

THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY OF IRAN AND INDIA

Kamyar Sanaie

Ph.D. student of Pune University, Pune

Dr. Vaibhav Jadhav

Assistant Professor

Department of Education and Extension, Savitribai Phule Pune University

Introduction

The place of religion in public education is an issue concerning many people. In America, following World War II to practice religious exercises in schools was always an issue for criticism and resentment. Some people believe in that and some don't (Thiessen, 2001). Religion in public education is a sensitive issue and attracts a lot of attention. There are many researches about different major religions and their effects and its interrelationship with education. As the Baha'i faith is new comparing to the other religions, there isn't adequate research about the philosophy of education from the Baha'i perspective.

Teachings of Baha'i faith lays a great stress on spiritual education and believes that the lack of spirituality is the main cause of the problems of the world so from the Baha'i point of view moral but illiterate child is better than a literate but unethical one, because, the first one doesn't harm the others but the second one can harm himself and others. One of the main principles that Baha'i education stresses and proclaims is that education is not only a way for personal progress but it is also a means for social engagement and social development. (Arbab, 2004)

The main teaching of Baha'i faith is unity in diversity. Although I am different from you, by faith, color, race and thought but not only do I respect you but try to love you and pave the way for your development. Disunity from the Baha'i perspective is the root of all disasters and calamities of the world like war, social inequality, insecurity, anti-social behavior, disparity and conflict, prejudice, criminality etc.

Baha'i educationalist like Daniel Jordan, (Jordan & Street, 1972) has suggested that if the teachings like unity in diversity and universal peace be applied in general and in education in particular, