal in the eyes of God, and consequently within the Bahá'í community there is ideally no hierarchy of status groups.¹ On the other hand, in traditional village Hinduism a man is ranked according to his caste, an institution which not only determines the nature of his social relationships but reflects his state of purity and therefore his proximity to God. Mention has already been made of this hierarchical structure in Chapter 4, but since its assumptions are at such great odds with the social norms of the Bahá'í Faith and are ones with which the movement must come to terms in both its teaching and consolidation programs, this chapter will commence by citing a few examples of how the ideals of social inequality are manifested in the traditional village, specifically, as regards the behavior patterns of 'unclean' and 'untouchable' caste members. Concerning this subject, the author is well aware, as was stated in Chapter 4, that the influences of modernization are having a disruptive effect on the traditional system. However, the ideal of social inequality still remains part and parcel of the contemporary villager's 'world view', and therefore while these examples are not meant to be a definitive statement regarding the present condition of the lower castes in rural Malwa, it is the author's conviction that they reflect the essential social norms of popular Hinduism.

¹ In a normative sense the Bahá'í Faith is an egalitarian religion. Structurally, however, there exists a hierarchy of status groups, the top positions being held by the manifestation, his successors, and members of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Regarding the latter, however, it should be pointed out that according to Bahá'í ideals it is the institution and not the individual members that is raised to a position of authority.

Two status groups which have traditionally been ranked very low in the village social system, and ones whose numbers in terms of Bahá'í enrollment are quite high,² are Balāis and Chamārs. Balāis are considered Śudras and are classified as 'unclean', while Chamārs are designated 'untouchables'.³ Both castes receive their low status as a result of their traditional occupations.⁴ Balāis were a weaver caste, and their work brought them into contact with a bow whose string (being made of animal tissue) defiled them.⁵ Likewise, Chamārs traditionally worked with leather,⁶ and therefore they were looked upon as being impure. As a consequence of their condition the living quarters of both Balāis and Chamārs are separated from 'clean' caste dwellings, and their members are often denied the use of specific village social services. Moreover, in terms of general social intercourse certain spacial taboos are applied to them.

The ground plan of most villages in Malwa, and indeed in all of India, is characterized by its separation of 'clean' caste dwellings from 'unclean' and 'untouchable' homes. Both K. S. Mathur and Adrian Mayer found this type of housing pattern in their respective Malwa villages,⁷ and all of the 'model village' communities investigated in this study were

² Although there are no official records of the caste backgrounds of declarants in Malwa, I was informed by village teachers that members of the two castes make up a considerable number of lower caste declarants in the region.

³ The main difference between the two being that theoretically the former do not spread pollution by physical contact. See Mathur, p. 69

⁴ What is considered important is not the actual occupation of the individual involved, but the traditional occupation of his caste. For example, most Balāis and Chamārs are cultivators or field laborers, but their traditional occupations still defile them.

⁵ According to the traditional scheme of values contact with parts of remains of animals is considered defiling

⁶ Often as skinners or tanners

⁷ Potlodi in Indore district and Ramkheri in Dewas district - see Introduction, p. 7.

laid out along similar lines. Consequently, Balāis and Chamārs cannot live among the higher castes but must reside in separate wards outside the main area of village habitation. This generally means that they live on the periphery of the village, and in some cases their dwellings can be separated from the main settlement by a considerable distance. Moreover, 'clean' caste members will rarely enter such wards.

Just as they are isolated from other members of the village in terms of living space, Balāis and Chamārs have traditionally been descriminated against regarding the use of many village social services. For example, Brāhmans and Nāis will not usually serve them,⁸ and they are not allowed to use 'clean' caste wells but must draw water from their specially designated springs. As was pointed out in Chapter 4, the main reason for such segregation is the belief that direct physical contact with impure castes will taint the 'clean' casteman. The social inequality these castes face is also noticeable during times of general social intercourse. Thus, they must address higher castemen with titles of respect, and they are expected to sit in separate groups away from the main body of villagers during communal gatherings. In this respect Mathur noted the following:

My observations in Potlodi show that on occasions of communal gatherings, care is taken by everybody to accord due prestige to others. Brahmin and Rajput are almost always given a patient hearing when they speak. Members of other 'clean' castes sit in a body whereas members of 'unclean' and 'untouchable' castes sit a little away from the main body and are expected to be patient listeners only.⁹

And,

When an 'unclean' or 'untouchable' caste man visits a 'clean' caste house, he is treated with a certain contempt, which, however, is seldom taken to be so by the latter, since he has become accustomed to such behaviour. He is not allowed to enter the house, no seat is offered to him; he usually sits on the naked ground just outside the threshold.¹⁰

⁸ Each caste usually has its own designated members who perform these tasks.

⁹ Mathur, p. 122

¹⁰ Mathur, p. 137

'Unclean' and 'untouchable' castes also have distinct deities, rituals, and festivals which distinguish them from higher castes. In addition, in those festivals which are communal in nature they have traditionally had to participate on an unequal basis, often acting as servants to the 'clean' castes, and in many instances 'untouchable' members have not been allowed to participate. Moreover, although they are legally permitted to enter village temples, most 'unclean' and 'untouchable' castemen will not frequent these places because they are not allowed to worship in the same way that 'clean' Hindus do.¹¹ Therefore, in general the role of 'unclean' and 'untouchable' castes in village social life has been one of isolated servitude.

While in popular Hinduism patterns of status group interaction are based on concepts of purity and pollution and their implications of human inequality, the principles guiding social interaction in the Bahá'í community are more egalitarian in nature. The core of these principles is the concept of the oneness of mankind, a belief which 'Abdu'l-Bahá designated as the foundation of the Faith of God¹² and Shoghi Effendi referred to as the most vital of all the principles found in Bahá'u'lláh's tablets.¹³

According to the concept of the oneness of mankind all men are believed to be equal in the eyes of God. While they may differ in their potential capacities - and will of necessity attain to different intellectual

¹¹ Mathur, p. 166

¹² 'In this wondrous Revelation, this glorious century, the foundation of the Faith of God and the distinguishing feature of His Law is the consciousness of the Oneness of Mankind.' (Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 36)

¹³ Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 216-217

and socio-economic stations in life - they are all His children, and their existence is sustained by His power.¹⁴ Consequently, the social principles of the Bahá'í Faith are an extension of its metaphysical beliefs. As in Islám the emphasis placed on the Oneness and Unity of the God-head results in a corresponding drive towards unity in the human sphere; God is the father of all men, and hence all of his children are members of one family. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.'¹⁵

Unlike popular Hindu doctrine, the Bahá'í teachings do not posit a belief in intrinsic impurity. As was noted in Chapter 4, according to Hindu belief man is born in a state of neutrality and is extremely susceptible to impurities. This doctrine naturally leads to a hierarchical stratification of things 'pure' and 'impure', and in the human sphere results in concepts of ritual inequality and their social manifestations of 'untouchability' and communal exclusiveness. Bahá'í doctrine, on the other hand, accepts that man is born good, and moreover that there is nothing in existence that is intrinsically impure or evil.¹⁶

Not being divided into a range of pure and impure categories, all creation is viewed as a unity held together by the laws of love and attraction:

Unity is necessary to existence. Love is the very cause of life; on the other hand, separation brings death. In the material world of creation, for instance, all things owe their actual life to unity. The elements which compose wood, mineral, or stone, are held together by the law of attraction.¹⁷

¹⁴ 'In the eyes of the Creator all His children are equal; His goodness is poured forth on all.' (Paris Talks, p. 138)

¹⁵ Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 218

¹⁶ 'In creation there is no evil; all is good.' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 250)

¹⁷ Paris Talks, p. 139-'So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.' (Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 14)

From this belief follows the social ideal that all men are bound together by God's creative act: 'So it is with the great body of humanity. The wonderful Law of Attraction, Harmony and Unity, holds together this marvellous Creation.'¹⁸

The primary adjunct to the concept of the oneness of mankind is the ideal of the elimination of all prejudice - racial, sexual, national, religious, or socio-economic. God loves all of His creatures equally: 'Therefore no one should glorify himself over another; no one should manifest pride or superiority toward another; no one should look upon another with scorn and contempt and no one should deprive or oppress a fellow creature.'¹⁹ In terms of the Indian social environment this means that new declarants should strive to eliminate ideas of caste exclusiveness from their 'world views', a goal towards which the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India is working but, as we shall shortly see, finding somewhat difficult to implement.

Perhaps the most striking structural manifestation of the ideal of equality among the faithful in the Bahá'í community is the lack of any type of priesthood or body of scholars who are considered bearers of special knowledge or guides to spiritual enlightenment.²⁰ According to Bahá'u'lláh in this day men are meant to investigate truth for themselves;²¹ no body of clerics can guide them, and they should not blindly follow the pathway of tradition. Consequently, while all of the faithful have the right to use the Faith's revealed scriptures, no one can claim a monopoly over their

¹⁸ Paris Talks, p. 139

¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in The Divine Art of Living. Selections from the Bahá'í Writings, rev. ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1965), p. 110

²⁰ A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (p. 47) cites priesthood as one of the prohibitions listed in Bahá'u'lláh's Most Holy Book.

²¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 238

interpretation,²² a principle which allows each believer to have direct access to his God and, unlike traditional village belief, denies the necessity of a religious functionary in order that communion between the Sacred and the profane can take place.²³

As was noted in Chapter 8, the lack of a clergy or priesthood means that Bahá'í feasts and other periods of communal devotion are noticeably devoid of role differentiation. During these occasions all members of the community are free to offer prayers, and there are no 'secret' or sequestered verses set aside for use by specific individuals. In fact, according to Bahá'í ideals one of the main functions of such meetings is to transcend the limitations of race, class, nationality, sect, and personality.²⁴ Similarly, the spirit surrounding Bahá'í ceremonies is one of unity and equality. All holy day observances are occasions for the gathering of the entire body of believers,²⁵ and their formats do not provide for functional variations based on status group identification. Instead, all members of the community sit and participate together, there being no standardized apparel or activity distinguishing one believer from another.²⁶ Furthermore, the programs for each occasion are not determined by a sacrosanct body of traditional law administered by a chosen

²² Only Bahá'u'lláh's appointed successors ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice) have the right to officially interpret the sacred writings. Otherwise, each individual must work out his own salvation.

²³ For example, it is necessary that a Brāhman officiate at all 'high' caste rituals.

²⁴ The Bahá'í Community, p. 19

²⁵ In contrast to village observances where according to popular practice not all castes are permitted to observe the same festivals, some being celebrated only by 'clean' castes and others only by individual castes.

²⁶ While specific individuals read passages or present talks, they are meant to be selected on an arbitrary basis, and they differ from one observance to another.

few but are arranged and directed by the community's democratically elected administrative body.

The structure of Bahá'í local administrative institutions is also influenced by the Faith's social principles, but as we will be examining them in greater detail in Chapter 10 it is not necessary at this time to give specific examples of this relationship. It should be noted, however, that the foundations of the entire administrative system are intimately bound by the concept of the oneness of mankind, and as a result community leaders are to consider themselves guardians of the faithful, their offices being ones of service to the community and not positions of personal status. In this vein Shoghi Effendi wrote:

Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the Friends whom they represent... They should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles.²⁷

Furthermore, as they are elected for specific periods of time, administrators can be removed from office, and consequently there are no hereditary positions of leadership which can undermine the concept of equality among the faithful.²⁸

The ideal of equality of believers can also be seen in the formulation of Bahá'í laws and ordinances, as submission to the commandments of God is part of the twofold obligation of every Bahá'í:

The first is steadfastness in His love, such steadfastness that neither the clamor of the enemy nor the claims of the idle pretender can deter him from cleaving unto Him Who is the Eternal Truth, a steadfastness that taketh no account of them whatever. The second is strict observance of the laws He hath prescribed...²⁹

²⁷ Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 44

²⁸ Although the institution of the Guardianship was meant to be hereditary, Shoghi Effendi had no offspring, and as a result the office terminated with his death.

²⁹ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 289-290

Thus, all Bahá'í laws are binding on every believer, there being no special commands set aside for a specific segment of the community.³⁰ For example, there are no provisions for monasticism, as Bahá'u'lláh admonished priests and monks to leave their cloisters and enter the world.³¹ Therefore, the laws and ordinances of the Bahá'í Faith help reinforce in the world of action those lofty ideals set forth in the movement's literature - ideals whose emphasis on unity and equality among the faithful put them in marked contrast to the ideals and laws of popular Hinduism which provide for differentiation in behavior along caste lines³² and thereby act as buttresses to the concept of human inequality.

As one can readily see from the above discussion of Bahá'í social principles, the movement's approach to the question of human relations is in fundamental conflict with the social norms of traditional village Hinduism. This being the case, two important queries arise: first, why are villagers declaring their belief in such doctrines; and second, how are Bahá'í administrators and teachers approaching the problem of introducing these values to new declarants? The first question will be

³⁰ The exceptions being the aforementioned provisions for women and the elderly regarding the fast and obligatory prayers.

³¹ Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 49

³² Certain acts which are disdained by some castes are permissible to others. For example, K. S. Mathur relates that one of the most popular stories in Potlodi was the tale of the hunter and the Brahmin in which the former teaches the latter the secret of dharma. 'The hunter told the Brahmin that though he was a hunter-butcher by caste and trade, a man of a low and 'unclean' caste, he scrupulously observed his duties: he followed the trade of his caste, even though that involved butchering innocent animals for food...having been born into a particular caste and station of life, it is incumbent upon a person to live righteously in accordance with the traditions of his caste, for that, and that alone is his dharma.' (Mathur, p. 87)

considered at greater length in Chapter 12 (Conclusion) where it can be discussed in light of the accumulated data of the entire study. As for the second, its issues will be dealt with in the following pages.

While stringent laws whose dictates restrict the degree of status group interaction permitted in conventional social situations have long been important factors in the determination of patterns of social intercourse in the Indian village, there are two areas of life where these injunctions have tended to break down. The first is related to a villager's conduct outside of his village, and the second is associated with purely 'religious' activities.

In Hinduism the primary function of dharma (proper action) is to maintain a given social order. The basic unit of this social order has traditionally been the village and to some extent its surrounding region.³³ Rules of conduct, therefore, are primarily directed towards the perpetuation of a given set of values within one's conventional social milieu; outside of this context such rules are not as binding. For example, Mathur found that:

The general and popular view is that the actions of a person in a socio-cultural context which is not his own are not to be considered his normal social actions, and that, therefore, he is not judged on the basis of the former. What he does in the city is no business of his caste community in the village, so long as his actions do not infringe the solidarity of the social groups to which he belongs.³⁴

Consequently, there is a distinct difference made between one's dharma in conventional life and one's activities outside of that milieu. A similar distinction applies to what might be termed purely 'religious' activity. For example, rules of dharma are not binding on religious ascetics who have renounced the world, as they are not seen to be members of conventional

³³ For a discussion of the relationship of a village and its region see Adrian Mayer, especially the Conclusion.

³⁴ Mathur, p. 94

society. This same type of attitude has also been applied to devotional (bhakti) sects.³⁵ Within the framework of a sect's devotional activities traditional rules of dharma are often suspended. For example, as many sects have been anti-caste in outlook their devotees (from different caste backgrounds) have joined together in various forms of devotional activity such as sharing ritually consecrated food.³⁶ However, outside of such activities, that is, within the context of conventional society, traditional rules of dharma prevail.³⁷

The path that the Bahá'í Administrative Order has travelled in terms of introducing the social teachings of the Faith to new declarants in Malwa has been one that has taken advantage of the above mentioned categories of behavior. To this date Bahá'í teachers have not made an attempt to change the conventional life patterns of new believers but have directed their efforts towards inducing village declarants to adopt Bahá'í modes of behavior within the context of Bahá'í activities. These activities are essentially two in kind: those which take place outside the local community; and those which function within the village.

³⁵ As mentioned in Chapter 7, bhakti means devotion to a personal god. This form of religious activity, which is characterized by the chanting of devotional mantras or the repetition of divine names, developed first in the Tamil country (South India) in the seventh century and in the following centuries spread over all of India. Many bhakti sects center their devotion on the figures of Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, but the number of objects of adoration is almost immeasurable.

³⁶ An example of such a sect would be the Vallabhāchāryas. Members of this group worship Kṛṣṇa as outlined by their founder Vallabhāchārya (sixteenth century). During congregational worship devotees of any age, sex, or caste can participate in the devotional activities, which include the consumption of prasād (offerings of food made to a deity and later distributed amongst the devotees). For a more detailed examination of this sect see Richard Barz, Early Developments within the Bhakti Sect of Vallabhāchārya According to Sectarian Traditions, Ph.D. Dissertation, unpublished, University of Chicago, 1971.

³⁷ In this sense bhakti sects provide what Robert Merton has called 'latent functions'. Beyond their manifest function of provoking the ecstatic experience, they allow for the expression of 'deviant' social behavior. See Merton's Social Theory and Social Structure, (New York, 1968), p. 115-121.

In Chapter 6 mention was made of the Indore Teaching Institute and the role it plays as a channel of communication between local village communities in Malwa and the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith's administrative order. Here it was noted that one of the primary functions of the Institute is to educate new believers by exposing them to Bahá'í social principles in action. This is also true of Bahá'í seasonal schools and regional conferences (see Chapter 11), and consequently in the operating procedures of all three of these institutions there are no distinctions made on the basis of caste lines; all participants are considered equal and are treated accordingly. For example, there are no facilities for separate dining;³⁸ Harijans eat at the same table with Brāhmans, and the food is prepared by several hands. Similarly, attending members share rooms on a mixed caste basis.³⁹

In addition to eating, sleeping, and working together, participants are shown at these sessions how Bahá'í social principles should be applied within the framework of the movement's socio-religious institutions. For example, during the nine-day 'deepening' session held in December of 1973⁴⁰ a special Unity Feast⁴¹ was celebrated at which institute teachers spoke of the brotherhood of all Bahá'ís and stressed the necessity of all Bahá'í

³⁸ At the sessions observed by the author the eating arrangements were as follows. Both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food was prepared by four women, three from Parsi background and one from Hindu ancestry (the wife of the caretaker - a 'clean' caste Mālī). At meal times the food was placed in bowls and distributed along one large table located on the veranda. All participants ate at this table regardless of their caste backgrounds.

³⁹ Often village participants share one large room, and thus Brāhmans and Rājputs are housed in the same area as Balāis and Chamārs.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 6

⁴¹ The Nineteen-Day Feast is a local institution and as such it can only be celebrated at the community level. However, on those occasions when a feast day takes place during a conference or teaching institute session a special Unity Feast is held, the main difference between the two being that the latter contains no business or administrative period (see Chapter 10), as only a local community can consult on such issues.

feasts and ceremonies reflecting the ideal of the oneness of mankind.

During the feast villagers from both 'clean' and 'unclean' caste backgrounds prayed, sang, and ate together.⁴² At the same session mock local spiritual assemblies were elected, and the Bahá'í method of consultation was explained and exemplified.⁴³

By providing such activities outside of the conventional village setting the Bahá'í Administrative Order has enabled many declarants to experience new modes of social behavior without endangering their positions in traditional society. Thus, one of the main means of introducing Bahá'í social ideals into the rural communities has been to educate a number of key believers in a non-conventional milieu and then instruct them to help their fellow declarants in the application of these ideals within the context of Bahá'í socio-religious institutions, such as feasts, holy day observances, and assembly meetings. In this way, the Bahá'í Faith is not put in the position of having to directly confront the rigidity of the traditional system.

In the villages themselves, moreover, Bahá'í social principles are exemplified only within a Bahá'í frame of reference. Bahá'í administrators and teachers have not interfered with the standardized patterns of status group interaction, but have tried to concentrate on establishing the movement as a distinct religious phenomenon.⁴⁴ In this sense, the Faith

⁴² As mentioned earlier (Chapter 8), a Bahá'í feast is divided into three parts. During the third portion believers are meant to mingle with one another and share experiences. It has been traditional at this time for the host to serve food to the guests.

⁴³ The emphasis being placed on the right of every believer to air his thoughts. For an elaboration on this concept see Chapter 10.

⁴⁴ This does not mean to say that the Bahá'í Administrative Order has consciously adopted a double standard. Rather, it is a reflection of the movement's attitude of not involving itself in tearing down antiquated institutions but in constructing new ones. See p. 257-258.

might be grouped in the same category as the aforementioned bhakti⁴⁵ sects whose activities have often transcended conventional norms. Consequently, while village teachers espouse Bahá'í social principles they seldom break the traditional rules of dharma in a conventional setting. For example, the travelling teacher in Rīchā told me that he often shares food with a fellow Bahá'í of Muslim background, but he only does so in situations which are beyond the pale of conventional social interaction.⁴⁶

In looking at the 'model village' communities then, it can be assumed that the only situations in which one can expect to find any type of change in the traditional patterns of status group interaction will be within the framework of Bahá'í institutions, and even then, change will only be partial, as the approach of the Bahá'í Administrative Order has not been to force immediate change but rather to create frames of reference within which alternative modes of behavior can be introduced and nurtured to fruition.

The application of Bahá'í social principles in the context of the 'model village' communities can be divided into two basic categories: the breakdown of interdictions regarding spacial isolation; and the enhancement of equal participation in group activities. Within the

⁴⁵ The term bhakti is being used here in a broad sense, referring to a category of religious behavior which is strongly devotional in nature and is often characterized by egalitarian ideals, and not to specific metaphysical doctrines or beliefs.

⁴⁶ In this regard he implied that were he to enter the latter's home and openly partake of food the village elders would be likely to become upset. Several other travelling teachers also indicated that similar situations existed in their villages, the main drawback to inter-caste dining being the reaction of conservative elements within the Hindu community.

framework of the movement's devotional, ceremonial, administrative, and educational institutions attempts are being made to reduce the traditional taboos surrounding these categories of behavior, and in the following paragraphs a few instances of their results will be cited.⁴⁷

As was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, traditional patterns of status group interaction have been characterized by the lack of 'clean', 'unclean', and 'untouchable', caste intercourse, and consequently at village communal gatherings the latter have had to abide by designated laws of spacial isolation. Using this spacial taboo as an index of caste exclusiveness, it would appear that in the 'model village' communities under examination restrictions regarding inter-caste contact are not as stringent as they are in more conventional spheres of village life. For example, in village Rīchā Balāi and Chamār declarants are not isolated from the remainder of the group during feasts. While they generally sit next to each other they are in no way marked off as being separate. In fact, they often sit in close proximity to 'high' caste Brāhmans and Rājputs.⁴⁸ But perhaps an even more significant event in this regard was a Chamār's entering a Rājput household to participate in a meeting of the communities Local Spiritual Assembly, for, as we have already seen, Mathur found in his village that 'untouchables' were not allowed to enter the houses of 'clean' castemen. On this occasion (see Chapter 10) the Chamār not only entered the house but took his place among other 'clean' caste members and participated without any sign of

⁴⁷ The author is not in a position to say whether this 'deviant' behavior is only a result of Bahā'í values being introduced into the village or a manifestation of numerous contributing variables. The important point, however, is that Bahā'í institutions provide a framework for such expressions.

⁴⁸ It is interesting to note, however, that the two Bhaṅgī members of the community rarely attend communal activities, an indication that the stigma surrounding this caste (sweepers and scavengers) is still present in Rīchā.

discrimination.⁴⁹

There are also signs in village Kāsod that spatial isolation in Bahá'í activities is less apparent than in conventional situations. Both Balāi and Chamār castemen attend community meetings and are permitted to sit on the headman's veranda (where such occasions usually take place), a situation which is in marked contrast to traditional devotional and ceremonial activity in Kāsod where each caste has its own shrines whose locations are far removed from 'clean' caste temples. Moreover, the resident Bahá'í teacher is a member of an 'unclean' caste (Balāi), and he actively participates with 'clean' caste Rājputs in both devotional and administrative functions.⁵⁰

Additional examples of the breakdown of traditional concepts of spatial isolation in the 'model village' communities include the following: in Manāsā a Chamār has been elected to the community's Local Spiritual Assembly (although the community is dominated by Rājputs) and sits with eight Rājputs during assembly meetings; in Garabellī, where the Bahá'í community is dominated by 'unclean' Balāis, there are several 'clean' castemen who also take active part in community activities; and in all three communities in which Bahá'í primary schools have been established (Karañkanī, Manāsā, and Kāsod) children from 'unclean' and 'untouchable' castes sit in the same line as 'clean' caste children and take their respective turns reciting prayers and reading lessons. Moreover, in both Rīchā and Kāsod teachers reported that during feasts, food was often shared by all participants including both 'unclean' and 'untouchable' caste

⁴⁹ This attitude can be contrasted with Adrian Mayer's finding in Ramkheri that during village administrative meetings (Village Committee) Tanners (Chamārs) could not sit with 'clean' castemen but had to stand near the veranda. (p. 57)

⁵⁰ This individual presents a good example of the categorization of behavior taking place in these communities. While he teaches 'clean' caste children and interacts with Rājputs at feasts and assembly meetings, he lives in a small hut on the edge of the village, uses Balāi wells, and does not dine with higher castemen.

members.⁵¹

Regarding equal participation between 'clean', 'unclean', and 'untouchable' declarants in community activities, advances are not as noticeable. By and large, those who are most active or most vocal in the five 'model villages' are members of 'clean' castes. There are, however, exceptions to this rule, the most obvious one being Garabelī, where all of the members of the local administrative body are members of the Balāi caste.⁵² However, in the other villages where 'unclean' and 'untouchable' declarants are in a minority, active participation by members of these status groups is limited to specific individuals, as on the whole, 'low' castemen are still hesitant to participate on an equal basis. Consequently, although in Kāsod there are eight male Chamār declarants and five male Balāi believers, only one of these individuals (the Bahá'í teacher) is outspoken enough to participate in community discussion without any degree of reservation. For example, during a community meeting at which the question arose of building a Bahá'í bhavan, he was the only 'unclean' casteman to enter the discussion. Otherwise, the main flow of conversation was dominated by Rājput and Brāhman declarants. The same situation exists in Rīchā where the one Chamār who has been elected to the village's Local Spiritual Assembly is the only 'low' casteman in the community who can be said to play anything but a passive role in Bahá'í activities. Moreover, Bahá'í activities in Karañkani are almost exclusively the domain of 'clean' caste declarants, all administrative positions being held by members from this stratum of society.

⁵¹ The author only witnessed one such sharing of food in the 'model village' communities and that was during the social portion of the Rīchā feast. On that occasion 'clean', 'unclean', and 'untouchable' declarants jointly partook of roasted nuts and grams provided by the Bahá'í teacher (Rājput). Most village teachers, however, claimed that such sharing of food during Bahá'í feasts was not uncommon in their communities.

⁵² There are many such 'low' caste Bahá'í communities in Malwa, several of which are 'model villages'.

In summary, it appears that in the five communities some change is beginning to occur in the patterns of status group interaction, but that it is limited to particular frames of reference and is primarily concerned with the breakdown of traditional concepts of spacial isolation. Consequently, while all of the declarants in the five communities have proclaimed their belief in the oneness of mankind, they do not marry outside of their own castes, nor do they break traditional rules of commensality in conventional social situations. Furthermore, although 'low' caste believers are allowed to participate in Bahá'í activities without the stigma of spacial isolation being applied to them, in most cases members of these status groups assume their traditional roles of being good listeners. Yet, the fact that Bahá'í functions in the 'model village' communities are free from the blatant acts of social descrimination that often characterize relationships between 'high' and 'low' caste members is seen by the Bahá'í Administrative Order to be a positive step forward, and if nurtured it may lead to more constant and significant changes in the field of human relations. However, in this regard Bahá'í administrators hold no grandiose ideals of revitalizing the conventional social system. The central aim of the Bahá'í Faith in introducing its values and institutions into Indian villages is not to reform society but to build from the base level a new world social order whose institutions will reflect the ideals and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. They see the old world order as moribund and being on the verge of collapse; the salvation of mankind depends on a new civilization. Shoghi Effendi summarized this view in the following words:

We are indeed living in an age which, if we would correctly appraise it, should be regarded as one which is witnessing a dual phenomenon. The first signalizes the death-pangs of an order, effete and godless, that has stubbornly refused, despite the signs and portents of a century-old Revelation, to attune its processes to the precepts and ideals which that Heaven-sent Faith proffered it. The second proclaims the birth-pangs of an Order, divine

and redemptive, that will inevitably supplant the former, and within Whose administrative structure an embryonic civilization, incomparable and world-embracing, is imperceptibly maturing. The one is being rolled up, and is crashing in oppression, blood-shed, and ruin. The other opens up vistas of a justice, a unity, a peace, a culture, such as no age has ever seen. The former has spent its force, demonstrated its falsity and barrenness, lost irretrievably its opportunity, and is hurrying to its doom. The latter, virile and unconquerable, is plucking asunder its chains, and is vindicating its title to be the one refuge within which a sore-tried 53 humanity, purged from its dross, can attain its destiny.

Consequently, the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India is not concerned with altering life patterns in the context of the conventional social order but in establishing frames of reference in which new social ideals can grow and develop. At the present time it is still in the process of building these institutions in Malwa, but in many of the 'model villages' they have already come to represent, at least in word if not always in deed, the ideal of human equality.

⁵³ Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day Is Come, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1967), p. 16

Chapter 10 Local Administration

Several times during the course of this study it has been mentioned that as an international movement the Bahá'í Faith is not only involved in converting people to its teachings; it is also attempting to introduce in various countries throughout the world socio-religious institutions whose modes of operation have been formulated and developed by its founders and their duly appointed successors. These institutions are part of an internationally linked superstructure whose present form is seen to be the embryonic state of a future world social order, referred to in Bahá'í literature as the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The prime goal of the movement is to construct this new order, and its teaching and consolidation activities both in rural Malwa and in numerous countries throughout the world are part of the building process. Shoghi Effendi referred to the goal when he wrote:

Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses, they press forward, undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá'u'lláh can mature and develop. It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive, to which the life of the world-wide Bahá'í Community is wholly consecrated, that constitutes the one hope of a stricken society.¹

In the process of establishing the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, the Bahá'í Faith has developed a system of administrative institutions whose primary functions are to both guide and direct the movement's teaching and consolidation programs and administer to the general needs of believers.

¹Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 195

As was shown in Chapter 5, the administrative institutions are organized on three levels: international, national, and local. As the first two have been discussed in Part II of the study, the present chapter will be primarily concerned with local administrative procedures.

The fundamental local administrative institution in the Bahá'í Faith is the Local Spiritual Assembly. Like other administrative institutions within the Faith, its establishment was ordained by Bahá'u'lláh:

The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather the counsellors to the number of Bahá [9]...It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly. Thus hath the Lord your God commanded you.²

Bahá'ís hold this formulation to be particularly significant. In fact, Shoghi Effendi emphasized that the power not only of the Local Spiritual Assembly, but of the entire administrative order was due to its divine formulation:

It should be noted in this connection that this Administrative Order is fundamentally different from anything that any Prophet has previously established, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh has Himself revealed its principles, established its institutions, appointed the person to interpret His Word and conferred the necessary authority on the body designed to supplement and apply His legislative ordinances.³

The duties of the Local Spiritual Assembly can be divided into two main categories. First, it is meant to act as a stimulating agent for the promotion and organization of teaching and consolidation activities

² Quoted in Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1968), p. 21

³ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 145

on the local level.⁴ Accordingly, the Local Spiritual Assembly should

...consecrate a certain part of its time, at each of its sessions, to the earnest and prayerful consideration of such ways and means to foster the campaign of teaching, or may furnish whatever resources are available for its progress, extension, and consolidation.⁵

Consequently, at this stage in the development of the Bahá'í Faith one of the primary responsibilities of the Local Spiritual Assembly is to see that within the city or hamlet in which it is operating, the doctrines of the movement are both spread to those who have not heard them, and strengthened in the minds of those who have accepted. Second, the body is meant to consult on affairs pertaining to the life of the local community.⁶ For example, if there is a dispute between two members of the community, the Local Spiritual Assembly acts as a court of arbitration, helping the parties to reconcile their differences.

As Shoghi Effendi pointed out, 'They must endeavour to promote amity 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.'⁷

⁴ 'Each local Assembly has a definite area of jurisdiction. In most cases the area is that of the civil boundaries of an incorporated village, town or city. An Assembly may also be formed by nine or more Bahá'ís who reside in the same township or county or unincorporated village.' (The Bahá'í Community. A Summary of Its Organization and Laws, rev. ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1963), p. 5)

⁵ Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice, rev. ed., (Wilmette, Illinois, 1963), p. 44-45

⁶ 'Not only with regard to publication, but all matters without any exception whatsoever, regarding the interests of the Cause in that locality, individually or collectively, should be referred exclusively to the Spiritual Assembly in that locality, which shall decide upon it, unless it be a matter of national interest, in which case it shall be referred to the national body.' (Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 23)

⁷ Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 39

Similarly, any decisions concerning financial matters, such as appropriation of funds within the community, are the responsibility of the Local Spiritual Assembly.

As representatives of the Bahá'í community, the members of the Local Spiritual Assembly are relegated such additional responsibilities as protecting the Faith from external attack and internal division, arranging community functions, and maintaining communication with the movement's higher administrative institutions.⁸

In keeping with the Bahá'í ideal of equality among the faithful, members of the Local Spiritual Assembly are elevated to their positions by means of a democratic election. Each year on the first day of Ridván (April 21) members of Bahá'í communities throughout the world assemble for the purpose of selecting their local leaders. Every Bahá'í over twenty-one years of age is eligible to vote, and as Shoghi Effendi emphasized, taking part in this event is a sacred obligation:

...and every declared believer of 21 years and above, far from standing aloof and assuming an indifferent or independent attitude, should regard it his sacred duty to take part conscientiously and diligently, in the election, the consolidation and the efficient working of his own local Assembly.⁹

On this occasion each member of the assembled group writes down the names of nine believers whom he feels would best serve the local community.

The mood of the election meeting should be one of prayer and meditation; there should be no electioneering or nominating of candidates, and prayers should be read before the ballots are cast.¹⁰ After the ballots are counted,¹¹ the nine individuals who receive the highest number of votes

⁸ Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 39-40

⁹ Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 39

¹⁰ The Bahá'í Community, p. 7

¹¹ Those members not attending the meeting have the right to send their sealed ballots by mail or messenger.

become the members of the Local Spiritual Assembly.¹² The believer who receives the most votes then calls the new members together, and assembly officers are selected. Each assembly should elect a chairman, a vice-chairman, a secretary, and a treasurer.¹³ When the body has selected its officers it should report the results to the National Spiritual Assembly.

In performing their duties members of the Local Spiritual Assembly have certain responsibilities to the body of believers. While they are not 'responsible' for their acts in the way this term is understood in contemporary parliamentary systems, they are pledged at all times to promote the best interest of the community. Thus, although assembly members are directed to base their decisions on nothing but the admonitions of their own conscience,¹⁴ they are nevertheless '...solemnly pledged to follow, under all conditions, the dictates of the "Most Great Justice" that can alone usher in the reign of the "Most Great Peace"...'¹⁵ Consequently, as was pointed out in Chapter 9, the function of local administrators is not to dictate, but consult, both among themselves and with members of the community at large.¹⁶

¹² In case of a tie for ninth position, a second ballot is cast to decide the issue. Only members present at the election meeting can participate in the second ballot.

¹³ Unlike the general election, officers of the Local Spiritual Assembly are selected by majority vote. Thus an individual would have to receive at least five votes before being elected chairman.

¹⁴ In this vein Shoghi Effendi wrote that members of the Local Spiritual Assembly are '... invested with an authority rendering them unanswerable for their acts and decisions to those who elect them...' (God Passes By, p. 331)

¹⁵ Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 331

¹⁶ 'Let us bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation...' (Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 63-64)

There are no prescribed times when assembly meetings should be held, although in large communities they are generally called at least once a week. A meeting can only take place when all members have been notified of its time and location, but five persons at any given session constitute a quorum, and a majority vote of those present is sufficient for conducting business.¹⁷ All meetings should be opened with a prayer, which is generally followed by the reading of the minutes of the previous meeting and by discussion of reports submitted by any of the body's duly appointed committees.¹⁸ After committee reports have been presented old and new business is discussed, and upon conclusion of consultation the meeting is closed with a prayer. All sessions should be conducted in an atmosphere of prayer, love, and harmony:

They must when coming together turn
their faces to the Kingdom on High and
ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They
must then proceed with the utmost devotion,
courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to
express their views.¹⁹

The various aspects of assembly interaction are guided by the principle of Bahá'í consultation, according to which, every member of the group has the right to express his or her views with absolute freedom.²⁰

¹⁷ By-Laws of a Local Spiritual Assembly, Article VIII, section 1

¹⁸ The Local Spiritual Assembly has the authority to appoint committees, composed of members of the community and chaired by one of its own members, whose functions are to organize and co-ordinate specific activities within the community. For example, in a local community there might be committees responsible for propagation activities, 'deepening' programs, and child education.

¹⁹ The Bahá'í Community, p. 10-11

²⁰ 'Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views.' (Shoghi Effendi, in Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 44)

When expressing their ideas, however, members are supposed to remember that their purpose is community service. In the words of Shoghi Effendi:

They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavour, by their openmindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the Friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection.²¹

After all opinions have been voiced and thoroughly and impassionately discussed, a vote is called. A majority vote constitutes a verdict, and once arrived at becomes the decision of the entire body. 'There is no minority opinion in Bahá'í Administration; the decision of the majority is the decision of all.'²² Moreover, the judgement must be accepted by every believer in the community; no one should criticize or act contrary to the decision, as this would cause disruption and antagonism within the community.²³

Part of the Local Spiritual Assembly's consultative responsibility is to consider recommendations presented to it by the community. The occasion for the formulation of community suggestions is the business portion of the Nineteen-Day Feast. During this time individual believers can make recommendations concerning any matter related to the Faith. However, 'Such recommendations must be adopted by majority vote of the community members present before constituting a resolution to be considered by the local Spiritual Assembly.'²⁴ This means that all

²¹ Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 44-45

²² The Bahá'í Community, p. 12

²³ 'Let us recall His explicit and often-repeated assurance that every Assembly elected in that rarefied atmosphere of selflessness and detachment is, in truth, appointed of God, that its verdict is truly inspired, that one and all should submit to its decision unreservedly and with cheerfulness.' (Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 65)

²⁴ The Bahá'í Community, p. 19

recommendations must be openly aired, there being no room within the administrative process for lobbying.²⁵

Like assembly meetings, community discussion is governed by the rules of Bahá'í consultation. Under the guidance of the Chairman of the Local Spiritual Assembly every member of the community is allowed, if so desired, to express an opinion. After consultation the members are polled. If a suggestion is adopted, the Local Spiritual Assembly must consider it at their next meeting and report their decision to the community at a future feast.²⁶

It is also at the Nineteen-Day Feast that the Local Spiritual Assembly performs its communicative functions. On the one hand, it serves as a channel through which individual believers can make suggestions to the National Spiritual Assembly; if a recommendation is passed by the community, the Local Spiritual Assembly may in its discretion forward it to the national body.²⁷ Conversely, the Local Spiritual Assembly provides a means by which the higher administrative institutions can communicate with individual believers. At each feast the group's secretary relays to the community any communications or directives^{*} sent by the National Spiritual

²⁵ Problems of an individual nature should be taken directly to the Local Spiritual Assembly, but any recommendations regarding the Faith in general must be discussed at the Nineteen-Day Feast.

²⁶ 'The secretary of the Assembly records each resolution adopted by the community, as well as the various suggestions advanced during the meeting, in order to report these to the Spiritual Assembly for its consideration. Whatever action the Assembly takes is to be reported at a later Nineteen-Day Feast.' (The Bahá'í Community, p. 19)

²⁷ The Bahá'í Community, p. 19

^{*} The National Spiritual Assembly sends monthly circulars to the local communities under its jurisdiction. In these bulletins messages received from the Universal House of Justice are recounted as well as news relating specifically to the activities of the national Bahá'í community. Such communication is generally read at the beginning of the business portion of the feast which follows the conclusion of the devotional period.

Assembly and its appointed committees. This contact is a vital link in the chain of communication that binds Bahá'í communities throughout the world. As a Bahá'í administrative manual states:

A matter of vital importance at this meeting is consideration of national and international Bahá'í affairs, to strengthen the capacity of the community to cooperate in promotion of the larger Bahá'í interests and to deepen the understanding of all believers concerning the relation of the local community to the Bahá'í World Community.²⁸

Another administrative process involving the participation of members of local communities is the selection of delegates to act as electors of the National Spiritual Assembly.²⁹ In every country where there exists a national administrative body, delegates, whose number and apportionment are determined by Bahá'í population patterns, are annually selected by means of democratic election to attend the National Convention. The method of electing delegates varies according to country. In countries where the Bahá'í population is small, delegates are often selected in local communities, each community being assigned a specific number of delegate seats according to its relative size. In countries like India where the Bahá'í population is comparatively large, delegate positions are allocated on the basis of population density, a specific geographical area receiving a fixed number of seats. Consequently, in such countries delegates are selected at annual district conventions, an institution which will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.

Once delegates are chosen they have the right to attend the National Convention in the capacity of electors of the National Spiritual Assembly.³⁰

²⁸ The Bahá'í Community, p. 18

²⁹ 'It is expressly recorded in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings that these National Assemblies must be indirectly elected by the Friends; that is, the Friends in every country must elect a certain number of delegates, who in turn will elect from among all the Friends in that country the members of the National Spiritual Assembly.' (Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 61)

³⁰ In India this convention is held in New Delhi during the last week of April.

If a duly elected delegate cannot attend the gathering in person, he is able to send his ballot by post or messenger, and it will be counted with the votes cast by attending delegates on election day. A delegate, however, is encouraged to attend the session. According to the Faith's Guardian:

It should, however, be made clear to every elected delegate - who should be continually reminded - that it is a sacred responsibility and admittedly preferable to attend if possible in person the sessions of the Convention, to take an active part in all its proceedings, and to acquaint his fellow-workers on his return with the accomplishments, the decisions, and the aspirations of the assembled representatives of the believers.³¹

The purpose of the National Convention is twofold. First, as already mentioned, it provides the opportunity for the election of the National Spiritual Assembly. As with other Bahá'í elections there is no electioneering or nominating of candidates. Rather, after the reading of prayers³², each elector writes down the names of nine persons. In so doing he is free to choose from among all the officially declared Bahá'ís within the national community. After tabulation the nine believers who receive the highest number of votes become the members of the National Spiritual Assembly for the year. In case of a tie for ninth position, a second ballot is cast by those delegates in attendance. The meeting's second function is to provide a forum where (as representatives of local believers) the delegates can consult with the new National Spiritual Assembly.³³ At this time the opinions and sentiments of the delegates can be expressed

³¹ Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 65

³² '...the elector...is called to vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold.' (Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 65)

³³ 'I feel, however, that in view of the expansion and the growing importance of the administrative sphere of the Cause, the general sentiments and tendencies prevailing among the Friends, and the signs of increasing interdependence among the National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world, the assembled accredited representatives of the believers should exercise not only the vital and responsible right of electing the National Assembly, but should also fulfil the functions of an enlightened consultative and co-operative body...' (Shoghi Effendi, in Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 61-62)

openly and straightforwardly to the national office-bearers who in turn '...should familiarize the delegates with the various matters that will have to be considered in the current year, and calmly and conscientiously study and weigh the opinions and judgements of the delegates.'³⁴ Hence, the National Convention allows for direct consultation between the local and national levels of Bahá'í administration and is therefore an important appendage to the administrative activities of a local community.

In order that the reader might better understand the factors influencing the implementation of Bahá'í administrative institutions in rural Malwa it would be helpful before citing specific examples to say a few words concerning the structure of contemporary village administrative institutions. For our purpose it will not be necessary to examine these institutions in detail. Rather, it will be sufficient to make note of their essential characteristics.

Within the contemporary village there are two types of leadership positions: the traditional institutions of the village headman and caste councils, and the relatively modern Village Committee (pancāyat).

The office of the village headman is a hereditary position. In the past it was the primary position of authority in the village.³⁵ Most large villages in Malwa have two headmen, while smaller communities are under the guidance of a single individual, generally a member of a 'clean' caste, and very often a Rājput. Before the introduction of the Village Committee headmen were solely responsible for dispensing civil justice. Since they were the government's official representatives, they were relegated the responsibilities of maintaining law and order and collecting tax revenue.

³⁴ Shoghi Effendi, in Principles of Bahá'í Administration, p. 62

³⁵ For a more detailed account of the role of a village headman in Malwa see Adrian Mayer, p. 93-113.

In addition, they also acted as spokesmen for their villages in legal disputes. For example, Adrian Mayer found that in the past Ramkheri headmen had defended the interests of the village in land disputes by enlisting the help of government officials.³⁶ Outside of their official duties, headmen also play leading roles in both secular and religious spheres of village life, often arbitrating inter-caste disputes or performing specific services at village festivals.

The other traditional position of authority in the contemporary village is the caste council. Each caste has its own leaders whose primary functions are to settle disputes within their respective status groups and dispense punishment to those members who violate rules and mores. The members of these councils are generally elders who have had their positions of authority bestowed upon them as a result of their age or the prestige they hold within their respective communities. Moreover, like the village headman, their authority within a given area of jurisdiction has in the past been unquestionable. Consequently, traditional positions of leadership have tended to be controlled by dominant individuals who have claimed authority on the basis of either heredity or personal prestige.

With the introduction in the 1940's of democratic ideals on the local level, a new institution of leadership arose within Malwa villages. This was the Village Committee, or gram pañcāyat. In reality the institution is more often an area committee than a village committee, for several villages may come under the jurisdiction of one pañcāyat. Unlike traditional positions of authority, membership on a pañcāyat is determined by democratic election, and therefore theoretically all members of the village have an equal say in selecting their representatives.³⁷ Furthermore

³⁶ Mayer, p. 95

³⁷ The election of pañcāyat members generally takes place at a village - inter-village - meeting where individuals express their preferences by a show of hands.

*In reality these are sub-caste councils.

a committee's decision is not absolute; appeals to higher administrative institutions can be made (district committees).

As one might imagine, the powers of the pañcāyat and those of the village patel have often come into conflict. Originally a committee lacked the power to collect taxes, but by the 1950's in many instances it had assumed this right. In 1955 Adrian Mayer found that 'The present policy seems to be to give it [Village Committee] all the powers formerly held by the headman.'³⁸ However, while the powers of pañcāyats have increased, in many of the smaller villages of the region, such as Rīchā, Manāsā, Karañkanī, and Kāsod, the headman still plays an important role in village leadership. In all four villages he was involved in the collection of taxes and the settling of disputes, and was generally regarded as the most influential individual in the community.

From our point of view, however, the relative powers of village administrative institutions are per se not important. Interest in them arises only in terms of the influence they have on both the introduction and subsequent functioning of Bahá'í administrative institutions. For example, the importance of the Village Committee with its democratic features of popular election and right of appeal lies in the similarities it shares with certain Bahá'í procedures. As a result of its existence, the introduction of Bahá'í administrative institutions has not been handicapped to any great degree by villagers' lack of understanding of democratic procedures; when Bahá'í teachers speak of elected assembly members, new declarants have a basis in reality with which they can identify, for although many of the principles in Bahá'í administration are different from those that characterize political processes in Malwa villages, the fundamental ideal of one man one vote is akin. Similarly, traditional institutions cast their influence on Bahá'í procedures. As will be shown in following pages, customary patterns

³⁸ Mayer, p. 115

of village leadership are still manifestly expressing themselves within the framework of Bahá'í administrative institutions.

Bahá'í leadership in India has placed much importance on the establishment and development of the Faith's administrative institutions in the village communities in Malwa, as they are the foundation on which the Bahá'í Administrative Order is trying to build the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. In this regard it is believed that local spiritual assemblies will eventually evolve into local houses of justice, the cornerstones of local administration in the new world social order. As Shoghi Effendi stated: 'That the Spiritual Assemblies of today will be replaced in time by the Houses of Justice, and are to all intents and purposes identical and not separate bodies, is abundantly confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself.'³⁹ Consequently, much of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee's limited manpower and resources is directed towards the establishment and maintenance of local administrative institutions. In carrying out this work they are following the advice of the Universal House of Justice which in a letter dated February 15, 1968, stated:

In all your training programmes, the Baha'i Administration should have special attention. The believers should know that our administration is part of our religion. For this reason, not only should you patiently and lovingly train the believers, but should also strive to attract to the Faith individuals who possess qualities and capacities that will add to the administrative strength of the Community as a whole.⁴⁰

Every year on April 21, the 2,356 communities in Malwa in which nine or more Bahá'ís reside must elect their local spiritual assemblies for the year, and it is the responsibility of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee

³⁹ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 6

⁴⁰ 'Letter written to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, February 15, 1968', Arise to Serve, p. 122

to help direct the procedure. Consequently, during the entire month of April, all of the Committee's travelling teachers take to the field for the purpose of contacting as many communities as possible and reminding them of their responsibility to hold elections on the prescribed day. Moreover, instructions regarding the election are sent to the villages. For example, in the Bahā'ī Darśan of March, 1974, directions concerning the proper method of forming a local spiritual assembly were outlined. The following paragraph was taken from that issue:

The members of the Local Spiritual Assembly are the nine Bahá'ís who in each community on election day receive the most votes. After the election it is their duty to gather together and hold a meeting. From among the nine chosen, the one who receives the most votes becomes the temporary chairman, and as soon as possible he must call the first assembly meeting. It is necessary to begin this meeting with a prayer and to ask God's help in promoting the progress of the Cause. After the prayer it is necessary for them to select the assembly officers for the year. Each assembly must have a chairman, secretary, vice-chairman, and treasurer. The work of the chairman is to direct the meetings and to help the assembly in arriving at their decisions. If the members only come together to talk and then disperse, their meeting will have no benefit.⁴¹

When travelling teachers contact the village declarants they once again explain the proper election procedures and emphasize the importance of approaching the event in a prayerful attitude. In addition, they request assembly members to inform the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee of the outcome of the election. In the 'model villages' elections are often supervised by travelling teachers or 'deepened' Bahá'ís. Following prayers, pieces of paper are distributed among the believers who are then asked to write the names of none fellow village Bahá'ís whom they feel would best serve the community. Those who cannot write are asked to relate their

⁴¹ Bahā'ī Darśan, March 29, 1974, p. 2

choices to the election supervisors who in turn enter the verbal vote on a piece of paper and place it among the other ballots. At the conclusion of the election, votes are tabulated and results announced. Officers are then elected and their names sent to the Regional Teaching Committee which in turn sends them to the national office in New Delhi.

The Regional Teaching Committee also directs and supervises the election of convention delegates. As mentioned earlier, delegate positions are apportioned on the basis of Bahá'í population. In India there are a total of 171 delegate positions, each delegate representing 2,350 believers. Every state within the Indian Union receives at least one delegate position regardless of the number of Bahá'ís residing in its territory, while the remaining positions are distributed according to Bahá'í population density. Malwa has been assigned fifty-three seats, an indication that close to one-third of the declared Bahá'ís in India reside in this region. The number of delegate positions in Malwa are listed below according to district.

Table 11⁴²

<u>District</u>	<u>Delegate Positions</u>
Ujjain	15
Shajapur	12
Mandsaur	6
Dewas	5
Ratlam	4
Bastar	3
Dhar	2
Sehore	2
Rajgarh	1
Indore	1
Jabalpur	1
Jhabua	<u>1</u>
	53

In Malwa the occasions for electing convention delegates are referred to as unit elections. To facilitate the selection process the National

⁴² The districts of Sehore, Bastar, Jabalpur, and Jhabua also come under jurisdiction of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee.

Spiritual Assembly has divided the region into eighteen sections, each of which has its own unit election. In some cases a unit indicates a Bahá'í population of 2,500 declarants, while in other instances it represents a population of 7,500 believers. In the former units one delegate is selected, and in the latter three are chosen. In mid-February a special election is held in a key village within each unit, the various Bahá'í communities in each unit having been informed prior to the gathering of its time and location. The entire process of electing convention delegates lasts eighteen days, one unit convention being held each day between February 11, and February 28.

So as to provide complete fairness in the selection of delegates, the elections are supervised by Bahá'ís who do not live within the unit in question. They are often members of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee or members of consolidation teams (see Chapter 6). In addition, in last year's election (1974) election sites were visited by the region's Auxiliary Board member.

At each unit election supervisors open the meeting with prayers and instruct the assembled declarants in the manner and method by which Bahá'í elections are to be implemented. These instructions include a review of the essential procedures found in all Bahá'í elections as well as specific directives concerning the election of unit delegates, which in the case of a unit representing 2,500 believers involves the writing down of a name of one person residing in the unit whom the voter feels would make a good delegate, and in the case of a unit representing 7,500 declarants means the selection of three such individuals. Pieces of paper are then distributed, and the election takes place. As in assembly elections, those who cannot write are directed to indicate their choices to an election supervisor. After all participants have cast their ballots the election supervisors tabulate the votes, and the individual(s) with the highest number of votes is (are) declared the unit delegate(s) for that year and is (are) eligible

to attend the National Convention as an elector(s) of the National Spiritual Assembly.⁴³ In those cases where a duly elected delegate cannot attend the meeting,⁴⁴ he is asked to submit his ballot⁴⁵ to an election supervisor (generally an auxiliary board member) who in turn forwards it to the national office where it will be counted along with the ballots of attending delegates on the day of the election meeting.

According to members of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, attendance at unit elections is generally low; one hundred and fifty declarants would be considered a sizeable number for such a gathering. For example, in the unit election held in village Mārod (Ratlam district) the elected delegate received 84 out of 133 votes cast. The lack of attendance is no doubt partly due to the fact that villagers must travel a fair distance to the election site, but it is also an indication that active involvement in Bahá'í institutions is still limited to a minority of declarants.

The Bahá'í Administrative Order in India is not only concerned that assembly members and delegates be properly elected but that local institutions begin to function as viable community entities. In this vein the Universal House of Justice told the Indian National Spiritual Assembly that 'The Spiritual Assembly should be regarded as the pivot of the activities for Bahá'ís in each village.'⁴⁶ In expressing this view the body was

⁴³ In the five 'model villages' three delegates were elected: one from Manāsā, and two from Rīchā.

⁴⁴ Many delegates cannot afford the travelling expenses, and although in many cases the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee has helped partially finance their trips, the lack of funds makes it impossible for all delegates to travel to New Delhi.

⁴⁵ He is asked to write the names of nine persons on a prepared election slip which is then sealed and forwarded to New Delhi.

⁴⁶ 'Message of September 13, 1966', Extracts from Communication of the Universal House of Justice, p. 8



Convention delegates

reiterating the feelings of Shoghi Effendi who had earlier remarked that 'Without the study and application of the administration the teaching of the Cause becomes not only meaningless, but loses in effectiveness and scope.'⁴⁷

In attempting to nurture local administrative institutions the Administrative Order relies heavily on its two channels of communication that provide new declarants with direct human contact, namely, teaching institutes and travelling teachers. As with other Bahá'í consolidation activities, an attempt has been made to educate a few key believers. This policy is reflected in the following message sent by the National Spiritual Assembly to its teaching committees in April of 1971.

Throughout the year your committee must concentrate on training at least the Secretary and Chairman or any two members of each Local Spiritual Assembly of your region, inviting them in teaching and deepening courses, asking the travelling teachers to conduct one or two day deepening lessons in the places where there are Local Spiritual Assemblies.⁴⁸

Of the two sources of contact, travelling teachers are the more effective. While teaching institutes present occasions when villagers can receive personal instruction concerning the fundamentals of Bahá'í administration, they are weakened by the fact that they do not operate in an environment similar to the one in which administrative institutions must function. Travelling teachers, on the other hand, can give instruction in the villages, and hence their lessons are more meaningful. Even with the use of such educational channels, however, the administrative institutions in many villages often lie dormant. This is mainly due to the previously mentioned lack of funds and trained manpower which prevents many villages from receiving personal contact. Until the Administrative Order can

⁴⁷ Quoted in Directives from the Guardian, p. 2

⁴⁸ Unpublished correspondence of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, 'Letter to teaching committees, April 23, 1971.'

increase its resources and manpower, in Malwa it is concentrating on trying to develop local administrative institutions in the 'model villages'. However, judging from observations and information supplied by village teachers it would seem that even in the 'model village' communities Bahá'í administrative institutions are still in the initial stages of development; that is, while they are functioning they do not always follow the prescribed procedures outlined earlier in this chapter. The attitude of the Administrative Order, however, is characterized by patience and forbearance. From Hands of the Cause to teaching committee members, Bahá'í administrators realize that change in the Indian village where the influence of tradition is still strong will of necessity be a slow process, and consequently they have refrained from demanding 'letter of the law' observance, preferring to allow for gradual maturation. In this regard they are following the advice of the Guardian who concerning the approach to be taken towards new believers said:

Let him refrain, at the outset, from insisting on such laws and observances as might impose too severe a strain on the new seeker's newly-awakened faith, and endeavor to nurse him, patiently, tactfully, and yet determinedly, into full maturity, and aid him to proclaim his unqualified acceptance of whatever has been ordained by Baha'u'llah...Let him not be content until he has infused into his spiritual child so deep a longing as to impel him to arise independently, in his turn, and devote his energies to the quickening of other souls, and the upholding of the laws and principles laid down by his newly-adopted Faith.⁴⁹

All five of the 'model villages' examined in this study have duly elected local spiritual assemblies functioning within their confines. For the Bahá'í year 1973-1974⁵⁰ the membership of each assembly according

⁴⁹ Shoghi Effendi, The Advent of Divine Justice, p. 43

⁵⁰ Assemblies serve from April 21, and thus their terms overlap the Gregorian calendar.

to caste background was as follows:

Table 12

<u>Village</u>	<u>Caste Background</u>	<u>Chairman</u>
Kāsod	Rājput (7) Brāhman (1) Balāi (1)	Rājput
Manāsā	Rājput (8) Chamar (1)	Rājput
Richa	Brāhman (4) Rājput (3) Balāi (1) Chamar (1)	Rājput
Karaṅkanī	Gūjar (4) Rājput (3) Brāhman (2)	Rājput
Garabelī	Balāi (9)	Balāi

As can be seen from the above figures, all of the local spiritual assemblies except for Garabelī, which is primarily a low caste community, are dominated by 'clean' caste members, and then mainly Rājputs. Moreover, in three of the communities the village headman is a member of the assembly (Kāsod, Manāsā, and Karaṅkanī), and in Garabelī several Balāi caste leaders have been elected. Consequently, the composition of the assemblies in these villages seems to reflect traditional leadership patterns.

According to village teachers, assembly meetings in the communities are not always held on a regular basis; they are called when there is a need to discuss a specific problem. Furthermore, the assemblies only consult on matters related to Bahá'í activities; they do not interfere with the jurisdiction of village administrative institutions. Here again one can see the effects of the Bahá'í policy of by-passing the 'old order'. Accordingly, Bahá'í administration is completely removed from political affairs. In fact, Shoghi Effendi forbid such incursion. He never ceased to remind the believers that the religion of Bahá'u'lláh demanded

allegiance to one's government:

And this principle is no other than that which involves the non-participation by the adherents of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, whether in their individual capacities or collectively as local or national Assemblies, in any form of activity that might be interpreted, either directly or indirectly, as an interference in the political affairs of any particular government.⁵¹

Consequently, the main issues discussed at village assembly meetings are those which are related to Bahá'í teaching and educational activities and the collection and use of Bahá'í funds. There have been occasions in the past (although not in these particular villages) when local assemblies have had to discuss individual breaches of faith. For example, I was told that in one village a specific declarant absconded with funds, and that the matter having been discussed by the assembly was forwarded to the National Spiritual Assembly for further consultation. Such instances, however, are rare, and therefore the primary function of local spiritual assemblies in the 'model villages' is to consult on matters concerning community teaching and education.

On the evening of March 12, 1974, the Local Spiritual Assembly of Karahkani met to discuss problems relating to the condition of the village's Bahá'í primary school. The meeting was held in the home of the resident Bahá'í school teacher who although not a member of the body is generally present at Bahá'í functions in the village as he is the main link between the community and the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee. In addition, being the headmaster of the school his presence at the meeting was considered important. Eight other persons were in attendance, one member being out of station. The meeting was opened with a prayer, after

⁵¹ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 64

Spiritual Assembly for building repairs, it would not ask for any further assistance at this time, but the school teacher agreed to see if he could obtain more books from the Regional Teaching Committee office in Ujjain. The meeting was then closed with a prayer.

It seems apparent from the preceding account that the session was not an example of an ideal assembly meeting. In the first place, a non-assembly member (the school teacher) was one of the most active participants in the consultation. Furthermore, no records were kept, nor was the proper method of voting adhered to. Of greater significance is the fact that the true spirit of Bahá'í consultation was not present; the discussion was controlled by three persons. While other members were present, they were not queried as to their own opinions, and although all of them were members of 'clean' castes, they seemed to bow to the authority of their superiors, a sign that traditional leadership roles are still influential in Bahá'í administrative institutions in Karankani.

Administrative meetings in village Rīchā are held in the home of the resident Bahá'í travelling teacher. On the evening of January 18, 1974, seven members of the Local Spiritual Assembly met to discuss the contents of a message sent to various village communities by the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee concerning the state of the Indian Bahá'í Fund.

In every country throughout the world where there exists a functioning national spiritual assembly, there also exists a national fund. These funds consist of money freely given to the Faith by local adherents (and in some cases, as with India, allocated funds from the international headquarters in Haifa)* which supports all teaching and consolidation work within a specific country. Contributions to Bahá'í funds are meant to be voluntary in nature, the only type of appeals for money permitted being

* An international fund derived from contributions of national communities throughout the world.



An assembly chairman

those directed to the community as a whole.⁵³ The Universal House of Justice, therefore, has supported the idea of general appeals to the body of believers. Accordingly, the Indian National Spiritual Assembly occasionally makes such requests. A letter addressed to its teaching committees reveals the Assembly's position.

We have to educate all the Bahá'ís old or new, who have accepted Bahá'u'lláh that they are full and equal members of the Bahá'í World Community and as such they are equally responsible to the progress of the Faith. The Universal House of Justice asks us that we should not hesitate, nor be diffident, in speaking of the Fund to the believers in mass teaching areas. They should know that giving to the Bahá'í Fund attracts blessings upon them.⁵⁴

A similar appeal was made during January of 1974, and hence the topic of the Indian Fund was discussed during the meeting of the Local Spiritual Assembly in Rīchā.

Like the meeting in Karānkanī the Rīchā consultative session was begun with a prayer read by the Chairman of the Assembly (Rājput) who is also a Bahá'í travelling teacher. He then proceeded to inform the assembled members that the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee wanted to remind believers in Malwa that the Indian Bahá'í Fund is the foundation upon which all Bahá'í activities in India are based; travelling teachers teaching institutes, conferences, and village schools are all supported by its resources. Therefore, each local spiritual assembly in the region was being asked to consult on the question of how to encourage greater participation among the believers in their respective communities. In the consultation that followed it was finally decided that the question

⁵³ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 9

⁵⁴ Unpublished correspondence of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, 'Letter to teaching committees, January 15, 1971'

should be presented to the believers during the next feast. However, to set an example for the rest of the community to follow, the Assembly would make a monthly contribution to the Indian Bahá'í Fund. Unlike the meeting in Karānkanī, consultation was not dominated by specific personalities. While the Bahá'í teacher guided the discussion, several members contributed ideas, including the Assembly's Chamār member. In fact, it was this 'untouchable' who suggested that the body make an initial contribution. Furthermore, there seemed to be a more democratic spirit surrounding the meeting; participants treated each other as equals, and there was no sign of individual superiority.

In seeking factors that might explain the differences between the Rīchā and Karānkanī meetings two conditions emerge as being particularly significant. First, the headman in Rīchā is not a Bahá'í, and therefore his influence is not felt as it is in Karānkanī where as pointed out earlier the Gujar headman is one of the most active declarants in the village. Second, the Bahá'í community in Rīchā is characterized by its large number of young declarants; 66 % of the community's believers are under the age of thirty (see Chapter 4). Consequently, there is no individual among them who represents a traditional figure of authority, whereas in Karānkanī the two elder members of the community both hold positions of authority in the traditional power structure. If there is anyone in Rīchā who might be considered the community leader it would be the Bahá'í travelling teacher, but his age (26) prevents him from assuming a traditional type of authoritative role. Therefore, it would seem that in villages like Rīchā where the Bahá'í community does not include within its ranks persons who represent traditional authoritative positions there is greater potential for the democratic aspects of Bahá'í administrative processes to reveal themselves.

Among the five 'model villages' cited in this study, however, Rīchā

appears to be an exception. In Garabellī administrative activities tend to be governed by Balāi caste leaders, one of whom was among the original Bahá'í converts in Malwa. Having the dual prestige of being a spokesman for the scheduled castes and a former Bahá'í travelling teacher, the latter is looked to by other members of the community for guidance and leadership. In Manāsā and Kāsod there exist similar situations to the one in Karañkanī; in both communities the village headman and other traditional village leaders are members of the Faith, and consequently they often control Bahá'í administrative institutions. For example, in Manāsā the headman has been a member of the village's Local Spiritual Assembly since its establishment in the early 1960's, and has travelled several times to New Delhi in the role of a convention delegate, while in Kāsod the Local Spiritual Assembly is dominated by influential Rājputs.

Similar conditions seem to prevail at feasts. With the exception of Rīchā, community consultation is governed by a few individuals, the majority of attendants including both high and low caste members being only passive participants. This situation was readily apparent during community consultation in Kāsod where as mentioned in Chapter 9 the question of building a Bahá'í bhavan was raised. In discussing the subject with a visiting Bahá'í travelling teacher, four members of the community predominated: two Rājputs, a Brāhman, and the Balāi school teacher. While other members of the community listened to the discussion they did not air their views.

While by no means comprehensive in scope, the above accounts nevertheless give an indication of the state of Bahá'í administrative institutions in the five 'model villages'. In general it would appear that their modus operandi is not always consistent with Bahá'í administrative norms: meetings are not held on a regular basis; records

of those meetings which are held are not usually kept; and proper methods of voting are not generally adhered to. More importantly, in most of the communities the spirit of Bahá'í consultation, namely, free and equal participation by all members of the assembly or community is lacking. The examples of the Karankani and Kasod meetings reflect this phenomenon. However, it should once again be stressed that at this stage in the development of Bahá'í administrative institutions in Malwa the fact that elected members of a village assembly will come together to make decisions concerning their communities is seen by the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India to be in itself a type of breakthrough. Given the traditional influences of hierarchical leadership and the Bahá'í policy of training specific believers to act as community leaders and educators, the problem of dominant individuals seems to be accepted as an inevitable stage through which the communities will have to pass. Yet, with the continual breakdown of traditional village leadership roles (as a result of the introduction of modern secular ideals and institutions such as the Village Committee and universal suffrage) the future holds many possibilities for the development of Bahá'í administrative institutions in Malwa, and therefore the Bahá'í Administrative Order is primarily concerned that for the present their presence in the villages be known, even in a limited form, because a time may come when they will be in a position to develop into more significant sources of village leadership.

Chapter 11 Education and Propagation

In Bahá'í literature great emphasis is placed on the cultivation of community education. At the same time, much importance is attached to the sponsoring of local propagation campaigns. In fact, education and propagation are two of the pillars of Bahá'í community life: one is directed towards strengthening the community internally, while the other aims at adding members to its ranks. This chapter will take a brief look at Bahá'í teachings regarding education and propagation, both in their theoretical forms, and as they are being implemented in rural Malwa.

In The Tablet of Ishráqát Bahá'u'lláh states:

It is enjoined upon every father to provide for the instruction of his sons and daughters in the art of learning and writing and in that which hath been prescribed in My Epistles. He that neglecteth that whereunto he is bidden, if he be wealthy, the Trustees are to take from him that which is required for their education, and if he be poor, the matter shall devolve upon the House of Justice...¹

As the preceding passage reveals, education in the Bahá'í Faith means universal education; all believers are given the responsibility of educating their sons and daughters so that ignorance might be eliminated and knowledge become the guiding light of civilization. In this vein, 'Abdu'l-Bahá penned the following:

The primary, the most (sic) urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. The principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance. Today the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time.²

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, The Tablet of Ishráqát, in The Bahá'í Revelation, p. 159

² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, trans. by Marzieh Gail, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1957), p. 109

In fact, so much importance is placed on the education of children in the Bahá'í Faith that it is considered an obligatory command which if not obeyed leaves the individual concerned answerable to God. For example, it is written that 'Should they neglect this matter, they shall, be held responsible and worthy of reproach in the presence of the stern Lord.'³ Another passage repeats the warning: 'Beware! Beware! that ye fail not in this matter. Endeavor with heart, with life, to train your children, especially the daughters. No excuse is acceptable in this matter.'⁴

Education, however, does not only mean the training of children. It also implies the development of the mental powers of all members of the community. Moreover, it not only involves the learning of matters related to the temporal world, but also infers the understanding of 'divine' realities. Consequently, while knowledge of the sciences and arts is praised, it is not held to be the only domain of education. Rather, the teachings of science and religion are seen to be complementary spheres of knowledge, and a proper investigation of both is necessary for a complete understanding of reality. Hence, 'We may think of science as one wing and religion as the other; a bird needs two wings for flight, one alone would be useless.'⁵ However, true arts and sciences are not those topics which begin and end in words; they are the spheres of knowledge which are conducive to the well-being and tranquility of mankind.⁶ Thus, while Bahá'ís are encouraged to acquire knowledge of the arts and sciences, they are also commanded to seek out the 'divine' realities as expressed in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

³ Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol. III, p. 579

⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 399

⁵ Paris Talks, p. 130

⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 19

Is it not astonishing that although man has been created for the knowledge and love of God, for the virtues of the human world, for spirituality, heavenly illumination and life eternal, nevertheless he continues ignorant and negligent of all this? Consider how he seeks knowledge of everything except knowledge of God...How much he is attracted to the mysteries of matter and how completely unaware he is of the mysteries of divinity!⁷

One of the vital responsibilities of the Local Spiritual Assembly, therefore, is the promotion of community educational activities. Regarding this responsibility Shoghi Effendi wrote:

They [local spiritual assemblies] 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, Bahá'í educational institutions, organize and supervise their work and provide the best means for their progress and development.⁸

The primary purpose of Bahá'í educational activities, however, is not just to provide believers with a theoretical knowledge of the Faith's teachings but to teach them how to translate this knowledge into the realm of action. In essence Bahá'í education means learning the meaning of Bahá'í writings in ways that will provide a basis for believers to act in accordance to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Consequently, Bahá'í education is largely moral education. Its aim is to teach the believer to know himself as part of the divine chain of creation and to show him that the development of society is closely linked with his personal conduct. As the Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas record:

⁷ Foundations of World Unity. Talks by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1968), p. 64

⁸ Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 38

For this day the most necessary duty is to purify your morals, to correct your manners, and to improve your deeds. The beloved of the Merciful must appear with such morals and habits among the creatures that the fragrant odor of the garden of sanctity may perfume all the horizons and may quicken all the dead souls, because the Manifestation of Divinity and the dawning of the infinite lights of the Invisible is intended for the education of souls and the refinement of the morals of all in existence...⁹

In India, where most of the rural local spiritual assemblies are not well developed, the Bahá'í Administrative Order has promoted community education by establishing educational institutions on both the regional and local levels. Mention has already been made of the most prominent regional educational institution in Malwa, the Indore Teaching Institute. In addition to the Institute there are two other educational institutions functioning on the regional level: regional conferences, and seasonal schools. Moreover, on the local level ten village primary schools have been established.

Regional conferences are similar to teaching institutes in that they provide occasions when declarants from throughout the region (and country) can meet with each other for the purpose of learning about the various aspects of Bahá'í life. The main difference between the two is that teaching institutes are held in one location and run on a more regular basis, whereas conferences are held throughout the region and are generally called for a specific purpose or event. In addition, although they often contain 'educational' programs within their formats, conferences tend to be more oriented towards the creation of group unity and the development of enthusiasm as regards teaching campaigns than they are with direct study of the writings.

After the great explosion of declarations that followed the Saṅgimandā experiment (see Chapter 3), the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India

⁹ Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol. II, p. 373

sponsored a series of conferences in Malwa for the purpose of promoting unity among the new declarants. In August of 1961 a large conference was held in Dhar. This was followed by similar conferences in Ujjain and Indore. When Rúhíyyih Khánum visited Malwa in 1964 special conferences were held in Shajapur and Indore, and a rash of such conferences were convened in 1968, one of which was a special 'deepening' conference held in Ujjain for the education of tribal declarants.¹⁰ Furthermore, over four hundred declarants from Malwa attended the International Bahá'í Conference held in New Delhi in 1967. Recent years have seen periodic conferences both in Ujjain and Indore, and, furthermore, another large conference is being planned for Malwa in 1975 to help promote the Universal House of Justice's new Five-Year Plan.

The educational portions of these conferences usually involve talks presented by special guest speakers (often prominent members of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, such as Hands of the Cause or visiting international personalities). Thus the primary function of regional conferences is not to provide intense study but to engender spirit and feelings of group unity.

A more purely educational institution is the Bahá'í seasonal school. Originally termed summer-schools - because they were developed by early converts in America during periods of summer vacation - these educational gatherings of believers have over the years expanded beyond the boundaries of a particular season so that today most Bahá'í communities around the world hold not only regional summer-schools but regional winter and spring-schools. Shoghi Effendi anticipated such a development when he relayed that although summer-schools were originally convened in the summer months '...there is no reason why they should be called "Summer Schools".'¹¹

¹⁰ There have been a good number of declarations among tribal peoples in Malwa, especially among the Bhils.

¹¹ 'Letter to an individual believer, December 26, 1941', Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand, p. 42

Summer, winter, and spring schools are held throughout India for the purpose of 'deepening' declarants in the knowledge of the Bahá'í writings. Although there is no rigid format to which instructors must adhere, the following was advised by Shoghi Effendi:

Shoghi Effendi feels that the real purpose of these Summer Schools is to deepen the knowledge of the friends. Lectures are very essential for they give a wonderful picture of the subject matter, but it is not sufficient to have a picture; the friends should deepen their knowledge and this can be achieved if, together with lectures, there are study classes and seminar work carried on by the same lecturer.¹²

Consequently, one of the central aims of seasonal schools is to provide an environment in which believers can both hear and learn the revealed verses of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.¹³

Since the advent of mass teaching in Malwa special seasonal schools have been periodically held in both Ujjain and Indore. The sessions last from several days to a week, during which time participants eat, sleep, and work within the confines of Bahá'í educational centers.¹⁴ Their formats have usually followed the general pattern quoted above, with special emphasis being placed on administrative topics.¹⁵ Furthermore, much of the work in these schools has been oriented towards oral education, as the problems of illiteracy often diminish the value of direct scriptural study.

The Bahá'í Administrative Order has not only developed educational

¹² Bahá'í News (United States and Canada), # 63, June, 1932, (West Englewood, New Jersey), p. 3

¹³ 'The friends should read the Writings and be able to quote from the Tablets when discussing subjects pertaining to the Faith.' (Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Bahá'í News (United States and Canada), #67, October, 1932, (West Englewood, New Jersey), p. 4)

¹⁴ In Indore the Teaching Institute grounds are used, and in Ujjain the Bahá'í center located just outside of the city is utilized.

¹⁵ 'The teaching of the Administration is therefore, an indispensable feature of every Bahá'í Summer School...' (Shoghi Effendi, quoted in Directives from the Guardian, p. 66)

institutions on the regional level in Malwa, it has also sponsored the establishment of village primary schools. In Malwa ten such schools are currently functioning,¹⁶ and several have been officially recognized by the Madhya Pradesh District Education Officer as meeting the government's requirements for primary schools.¹⁷ Five of the schools are located in Shajapur district; two are situated in both Mandsaur and Ratlam districts; and one is located in Ujjain district. Each school has a resident Bahá'í teacher who is supported by the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee.

The curriculum in the village schools consists of Hindi, mathematics, and geography-history. In addition, one period each day is devoted to Bahá'í education, which generally involves memorizing prayers and learning about the lives of the central figures of the Faith.

Three of the five 'model village' communities examined in this study have functioning Bahá'í primary schools within their boundaries. The Manāsā school was built in 1968, the same year that villagers in Karañkānī constructed their school. In Kāsod there is no school house (although members of the community have recently been considering the possibility of building a Bahá'í bhavan - see Chapter 9 -), and consequently classes are held in the open. In both Rīchā and Garabelī government schools have been erected, and consequently there is no real need for Bahá'í schools.

The Manāsā primary school has twenty-one students, all of whom are boys ranging in age from four to ten years. Three of the pupils come from status groups which have traditionally been classified as 'unclean' and

¹⁶ There were at one time close to twenty primary schools functioning in Malwa villages, but lack of funds and trained teachers has resulted in some of them having to be temporarily discontinued.

¹⁷ Bahá'í News (India) of September - October, 1973 noted that several additional schools had also applied for recognition (p. 10).

'untouchable', two being members of the Balāi caste and one coming from a Chamār family. The remainder of the children are members of the Rājput caste.

The resident teacher is a Rājput who has been in the service of the Bahá'í Faith for five years. He conducts daily classes in all of the above listed subjects, and his school is one of those recognized by the Madhya Pradesh Educational officer as meeting required government standards.

In addition to the standard subjects the teacher maintained that some time each day is relegated for the teaching of Bahá'í prayers, which is accomplished by means of oral repetition. In this process the teacher recites a line of verse which is then repeated by the child until he has mastered the prayer. As a result of this training, fifteen of the pupils know complete prayers by heart, and many of them can stand and recite verses without any difficulty.¹⁸ The instructor also stated that besides the daily session of verse repetition, lessons relating to the central figures of the Faith are periodically presented.

The village school in Karañkani has not as yet been recognized by the Madhya Pradesh government. As in Manāsā, the resident teacher is in the employment of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, as is his wife who also teaches in the school. In addition to his responsibility in Karañkani the teacher periodically journeys to a nearby village to help direct the activities of a second Bahá'í village school.¹⁹

The subjects taught in the Karañkani Bahá'í school are the same as those taught in Manāsā, and like its sister class emphasis is placed on teaching children prayers by means of oral repetition. Consequently, most all of the twenty children who attend the school know at least one

¹⁸ The author witnessed several children recite prayers.

¹⁹ His wife's presence in the school has allowed him to perform this dual function.

Bahá'í prayer.

The same situation exists in Kāsod where apart from the standard curriculum the twenty-three students learn Bahá'í prayers and listen to stories about the leading figures in Bahá'í history. Significantly, the village teacher in Kāsod comes from an 'unclean' caste. Although a Balāi he teaches children from both 'clean' and 'unclean' caste backgrounds, many of his students being the sons of Rājputs. It should be noted, moreover, that he is not an isolated example of this phenomenon, for among the ten village school teachers in Malwa two are Chamārs and two (including the Kāsod teacher) share Balāi ancestry.

In establishing village schools the Bahá'í Administrative Order hopes to accomplish two things: first, to help raise the literacy rate in rural Bahá'í communities by providing declarants' children with a primary education and the possibility for further advancement; and second, and perhaps more realistically, to make village children aware of the basic ideals and modes of behavior associated with the Bahá'í Faith, with the hope that as they mature they will be able to assimilate these ideals into their daily life patterns. As was mentioned earlier, one of the main problems associated with the consolidation plans of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa has been that many of the concepts and modes of behavior found in its teachings are culturally alien to rural Hindus. By educating village children from an early age Bahá'í administrators in India hope to break down to some extent this type of cultural alienation, and in so doing, allow for the next generation of rural Bahá'ís to become more 'deepened' in the ways of the Faith. In fact, members of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee place much of their faith in future community development in village primary schools, and consequently during the the Five-Year Plan there is hope that additional schools can be established in Malwa. In this regard, travelling teachers reported that many village communities are anxious to have similar



A Bahá'í village school and class

institutions established in their villages, but at the present time the Bahá'í community in India faces the financial problem of trying to maintain widespread teaching and consolidation activities on a very limited budget. If this problem can be alleviated, however, it is likely that the 1970's will see further educational activity at the village level.

The leaders of the Bahá'í Faith from Bahá'u'lláh to the Universal House of Justice have not only placed great emphasis on the importance of developing community education, they have also stressed the necessity of individual believers becoming actively involved in propagation efforts. In this sense the Bahá'í Faith is a proselytizing religion, for it seeks to find new converts by means of 'missionary' activity.

The writings of the Bahá'í Faith contain numerous references to propagation and proclamation. For example, in Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh the following is recorded:

Center your energies in the propagation of the Faith of God. Whoso is worthy of so high a calling, let him arise and promote it. Whoso is unable, it is his duty to appoint him who will, in his stead, proclaim this Revelation, whose power hath caused the foundations of the mightiest structures to quake, every mountain to be crushed into dust, and every soul to be dumbfounded.¹⁸

And again,

The Pen of the Most High hath decreed and imposed upon every one the obligation to teach this Cause... God will, no doubt, inspire whosoever detacheth himself from all else but Him, and will cause the pure waters of wisdom and utterance to gush out and flow copiously from his heart.¹⁹

¹⁸ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 196-197

¹⁹ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 314

'Abdu'l-Bahá, whose entire life was dedicated to teaching the doctrines of his father, and to whom the Bahá'ís of the world turn as their perfect exemplar, penned the following words in his Tablets of the Divine Plan:

In brief, I hope you will display in this respect the greatest effort and magnanimity. It is assured that you will become assisted and confirmed. A person declaring the glad tidings of the appearance of the realities and significances of the Kingdom is like unto a farmer who scatters pure seeds in the rich soil. The spring cloud will pour upon them the rain of bounty, and unquestionably the station of the farmer will be raised in the estimation of the lord of the village, and many harvests will be gathered.²⁰

He supplemented this statement in a letter to an individual believer when he wrote:

It seems that thou wast uncertain whether to occupy thyself in writing or delivering the tidings of the Cause of God. In these days, to deliver the glad-tidings is the best of all. Open then thy tongue to the guidance of the human race on any occasion that presents itself.²¹

As recorded in Chapter 1, it was Shoghi Effendi who personally organized and directed Bahá'í propagation plans between the years 1921 and 1957, launching several international campaigns, the most notable of which was the Ten-Year Crusade. Time and again in his writings the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith admonished the believers to arise and teach the religion of Bahá'u'lláh. For example, in 1930 he wrote:

Indeed to bring this message to mankind in its darkest hour of need is the paramount duty of every believer. All the agony, the suffering, privation and spiritual blindness afflicting people today everywhere in the world, to a greater or lesser degree, is because they are unaware of, or indifferent to, the Remedy God has sent them. Only those who are aware of it can carry its healing knowledge to others, so that each Bahá'í has an inescapable and sacred duty to perform.²²

²⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of the Divine Plan, (Wilmette, Illinois, 1971), p. 34-35

²¹ Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol. II, p. 321

²² Quoted in Directives from the Guardian, p. 74

In a like manner, upon its election in 1963 the Universal House of Justice reiterated that 'The high intensity of teaching activity reached at the end of the World Crusade, far from slackening, must now be increased as the friends everywhere draw on the vast spiritual powers released as a result of the celebration of the Most Great Jubilee and the emergence of the Universal House of Justice.'²³

While the pleas of Bahá'í leaders have been consistent, it has only been in the last fifteen years that the Bahá'í Faith has entered into the arena of mass teaching, and, as we have seen in previous chapters, India was in the forefront of such activity. Although slow in starting, the active campaign of village teaching that characterized the 1960's changed the entire structure of the Indian Bahá'í community. India suddenly became a mass teaching community whose resources were channeled into programs and campaigns designed to propagate the teachings of the Faith among the subcontinent's vast rural population.

In Malwa, teaching activities are supervised by the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee. In directing local campaigns the Committee has made an effort to utilize village manpower whenever possible, and as a result it has organized a corps of travelling village teachers. In Chapter 6 it was noted that one of the functions of travelling teachers in Malwa is to act as channels of communication between the village communities and Bahá'í administrative institutions, more particularly the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee. Their second responsibility is to propagate the Faith in the rural areas. Concerning this vital function the Universal House of Justice in a letter to all mass teaching national spiritual assemblies stated the following:

²³ 'Message to national conventions, May 7, 1963', Wellspring of Guidance, p. 6

From among the believers native to each country, competent travelling teachers must be selected and teaching projects worked out. In the words of our beloved Guardian, commenting upon the teaching work in Latin America: "Strong and sustained support should be given to the vitally needed and meritorious activities started by the native...travelling teachers,...who, as the mighty task progresses, must increasingly bear the brunt of responsibility for the propagation of the Faith in their homelands!"²⁴

In another letter written specifically to the Indian National Spiritual Assembly the Universal House of Justice elaborated on the implementation of this institution:

...the progress and growth of the Cause in India depend on the services of your own people, and to this end, a concerted effort should be made to integrate the friends in India into the work of the Cause in all its aspects, to assure universal participation that will result in winning even greater victories for the Cause. In this connection, your idea of engaging a number of well trained travelling teachers in India is, in principle correct. You have various Teaching Institutes and a number of devoted, well-informed teachers at your disposal for this service.²⁵

Over the years the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India has trained numerous travelling teachers to carry forth the message of Bahá'u'lláh to the village communities of Malwa. These individuals have come from local towns and villages, and they have been responsible for bringing many of the new declarants into the Bahá'í Faith.²⁶ At the present time there are thirteen such teachers actively working in the region. All of them have been specially selected by the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee, and they have all participated in specific training courses. Among the

²⁴ 'Letter to all national spiritual assemblies engaged in mass teaching, February 2, 1966', Arise to Serve, p. 111

²⁵ 'Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, February 15, 1968', Arise to Serve, p. 121

²⁶ For example, three of the five 'model village' communities cited in this study, Richā, Karañkāñī, and Kāsod, were initially contacted by local travelling teachers.

communities observed in this study only Rīchā harbors a travelling teacher, but Garabelī contains an ex-teacher who was very active during the initial years of mass teaching in Malwa, and the other three all have resident primary school teachers.²⁷

Travelling teachers are supported by funds supplied by the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee. Each month they receive a given allowance to help maintain themselves in the field, but they are not considered permanent employees of the Bahá'í Faith, as Shoghi Effendi considered such an act tantamount to having a paid clergy, an institution forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh. The Guardian expressed this feeling when he wrote:

Likewise travelling teachers should be assisted financially to carry out "projects" assigned to them. The friends should not for a moment confuse this type of support with the creation of a paid clergy. Any Baha'i can, at the discretion of the N. S. A. (National Spiritual Assembly) receive this necessary assistance and it is clearly understood it is temporary and only to carry out a specific plan.²⁸

The Universal House of Justice supported the Guardian's view when in a letter addressed to all national spiritual assemblies engaged in mass teaching they stated:

There is a danger in this situation which must be avoided at all costs. Despite the pressing requirements of the Nine Year Plan, no Baha'i teacher anywhere should consider himself as permanently employed by the Faith. We do not have in the Cause of God any paid career open to Bahá'í teachers.²⁹

As their name implies, travelling teachers traverse the rural areas of Malwa proclaiming the message of the Bahá'í Faith in towns and villages.

²⁷ Primary school teachers often engage in proclamation activities, but their essential task is the maintenance of village schools.

²⁸ 'Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Great Britain, May 29, 1946', Arise to Serve, p. 108-109

²⁹ 'Letter to all national spiritual assemblies engaged in mass teaching, June 25, 1964', Arise to Serve, p. 108

They often travel on foot, as in many areas it is the only suitable mode of transportation. The general policy of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee has been to instruct teachers to engage in one hour of prayer before starting on their journey. In addition, although there is no official method of teaching the Faith, they are encouraged to follow certain procedures which have proved to be helpful in village teaching.

First, and perhaps most importantly, travelling teachers are reminded that the most essential element in introducing the Faith to new listeners is not the knowledge the teacher possesses but his spirit and love for Bahá'u'lláh. They are instructed to make themselves instruments through which Bahá'u'lláh can work. For example, in one training session teachers were told about an illiterate village teacher who upon entering a rural community only said the name Bahá'u'lláh, but he said it with such sincerity that several members of the village declared. Thus, above all, teachers are advised to be sincere and loving and not to force the message upon unwilling listeners.

One technique employed by most travelling teachers in Malwa is to initially seek out the village headman. This procedure is followed for several reasons. In the first place, as this individual maintains a position of traditional authority in the village it is considered a mark of respect to ask his permission before initiating any teaching activity. Second, since he often holds great influence in the community his declaration is likely to result in other members of the village taking interest. Finally, since the headman generally comes from a 'clean' caste, by approaching him Bahá'í teachers are not marking themselves as missionaries who are aiming at converting 'low' caste Hindus.³⁰

³⁰ As stated in Chapter 3 this procedure was adopted in Malwa during the mid-1960's when it was learned that many 'clean' caste Hindus considered the Bahá'í Faith to be a religion for 'untouchables'.

Furthermore, because of the historical antagonism between Hinduism and Islām, travelling teachers are advised not to identify the Bahá'í Faith with the latter. For example, they are advised not to use the phrase 'Allāh'u'Abhá' (see Chapter 6) in front of new contacts, as the Arabic is too easily identified with Islām. In fact, a number of village teachers initially refer to Bahá'u'lláh as Bhagavān Bahā.³¹ In the same vein, travelling teachers often greet their listeners with the traditional greeting 'Jay Jay Rāma'. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 7, Bahá'u'lláh is spoken of in terms of the avatāra tradition, and in many instances passages from the Rāmāyana and Bhagavad Gītā are used to exemplify the ideals of the Bahá'í Faith.³²

Propagation campaigns in Malwa are often stimulated by teaching conferences. On these occasions Bahá'í teachers from throughout the region gather for two or three day sessions during which time they prepare themselves both mentally and spiritually for the tasks they are called on to accomplish. As was noted earlier in this chapter, conferences are often visited by important Bahá'í personalities who address the assembled group concerning the import of mass teaching. For example, Hand of the Cause Rúhíyyih Khánum spoke at numerous teaching conferences during her 1964 trip to the subcontinent. At one conference held in Indore she told the Bahá'í teachers that:

...a Bahá'í teacher should be so dedicated to the Cause that no obstacles could dishearten him, his heart must be overflowing with love for all humanity and he must be absolutely assured of Bahá'u'lláh's guidance and protection.³³

³¹ Removing the cultural connotations, the two have basically the same meaning.

³² For example, one teacher declared that he often identified Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation: 'My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting.' with Rāma's claim: 'I accept the man with the pure heart; I don't accept the man with the impure heart.'

³³ Nakhjavani, p. 55

During the last few years teaching activity in Malwa has not been as intense as it was in the early and mid-1960's. This is primarily due to the fact that much of the movement's energy in recent years has been directed towards consolidation programs. However, the Universal House of Justice's new Five-Year Plan calls for an increase in the number of local spiritual assemblies in India from the current number of 4,369 to 7,000 by the year 1979. Consequently, one can assume that teaching activity will once again be accelerated. In directing the new campaign Bahá'í administrative institutions in India will be guided by the closing words of the new Plan:

As the old order gives way to the new, the changes which must take place in human affairs are such to stagger the imagination. This is the opportunity for the hosts of the Lord. Undismayed and undeterred by the wreckage of "long-cherished ideals and time-honoured institutions", now being "swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines", the world community of Bahá'ís must surge forward eagerly, and with ever-increasing energy, to build those new, God-given institutions from which will be diffused the light of the holy principles and teachings sent down by God in this day for the salvation of all mankind.³⁴

³⁴ Five-Year Plan for the Bahá'ís of India, page numbers not listed.

Chapter 12 Conclusion

It is now time to draw together the various pieces of information presented in the body of this study and attempt to make some comprehensive statements about the role of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa. In the process two fundamental questions must be answered: first, what are the movement's primary teaching objectives and consequential methods of approach; and second, what functions do its institutions perform in the contemporary village social system? The first theme will involve looking at several additional questions regarding the Faith's evolution from a Persian sectarian movement into a universal religion and the resulting effects this development has had on its relationship with Hinduism, while the second will include both an examination of the reasons why Malwa villagers are declaring their belief in Bahá'í doctrines and an analysis of the present state of Bahá'í institutions in the five 'model village' communities. Regarding the second theme, the author is not in a position to make finalized conclusions. As has been mentioned several times throughout the study, the amount of first hand observational data he was able to gather in the village communities was limited by the official restrictions placed upon him, and consequently, although some examples of Bahá'í activities in the 'model villages' were personally observed, additional information had to be obtained from Bahá'í administrators and village teachers. Yet, while for the present finalized conclusions can not be drawn, the author's knowledge of the movement's doctrines and teaching methods when combined with both the data received from informants and his own personal observations allows him, he believes, to make educated speculations as to the current condition of Bahá'í institutions in these communities, and consequently, although the primary purpose of the present study has been to examine the

doctrinal and institutional components of the Bahá'í Faith in the light of how they are being taught in a specific cultural environment - the 'model village' data being primarily supplementary information designed to give the work's abstractions some basis in reality - some remarks regarding their actualization in the rural communities will be attempted.

In one sense the Bahá'í Faith can be interpreted as a response to the world's growing awareness of the oneness of the human experience. The collision of worlds that accelerated with the Crusades during the middle ages and has in the last two centuries intensified to ever increasing degrees is shattering, admittedly not without a struggle, the ideal of cultural exclusiveness. Mankind is slowly coming to the realization that cultural forms are only outward expressions and that the human experience which lies behind them is of greater structural significance. In its present form the Bahá'í Faith embodies this ideal. Its orientation is religious; that is, it seeks to explain the oneness of the human experience in terms of the Sacred - all men are created and sustained by one transcendent and omnipotent reality which has revealed itself through numerous manifestations who have in turn been the inspiration for the development of the world's great religions. The forms and symbolic modes of expression these religions have assumed have varied according to the environment and cultural milieu in which they have developed, but the essential experience they engender - that of man confronting the Sacred - is universal. It is this last point that makes the Bahá'í Faith world embracing in scope, for numerous religions have claimed that there is only one God and that mankind is His creation, but the former goes a step further and claims that all of the world's major religious traditions spring from the Sacred; a Hindu confronting the Divine through the cultural vehicle of Hinduism has had

just as valid and real experience as the Christian encountering the Holy through Christ or the Muslim experiencing the Word of God through Muhammad.

If a universal outlook characterizes the Faith's contemporary attitude towards other religious traditions, has this position resulted from an evolutionary process within the movement itself, or have such ideas existed from the early days of the religion's founding? E. G. Browne, who was studying the Bahá'í Faith at a time when it was just beginning to develop into an international movement, felt that the religion had undergone great changes since the time of the Báb. As he wrote in the introduction to his translation of The Táríkh-i-Jadíd:

At the present day, therefore, the vast majority of Bábís are Behá'ís, whose doctrines, sentiments, and ideals are already far removed from those of the primitive Bábís or modern Ezelís. No sooner was Behá (Bahá'u'lláh) firmly established in his authority than he began to make free use of the privilege accorded by the Báb to "Him whom God shall manifest" to abrogate, change, cancel, and develop earlier doctrines. His chief aim seems to have been to introduce a more settled order, to discourage speculation, to direct the attention of his followers to practical reforms pursued in a prudent and unobtrusive fashion, to exalt ethics at the expense of metaphysics, to check mysticism, to conciliate existing authorities, including even the Sháh of Persia, the Nero of the Bábí Faith, to abolish useless, unpractical and irksome regulations and restrictions, and, in general, to adapt the religion at the head of which he now found himself to the ordinary exigencies of life, and to render it more capable of becoming, what he intended to make it, a universal system suitable to all mankind.¹

At a later date (December, 1917) Browne felt that Bahá'í doctrine had been influenced by its introduction in the United States to various international, pacifist, and feminist movements.² Consequently, Browne implied that both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá had adapted the original teachings of the Báb to suit an international audience.

The official position of the Bahá'í Faith is that Bahá'u'lláh was given

¹ E. G. Browne, Introduction to The Táríkh-i-Jadíd, p. xxiv-xxv

² E. G. Browne, Introduction to Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion, p. xix

the right as 'Him whom God shall manifest' to abrogate many of the laws and teachings of the Báb. Moreover, it is held that the young Siyyid's teachings were designed to be enforced only for a short transitional period between his own revelation and that of Bahá'u'lláh. Accordingly, it is the latter who is seen to be the true formulator of the Bahá'í Faith's 'world view', while the former, although considered a manifestation of God, is viewed more as Bahá'u'lláh's forerunner³, a position not far removed from Browne's interpretation. Furthermore, Bahá'ís maintain that the movement's evolution into a world religion was not the result of his successors ('Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi) manipulating his teachings to suit an international audience. Rather, these individuals are seen to be the instruments who constructed the superstructure Bahá'u'lláh had envisioned.⁴

Regardless of whether Bahá'u'lláh's successors were only bringing to fruition the prophet's original vision or were chartering the movement in new directions as determined by their own interpretive creativity, there is no doubt that under the leadership of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi the Bahá'í Faith broke loose from its Persian moorings and began to take on universal significance. There is no need to reiterate the details of this transformation. Rather, from the point of view of the present study one specific development is particularly significant, and that is 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi's interpretation that Bahá'u'lláh had included among God's messengers the Indian figures of Kṛṣṇa and the Buddha. By stating that these figures were manifestations of God, the Bahá'í leaders were breaking down barriers which had separated the orthodox Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition from the religions of India, as the former have tended to view Buddhism and Hinduism as at best misguided religions. Thus,

³ Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, p. 98

⁴ Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day Is Come, p. 122

'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi must be looked upon as playing leading roles in the adaption of Bahá'u'lláh's principle of the oneness of religion to the specifics of the Indian cultural environment, an adaption which at a later date would be refined and developed by Bahá'í administrative institutions in the subcontinent. It is fair to say, therefore, that while Bahá'u'lláh may have had the vision of a universal faith, it has been his successors who have enabled this vision to become a reality, and it is in this sense that one can speak of the evolution of the Bahá'í Faith from a Persian sectarian movement to a world religion.

The Bahá'í Faith, however, is not merely interested in proclaiming the oneness of the religious experience. If this were the case, like the Theosophical Society or other liberal religious organizations it would be satisfied with working for toleration between the various religions of the world. Instead, as this study indicates, Bahá'í teachers are actively involved in converting people to their cause and subsequently educating them within a framework of specifically designated socio-religious institutions. In carrying out these activities, what, we might ask, are the movement's fundamental objectives, and moreover, what are the assumptions that lie behind them?

It has already been suggested that the Bahá'í Faith can be interpreted as a religious response to a unifying world. In this type of interpretation the international structure that the Faith embodies would be seen to have been the formulation of a charismatic individual who like all visionaries was ahead of the majority of his contemporaries in realizing the realities of the new world. However, one must remember that in the eyes of the charismatic formulator he was not reacting to a historical situation - he was creating it. Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be a manifestation of the Sacred; he was the instrument through whom God would accomplish his preordained plan for man and civilization, a plan which began with

Adam⁵ and would culminate with the establishment of 'The Most Great Peace'. Hence, from the point of view of the Bahá'í Faith the religion of Bahá'u'lláh is the cause of, and not the response to a unifying world, and consequently while Bahá'í teachings espouse the historical validity of other religious traditions, they also claim that these movements were preliminary steps in the evolution of a world civilization whose religious base will be the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. This point is important, for it is the conviction that they are building 'God's Kingdom on Earth' that sustains Bahá'í teachers both in India and other countries around the world.

The Bahá'í Faith's conversion objectives are also influenced by a sense of the apocalyptic. Within Bahá'í writings there are several references to a 'catastrophe' that is following mankind. For example, Bahá'u'lláh warns:

O YE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD!

Know verily that an unforeseen calamity is following you and that grievous retribution awaiteth you.⁶

Shoghi Effendi reiterated Bahá'u'lláh's admonition in the following words:

That the forces of a world catastrophe can alone precipitate such a new phase of human thought is, alas, becoming increasingly apparent. That nothing short of the fire of a severe ordeal, unparalleled in its intensity, can fuse and weld the discordant entities that constitute the elements of present-day civilization, into the integral components of the world commonwealth of the future, is a truth which future events will increasingly demonstrate.⁷

There is, consequently, a sense of urgency in the Bahá'í world to lay an institutional groundwork capable of surviving the calamitous machinations of a strife-torn humanity. In fact, it is this sense of urgency that has precipitated the mass teaching and consolidation campaigns in India. Hand of the Cause Rúhíyyih Khánum expressed this feeling during her trip to the

⁵ Adam symbolizes the first manifestation of God.

⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words, p. 44

⁷ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 46

subcontinent in 1964:

The destiny of the human race is to accept Bahá'u'lláh, we know that as Bahá'ís. Now, it has to start sometime and it is a little late in starting, because this Cause is over 120 years old and we are only beginning to get the entrance of people by troops into the Faith. We must not say this is too soon, we must say this is too late. We are in a hurry. We have lost a hundred years of the Bahá'í cycle. We want it to go faster every day, no matter what kind of problems arise from its going faster.⁸

Hence, the teaching and consolidation work presently being carried out in India is a reflection of the Bahá'í Faith's supposition that the old world order is soon to be rolled up and a new one laid out in its stead, and it is only in light of this belief that the movement's policies in rural Malwa can be fully understood.

The primary objective of the Bahá'í Faith, therefore, is to create a new world social order whose values and socio-religious institutions will be based on the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, and as a result its teachers are currently engaged in promoting an active international propagation campaign. In the process they employ a culturally adaptive teaching technique whereby Bahá'u'lláh is presented as being the fulfillment of the latter-day prophecies of the world's various religious traditions. In India this has meant that Bahá'u'lláh has been identified with the avatāra doctrine, primarily as it is formulated in the Bhagavad Gītā. It would be wrong, however, to suppose that the purpose of employing a culturally adaptive teaching technique in Malwa is to absorb Hindu elements into its mainstream and thereby facilitate religious understanding. In fact, one of the most common misunderstandings concerning the Bahá'í Faith's approach to other

religious traditions is that it is eclectic in nature. In truth, the Faith's teachers use this technique solely as a means of identifying the movement's teachings with traditional eschatological expectations. They do not compromise these teachings with those of Hinduism or any other religion but use traditional conceptual frameworks to construct cross-cultural bridges.⁹ Thus, by speaking of Bahá'u'lláh as an avatāra Bahá'í teachers allow Hindus to understand his prophetic claims in terms of their own culturally derived conceptual constructs, but they do not adopt the various formulations the Hindu mind has built around these constructs. Consequently, although the Bahá'í Faith claims to be the fulfillment of the avatāra tradition, it also asserts that its own doctrines are the true expression of traditional expectations and that the numerous doctrines which have been built up around the avatāra concept are extraneous accumulations of man-made ideologies. Therefore, the main purpose behind the movement's use of a culturally adaptive teaching technique in Malwa is to establish a meaningful channel of communication through which its own teachings can be introduced and implemented.

As mentioned in Chapter 7, when joining the Bahá'í Faith Hindus are not made to renounce Hinduism. At first glance this policy seems to be in conflict with the one stated above. On the one hand, the Bahá'í Faith does not compromise its own teachings with those of contemporary Hinduism, and yet converts are not made to renounce this heritage. How are these positions reconciled?

The apparent conflict is resolved by the movement's teachers identifying it as the renewal of true Hinduism. Reference was made in Chapter 7 to the fact that Hindus believe they are living in the kali-yuga, a time of religious decline. The Bahá'í position is similar in that it

⁹ Thus in terms of its presentation in Malwa the movement has taken on a Vaisnavite coloring, as is reflected in the numerous allusions made to this sect's religious concepts and symbols.

portrays contemporary religion as diluted by man-made trappings.

Accordingly, Bahá'í teachers refer to Bahá'u'lláh's doctrines as being the essence of pure religion, and consequently Hindus are not asked to negate their heritage but find its fulfillment in the Bahá'í Faith. This type of teaching approach, however, presupposes the need for educational follow-up. A villager whose patterns of behavior have been determined by a traditional set of values will not likely be able to conform to new standards without some degree of organized reinforcement, and it is for this reason that the Bahá'í Administrative Order has organized consolidation programs in Malwa.

The consolidation or 'deepening' activities of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa are under the direction of the Ujjain Regional Teaching Committee. As was stated earlier, the Committee's lack of resources and manpower has meant that in approaching this assignment it has had to concentrate its efforts on trying to 'deepen' a limited number of declarants who can in turn help promote the movement's teachings in the rural areas. The result of this approach has been that institutional development has been primarily limited to a number of 'model village' communities, while the majority of communities in rural Malwa have not advanced beyond the level of ideological acceptance of Bahá'í doctrine.

Even in the 'model villages', however, the educational activities of the Bahá'í Faith have been characterized by their sense of gradualism. As all of the chapters in Part III indicate, the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India has not tried to overwhelm new declarants by introducing the entire galaxy of Bahá'í laws, ordinances, and institutions into village life. Rather, it has concentrated on trying to establish a basic institutional framework within which change can begin to take place - the various

institutions examined in this study being the building blocks in this process. Moreover, in introducing these institutions into 'model village' communities the Bahá'í Administrative Order has not tried to influence direct change in conventional social situations. While declarants are urged to put the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh into practice in their daily lives, there has been no active attempt made to change traditional modes of behavior outside of Bahá'í institutions, and consequently most of the declarants in the five communities examined in this study still function within the Hindu ritual idiom.

In order to fully understand this 'indirect' approach to consolidation it must be kept in mind that the Bahá'í outlook assumes the eventual collapse of present world social structures. According to the Bahá'í view, as the world continues to move towards internationalism its various traditional social systems will to ever-increasing degrees be unable to cope with the new problems that arise. This view was poignantly stated by Shoghi Effendi when he wrote:

The whole world, wherever and however we survey it, offers us the sad and pitiful spectacle of a vast, an enfeebled, and moribund organism, which is being torn politically and strangled economically by forces it has ceased either to control or comprehend.¹⁰

Thus, the Faith's leaders assume that radical change will be the order of the day and that the movement does not so much have to engender change as be able to provide doctrines and institutions that can cope with it. Accordingly, Bahá'í administrative institutions in India are not interested in using their efforts to tear down a system which they feel will eventually collapse of its own weight. Rather, they are trying to construct the foundations of a new socio-religious system whose institutions will provide declarants with alternative frames of reference in which to participate as the old system continues to become disfunctional to the modern world. In

¹⁰ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 188

fact, the Administrative Order's entire program of developing a small number of 'model village' communities - a policy which at first glance might appear to be insignificant in terms of the amount of behavioral change it can induce - must be understood in terms of this futuristic outlook. To Bahá'ís the continual breakdown of the world's social systems makes it imperative that people are at least made aware of the alternatives that the Bahá'í Faith offers, and therefore it is the feeling of Bahá'í administrators in India that if a framework of Bahá'í community life can be established, even on a limited scale, in a number of key village communities, the time will come when large numbers of declarants will be able to be brought into active participation in Bahá'í institutions.

Seen in this light the current consolidation policy seems to be realistic in approach. Demanding sudden and thorough change or directly attacking traditional institutions in their conventional setting would no doubt result in a backlash that might remove the Bahá'í Faith from the villages altogether. Instead, by opting for a policy of gradual resocialization the Bahá'í Administrative Order has placed its faith in the power of the Bahá'í message and its implications for the future.¹¹

From what we know of the Bahá'í Faith's beliefs, social principles, and

¹¹ The philosophy behind this approach is one which asserts that as new declarants begin to gain a deeper understanding of Bahá'í principles and the implications they hold for their daily lives significant changes will begin to occur in their overall patterns of behavior. Indeed this was the position expounded by Shoghi Effendi in the following statement recorded by his secretary: 'He fully appreciates the fact that believers are still somewhat attached to the different cults from which they have come; this is a problem which always faces the Faith in a new region; it existed a long time in America, and seems part of the growth of the Cause. He feels your Assembly can afford to be patient with the friends, while at the same time educating them into a deeper understanding of the Cause. As their awareness of the true significance of Baha'u'llah grows, they will become weaned from the old ideas and give full allegiance to His teachings.' ('Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of South America, June 30, 1952', Arise to Serve, p. 79)

teaching and consolidation techniques, what kind of speculations can be made as to why a substantial number of Malwa villagers have declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh?

It seems apparent that one of the reasons villagers have declared themselves followers of Bahá'u'lláh is that for many of them the Bahá'í Faith offers a means by which they can raise their own self-esteem. Here reference is made to the large number of 'unclean' and 'untouchable' caste members who have reportedly enrolled in the Faith. In this regard, the Bahá'í principle of the oneness of mankind is very significant. 'Low' caste Hindus are naturally attracted to a movement which preaches the equality of believers and the elimination of status group segregation. Thus, an overriding causal factor in the great rise of declarations in Malwa in recent years must be the egalitarian ideals that the Faith enshrines. However, this factor alone does not provide a complete explanation. If the ideal of social equality were the only issue involved one would expect that most 'unclean' and 'untouchable' Hindus would have converted to one of the several 'egalitarian' religions which have found their way to the subcontinent over the centuries. Moreover, as the statistics from the five communities cited in this study indicate, a number of 'clean' caste members have also declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh. Therefore, there must be additional variables influencing villagers' decisions.

Another factor which must be considered is the movement's attitude towards Hinduism. Although this attitude is not eclectic in formulation, it is still syncretic, in that it does not disdain what it considers to be 'true' Hinduism but rather exalts it to a position of equality among the world's great religious traditions. Consequently, when a Hindu declares his belief in Bahá'u'lláh he does not do so at a cost to his own psycho-cultural identification. One of the main reasons that 'low' caste Hindus have not converted en masse to other religions is because in the process

they are required to denounce their Hindu heritage. On the other hand, by declaring themselves followers of Bahá'u'lláh Hindus of any caste background are not cutting their religio-cultural roots but proclaiming their belief in pure religion as revealed by the yugavatāra, a position which allows them to remain within the Hindu fold and protects them from being labeled converts to a 'foreign' religion.

Here a point has been touched on which at first glance might seem to be a case of hair splitting. Is there really a great deal of difference, one might ask, between a religion which proclaims certain socio-religious doctrines independently of the Hindu tradition (for example, Christianity or Islām) and another religion which preaches similar ideals but does so in the framework of the Hindu tradition? The author feels that there is a difference, and that an awareness of this distinction and its ramifications when combined with an understanding of the Bahá'í policy of not directly attacking the conventional social system gives one a better insight into why Hindus are declaring their belief in Bahá'u'lláh.

It has already been stated (Chapter 7) that as a socio-religious organism Hinduism allows its adherents a great deal of flexibility in terms of their conceptualization of the Sacred. In this vein, socially acceptable action has always been considered more important than metaphysical speculation. However, in order to truly grasp what it means to be a Hindu, one must take a further step and say that beyond the acceptance of any particular doctrine or adherence to certain patterns of behavior, being a Hindu means identifying oneself with a specific cultural tradition. Thus the historian A. L. Basham defines a Hindu as '...a man who chiefly bases his beliefs and way of life on the complex system of faith and practice which has grown up organically in the Indian sub-continent over a period of at least three millennia.'¹² It is this intangible 'feeling' of belonging,

¹² A. L. Basham, 'Hinduism', The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths, ed. by R. C. Zaehner, (London, 1959), p. 225

which can not always be put into specific categorical frames of reference, either doctrinal or behavioral, that lies at the base of a Hindu's self-identity. Consequently, one may not only hold diverse theological opinions but also, as is the case with adherents of many bhakti sects, follow unconventional patterns of behavior and still be considered a Hindu, whereas if an individual were to convert to Islām, regardless of the similarities that might exist between the doctrines and patterns of behavior to which he would adhere as a result of such a conversion and the doctrines and patterns of behavior ascribed to by certain unconventional bhakti sects, he would no longer be considered a Hindu, for in claiming himself a Muslim he would have denied his own cultural tradition.

By presenting Bahá'u'lláh as an avatāra who has come to revitalize Hinduism as well as the other religions of the world Bahá'í teachers do not put a new declarant in the position of having to deny his cultural heritage, and in effect he can psychologically remain a Hindu, as Bahá'u'lláh is not only the return of Christ and the 'Most Great Announcement' but the 'Immaculate Manifestation of Krishna'. Therefore, it is the author's contention that although the Bahá'í Faith is a universal religion, in the eyes of many of its declarants in Malwa the movement would probably be more closely identified with what he has termed the bhakti tradition. As mentioned in Chapter 9, bhakti movements have often offered alternative systems of metaphysical conceptualization (often strongly monotheistic) and provided frameworks for 'deviant' behavior, but they have not denounced the Hindu cultural heritage, both of which are characteristic of the operating procedures of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa. This contention seems even more plausible when it is remembered that to this day Bahá'í teachers have not actively tried to tear down or attack traditional village institutions but have concentrated on developing independent frames of reference in which the movement's ideals can be outwardly manifested. Consequently, it may

well be the bhakti style of approach in contrast to the cultural militancy of Islām or Christianity that has been partially responsible for many villagers declaring themselves followers of Bahá'u'lláh.

Another variable which must be weighed when considering this question is the overall pattern of social conflict that is becoming more characteristic of Indian society as it tries to adjust to the influences of modernism. As was noted in Chapter 4, this clash of values has been felt in the rural areas as well as within the urban centers, and consequently villagers are continually confronted by the forces of a changing world - ranging in scope from the more subtle effects of increased technological development to the more overt manifestations of political activism - to which they must try and adjust. This is especially true of younger individuals who are less able to hide in the shadows of tradition. Seen in this light, the Bahá'í Faith may well offer the younger generation of villagers (there are apparently a large number enrolled in Malwa) a synthesis between the past and the future. On the one hand, the Bahá'í Faith supposes many of the principles that are part and parcel of contemporary social idealism, particularly the concept of human equality, yet it still preaches the necessity of maintaining the religious element as a vital dimension of the human experience. Thus, to many declarants the movement might represent a means of alleviating the psychological conflicts engendered by the collision of traditional and modern worlds.

In summation, given the Bahá'í attitude towards Hinduism, the Hindu ideal of cultural identity, and the changing social scene in contemporary India, it is safe to posit that many people in rural Malwa are declaring their belief in Bahá'u'lláh because such a declaration allows them to express in a culturally acceptable way their socio-religious attitudes and feelings, many of which are in conflict with traditional ideals, without having to actively negate in word or deed either their cultural heritage or the traditional power structure.

It has already been suggested that the activities of the Bahá'í Faith should be viewed in terms of the movement's futuristic vision. Nevertheless, the contemporary situation can not be completely ignored, and it would be helpful, therefore, if some general statements concerning the present state of Bahá'í institutions in the 'model village' communities could be made.

Looking at the assumptions which underlie Bahá'í beliefs and values in light of the corresponding assumptions of popular Hinduism it is apparent that the former would be essentially at variance with the latter. The core of Bahá'í metaphysical doctrine, the indivisibility of the Sacred, is a case in point. Although monotheism is by no means alien to Hindu thought, even on the popular level, its formulation whereby the One Supreme Force is seen to have numerous forms, is basically at odds with the Bahá'í conception of the Sacred as a transcendent and omnipotent God. More importantly, the resulting social manifestations of this difference pose points of conflict. The stratification of the Sacred in Hinduism provides a theological base for status group stratification in the profane sphere as is borne out by the fact that different status groups have different primary deities, whereas the strong emphasis placed on the unity of the God-head in the Bahá'í Faith results in a similar emphasis being applied to the temporal world where normatively all men worship one Creator as brothers.

In a similar fashion, the various Bahá'í socio-religious institutions discussed in this work would theoretically conflict with those of the traditional system. The institutions of the Nineteen-Day Feast and the various holy day observances which stress knowledge of the revealed word and are lacking in religio-dramatic activity are at variance with traditional ritualistic and ceremonial institutions whose basic structures and modes of operation revolve around this type of symbolic performance. Furthermore, the Bahá'í abandonment of a religious functionary who presides over

devotional activity challenges the traditional assumption which holds that in order for rituals to be sanctified they must be officiated by a Brāhmaṇ or other 'clean' caste priest. Even the institutions of the Local Spiritual Assembly and community consultation are largely at variance , for although democratic ideals and institutions have become part of contemporary village life, they are still at odds with traditional leadership patterns.

Given the theoretical divergence between the two systems one would expect that the role of Bahá'í doctrines and institutions in the 'model village' communities would be primarily dysfunctional in nature, and as a result they would either clash with traditional institutions or be isolated from them. From the information the author was able to obtain it would seem that the latter situation is the more prevalent one. The traditional social structure does not seem to have reacted adversely to the introduction of Bahá'í institutions into village life but to have set them off as distinct religious phenomena. Here two important factors come into play. The first - to which the author has already made numerous references - is the Bahá'í approach of not directly attacking the traditional system, while the second is related to Hinduism's ability as a social organism to categorize and isolate 'deviant' behavior.

The Bahá'í Administrative Order's policy of gradually introducing Bahá'í values and principles into village life and thereby not forcing new declarants to violate conventional mores has resulted in Bahá'í village institutions not being strong enough to offer a viable social alternative to traditional institutions, and consequently at the present time the movement does not present a threat to the existing social structure. As the examples cited in the body of this work demonstrate, Bahá'í institutions are still in the formative stages of development. While devotional and administrative meetings are held in the name of the yugavatāra they are not reflections of Bahá'í norms: feasts and holy day

observances are generally short in duration and centered around 'deepened' believers; local spiritual assembly meetings are irregular and dominated by specific individuals; and community consultation is infrequent. This is not to say, however, that by following a policy of gradualism the Bahá'í Administrative Order in India has made a conscious effort to retard Bahá'í institutional development. Perhaps by following a more stringent policy whereby all declarants would be required to renounce old patterns of behavior and adhere to the letter of the law regarding participation in Bahá'í institutions a greater degree of structural development might already have taken place in the 'model village' communities, but the number of persons accepting Bahá'í doctrines and participating in Bahá'í activities would be greatly reduced, as the Bahá'í Faith would most likely be labeled a hostile religion. As it is, with Bahá'í institutions reflecting little more than a basic framework of 'religious' activity, Bahá'í teachers can continue to educate new declarants in the application of the Faith's principles and at the same time be tolerated by the traditional social system, a supposition which leads to the next point, namely, Hinduism's ability to compartmentalize 'deviant' behavior.

Although the Indian social system is often regarded as a fortress of conservatism, historically one of its great strengths has been its ability to adapt to certain socio-religious challenges by channeling 'deviant' behavior into specific sociological frames of reference. Thus, the system has created institutional safety valves within which unconventional activity can manifest itself without becoming a threat to society at large. These safety valves apply not only to challenges from outside the Hindu fold but to innovative developments within Hinduism as well. The former has resulted in the creation of specific non-Hindu castes,¹³ while the latter has produced not only a great range of Hindu castes and subcastes, whose

¹³ See Ghaus Ansari, Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh, (Lucknow, 1960).

rules of dharma often vary but the previously mentioned bhakti sects.

One scholar has gone as far as to say that the adaptive response has been the primary means by which Indian Civilization has dealt with change throughout the ages.¹⁴ A striking example on the personal level of this type of compartmental mentality is an account reported by J. Michael Mahar of an elderly Rājput who had kept a Chamār mistress for twenty years. 'When asked to explain how he reconciled this liason with his quite orthodox views on polluting powers of Untouchables, the gentleman replied that he felt no qualms as he had never accepted as much as a glass of water from her hands.'¹⁵

In terms of the Bahá'í Faith, then, it would appear that the village social system has been able to compartmentalize it as a specific 'religious' phenomenon, which although essentially dysfunctional in nature, can still be accomodated within its spectrum.¹⁶

Given the present state of Bahá'í institutional development in rural Malwa and the nature of the movement's role in village life, what are its prospects for future development?

In many ways the position of the Bahá'í Faith in rural Malwa seems precarious. On the one hand, if it hastens its institutional development in the village communities with the result that its adherents begin to cultivate new modes of behavior at a cost to their traditional roles, the

¹⁴ S. N. Eisenstadt, 'Some Remarks on Patterns of Change in Traditional and Modern India', Change and Continuity in India's Villages, p. 24

¹⁵ J. Michael Mahar, 'Agents of Dharma in a North Indian Village', The Untouchables in Contemporary India, p. 18

¹⁶ Again the author can not help but compare this phenomenon with the role of many Hindu bhakti movements which often provide for 'deviant' socio-religious behavior.

movement may find that its present harmonious relationship with the village social system could well change, and that a type of backlash reaction might set in. Were this to happen, the Faith might even meet the fate that other socio-religious movements have met, namely, being categorized as a specific caste. This would mean that in order to declare their belief in Bahá'u'lláh or participate in Bahá'í activities individuals would have to change status group identification,¹⁷ a predicament that would no doubt greatly reduce its following as well as nullify its potential for acting as a vehicle of cross-caste interaction. On the other hand, if Bahá'í institutions in the 'model village' communities remain static and do not develop beyond their present state of reflecting little more than a structural outline of Bahá'í community life there does not seem much hope for them becoming strong enough to influence significant behavioral change, and consequently the Bahá'í movement in the rural areas will remain primarily an ideological set of beliefs with little basis in social reality.

It seems, therefore, that Bahá'í administrators and teachers in Malwa must tread the thin line of continuing to structurally strengthen the 'model village' communities without alienating the movement from the traditional social structure. While it remains a 'religious' phenomenon the Bahá'í Faith will probably be free from direct antagonism, but should any great shift in declarants' conventional patterns of behavior take place a defensive reaction might well set in. If, however, the movement is able to maintain a balance between these two poles, a condition which would seem to necessitate a continuation of the policy of gradual resocialization, its prospects for future development appear to be favorable, as the forces of change that are sweeping across India will continue to give rise to the

¹⁷ If this type of reaction were to set in, non-Bahá'í members of a given caste might refuse to marry or dine with Bahá'í members of that caste, a situation which would mean that Bahá'í members would either have to reject the Bahá'í Faith or be forced to inter-marry and accept the same commensal status, thus forming a new caste.

demand for alternative social, religious, and political responses, and the Bahá'í ideal of combining religious elements with progressive socio-political concepts seems to be a realistic option. Consequently, the hope of the Bahá'í Faith in Malwa lies in the future. In fact, it is fair to say that the movement has staked its future in India on the belief that the new world will demand an alternative socio-religious structure. For the present it is determined to build.

Appendix A

Appendix A

Islām is divided into over seventy-two sects. The two major divisions, however, are known as Sunnī and Shī'ah, and both groups have their own beliefs as to the origins of their religions. According to the Sunnīs, the Shī'ah sect was founded by 'Abd Allāh b. Saba', a Yamanite Jew who was converted to Islām. He is supposed to have taught doctrines which regarded 'Alī b. Tālib, Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law, as being divine.¹ Shī'ahs deny this, claiming that he was an extremist (ghulāt), and some maintain that 'Alī had him and his followers burnt. Shī'ahs, however, are themselves divided into a number of different groups, of which the major are the Ismā'īlis and the Ithnā'asharīs. As the Ithnā'asharī branch of Shī'ism has been the state religion of Irān since the early sixteenth century and was therefore the basis of the religio-cultural milieu in which both the Bābī and Bahā'ī movements developed, this appendix will be concerned primarily with the case of the Ithnā'asharī Shī'ahs as presented by themselves.

The Ithnā'asharīs (also called rāfizī, or forsakers by Sunnīs) believe that the divine light of which Muḥammad came to be the custodian was equally shared by 'Alī, and they base this claim on a number of traditions. They attach great importance to the Prophet's last sermon at Ghadīr Khumm where he had stopped on his return from his last pilgrimage in March 632. At this time Muḥammad took 'Alī's hand and said, 'He of whom I am the mawlá (the patron?), of him 'Alī is also the mawlá.'² Shī'ahs also insist that during his last illness Muḥammad asked 'Umar to provide him with material to write his last will, but 'Umar avoided the request and thus the testament was never written. Moreover, Shī'ahs hold that after Muḥammad's death the

¹ M. G. S. Hodgson, entry on 'Abd Allāh b. Saba', The Encyclopaedia of Islam, (London, 1960), vol. I, p. 51

² L. Veccia Vaglieri, entry on Ghadīr Khumm, The Encyclopaedia of Islam, vol. II, p. 993

leadership of the community was usurped by Abú-Bakr (one of the most prominent companions of the Prophet) who was raised to the position of Caliph (Khiláfa - representative of the Messenger of God) by 'Umar and a group of followers during a meeting of the religious elite of Medina at which 'Alí was not present as a result of his performing the last rites for Muḥammad.³

According to the Shí'ahs, 'Alí disputed Abú-Bakr's right to community leadership. The two men's relations were further constrained, moreover, because of the claim of Fáṭimah ('Alí's wife and Muḥammad's daughter) to the property of Fadak⁴, a claim which was disregarded by Abú-Bakr. After Fáṭimah's death, however, 'Alí acquiesced to what had become a socio-political reality and remained busy with his literary activities until the assassination of the third Caliph, 'Uthmán.

The Caliphate of 'Uthmán (644 - 656) was plagued with factional disputes which finally led to his murder in 656. After his assassination 'Alí reluctantly accepted the position of Caliph, but Muḥammad's favorite wife, 'Á'isha, who had opposed the killing of 'Uthmán, joined against him in battle in 656 in what was later to become known as the Battle of the Camel.⁵ 'Alí's forces were victorious, and 'Á'isha later chose to abandon her leadership. During the five years of 'Alí's Caliphate a number of different parties emerged, and it was also at this time that his followers consolidated themselves, thus crystallizing the Shí'ah sect. The founding of the Umayyad Caliphate (660) drove a large number of 'Alí's followers into

³ For a full discussion of the events surrounding the death of Muḥammad see the entries on 'Alí b. Tálib and Abú-Bakr in vol. I of The Encyclopaedia of Islam.

⁴ A property originally held by Jews which was allocated to Muḥammad. He apparently devoted the revenues received from it to needy travellers (The Encyclopaedia of Islam, vol. II, p. 725). Fáṭimah claimed that Fadak should come to her as she was Muḥammad's heiress. Abú-Bakr, however, claimed it was public property as shown by the Prophet's use of it for benevolent purposes.

⁵ For a more complete explanation of this battle see The Encyclopaedia of Islam, vol. I, p. 308

the bosom of Shi'ism, and the murder of 'Alí's son, Ḥusayn, at Kerbela⁶ in 680 permanently divided the Muslims into Sunnis, Shi'ahs, and other different groups.

Although it would emerge from the above discussion that the conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ahs started over the question of succession, both groups evolved their own theological doctrines and theories. While Sunnis regard the first four Caliphs as rightful successors, Shi'ahs maintain that 'Alí and his descendants are the true imāms (supreme leaders) whose rights were usurped by the first three Caliphs, and around this belief has developed the politico-theological doctrine of the imāma (imāmate).⁷

Shi'ahs believe that the task of divine guidance does not end with the death of a prophet, for it is the will of God that the Islamic community should not be left on its own. Thus they maintain that a series of divinely appointed hereditary imāms beginning with 'Alí were assigned the function of intermediaries. According to Ḥasan b. Yusuf b. 'Alí Ibnu'l-Muṭahhar al-Hillí (d. 1325), one of the most well-known Shi'ah scholars,⁸ three of the most important issues concerning the imāma are: 1) that it is a necessary institution, 2) that the imām must be immune from sin, and 3) that the imām must be specified.

From the Shi'ah point of view the imāma is necessary for the same reason that Prophethood is necessary, namely, so that God can provide men with a leader who by his real knowledge and right actions can guide them

⁶ A spot located fifty miles south-west of Baghdad and about six miles west of the Euphrates. Today it is the location of Husayn's sepulchre, and is one of the holiest spots in the Shi'ah world.

⁷ The Ithna-'asharís trace the development of their theology from the 6th imām, Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq, who was recognized by Sunnis as well as Shi'ahs as a great scholar.

⁸ There have been numerous Ithna-'asharí divines known for their scholarly works. For a discussion of some of the more well-known of these scholars see Dwight Donaldson, The Shi'ite Religion, (London, 1933), especially chapters xxvii and xxviii.

toward the correct path and steer them away from wrong:

For the Imámate is the successor (khilāfa) of Prophecy and stands in its place (qá'im maqámahá), except in the matter of receiving (talaqqí) divine inspiration (wahy) without a mediator. And in the same way in which Prophecy is incumbent upon Allah the Most High on philosophical grounds, so also is the Imámate.⁹

Consequently, the imám is necessary to Islám as a guardian of the Law of the Prophet; '...to protect it from change or misinterpretation, and from additions or subtractions.'¹⁰

The doctrine of sinlessness is also fundamental to Shí'ah belief.

In the words of Mullá Muḥammad Báqir Majlisí:

Also we could not consider that the Imamate belonged to anyone who had done that which was forbidden, whether the offence were great or small, even though he should afterwards repent, for the command to scourge another can not be allowed to one who himself deserves scourging. The Imam, therefore, must be sinless.¹¹

In a like manner al-Hillí concludes:

And also because if he committed sin (ma'siya) and if it were incumbent upon men to disapprove of him, he would lose his place in men's hearts and the value of his appointment would be nullified.¹²

Finally, the imám must be specified; that is, he must be appointed by God and not by the people.¹³ Consequently, the imáma is a succession from

⁹ Miqdád-i-Faḥíl al-Hillí's commentary on Hasan b. Yusuf b. 'Alí Ibnu'l-Mutahhar al-Hillí, A Treatise on the Principles of Shí'ite Theology, trans. by William McElwee Miller, (London, 1958), p. 64

¹⁰ Donaldson, p. 308

¹¹ Mullá Muḥammad Báqir Majlisí, quoted in Donaldson, p. 322

¹² al-Hillí, p. 64

¹³ This is in contrast to the Sunní theory of the Caliphate which maintains that the leadership of the community is a public interest to be delegated to the Muslim nation for consideration and appointment. In this regard see Ibn Khaldún, The Muqaddimah, trans. by Franz Rosenthal, vol. I, 2nd ed., (London, 1967).

God and His Messenger, and it can not be acquired except through their delegation. In this regard, it is incumbent upon a prophet to appoint an imām and for every imām to appoint his successor. According to Ithna^ʿasharīs, therefore, the following descendants of ʿAlī were the rightful imāms:

ʿAlī's son al-Ḥasan (d. 669)
 al-Ḥasan's brother al-Ḥusayn (d. 680)
 al-Ḥusayn's son ʿAlī Zayn-al-ʿĀbidīn (d. 712)
 Zayn-al-ʿĀbidīn's son Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 731)
 Muḥammad's son Jaʿfar as-Ṣādiq (d. 765)
 Jaʿfar's son Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 799)
 Mūsā's son ʿAlī ar-Riḍā (d. 818)
 ʿAlī's son Muḥammad at-Taḳī (d. 835)
 Muḥammad's son ʿAlī al-Hādī (d. 868)
 ʿAlī's son al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī (d. 874)
 al-Ḥasan's son Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī

The twelfth imām (Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī) mysteriously disappeared in a grotto of a Samarra mosque at the age of perhaps four or five years. According to his followers he did not die but went into concealment. The twelfth imām, therefore, became known as the 'hidden imām', and although absent (ghāʾib) he is considered the true and infallible leader of the Islamic community:

The doctrine of his ghaiba, or concealment declares simply that he has been withdrawn by God from the eyes of men, that his life has been miraculously prolonged, that he has been seen from time to time, has been in correspondence with others, and maintains control over the fortunes of his people.¹⁴

During the 'Lesser Concealment' (874-940) four men succeeded in establishing themselves as his envoys (wakīls), the last dying in 940. At this time the 'Lesser Concealment' ended and the 'Greater Concealment' began. Since 940, therefore, Shīʿah mujtahids began to claim themselves as representatives of the twelfth imām, a situation which denies supremacy to secular power and thus gives the mujtahids a type of authority unknown to the Sunni ʿulamāʾ.

¹⁴ Donaldson, p. 235

The 'hidden imām' is also considered by Shī'ahs to be al-mahdī (the guided one), and he is expected to return (raj'a) before the end of time and usher in a period of justice and blessedness. Unlike the Sunni mahdī¹⁵, however, he will be the same Muhammad al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī who disappeared in 874. He has numerous titles which include al-Hujjat (the proof), al-Muntazar (the one awaited), and Qā'im al-Zamān (the master of time).¹⁶ The continued delay of his return, however, no doubt caused a type of eschatological anxiety¹⁷ among many Shī'ahs, and it was in such a climate that the Bābī and Bahā'ī movements raised their heads.

At this point it would be appropriate to compare the Bahā'ī concept of the 'prophet' as found in contemporary Bahā'ī literature with that found in Islām. According to the Bahā'ī view, prophets (or manifestations -

¹⁵ The Sunni mahdī, who according to Ibn Khaldūn is not, as in Shī'ah theology, an essential part of Sunni creed, but a commonly accepted eschatological figure who has arisen from the needs of the masses of Muslims over the ages (The Muqaddimah, vol. II, p. 156 - 200), is looked upon as a restorer of the faith of Islām, but he will restore the consensus of Islām which has been reached by the successive generations of Sunni scholars. Thus, the Sunni view maintains that the Muslim nation will be the interpreter of Islām, whereas the Shī'ahs give this right only to the imām mahdī.

¹⁶ Qā'im (literally, 'he who arises') is one of the common titles used in reference to the imām mahdī. This title was used by Bahā'u'llāh in referring to the Bāb who was considered by his followers to be the mahdī.

¹⁷ An interesting example of this type of phenomenon was reported by Ibn Baṭṭūta during his travels in Persia and Iraq. In the city of Hilla (not far from Samarra) he reported that believers came daily to the local mosque and proceeded to call for the return of the 'Master of the Age'. When he did not come they returned to their homes. The same process was repeated day after day. For a more complete description of this event see The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūta, trans. by H. A. R. Gibb, Hakluyt Society, Series 2, vols. 110 and 117, (Cambridge, 1962).

mazāhir-i-Ilāhiyya) are lawgivers and founders of new cycles in religious history. There have been numerous manifestations in the past, as there will be in the future. Bahá'í literature, however, generally recognizes nine such independent 'prophets': Abraham, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Kṛṣṇa, Jesus, Muḥammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh. All manifestations are seen to be in reality one and the same. Thus it is stated, 'In this respect, if thou callest them by one name, and dost ascribe to them the same attributes, thou hast not erred from truth.'¹⁸

In Islamic theology, both Sunnī and Shī'ah, there are two types of prophets: a rasūl is a prophet who brings a revealed book¹⁹, while a nabī is one who, while receiving divine inspiration, does not create a new sharī'ah. While there have been both kinds of prophets in the past, Muḥammad is believed to be the 'seal of the prophets', as his revelation as embodied in the Qur'ān was complete and final. In this vein Ibn Khaldūn states:

All this indicates that the Qur'ān is alone among the divine books, in that our Prophet received it directly in the words and phrases in which it appears. In this respect, it differs from the Torah, the Gospel, and other heavenly books. The prophets received them in the form of ideas during the state of revelation. After their return to a human state, they expressed those ideas in their own ordinary words. Therefore, those books do not have 'inimitability'. Inimitability is restricted to the Qur'ān.²⁰

The main distinction, therefore, between the Bahá'í and Islamic concepts of the 'prophet' (at least as far as Bahá'í missionary activity outside the Islamic world is concerned) is that the former asserts that finality in prophethood (here meaning the revelation of a new Law) was not reached in Muḥammad but was carried on in the personage of Bahá'u'lláh, a belief which takes the movement beyond the pale of Islām.

¹⁸ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 51

¹⁹ Thomas Hughes, A Dictionary of Islam, (London, 1935), p. 535

²⁰ Ibn Khaldūn, vol. I, p. 192 - 193

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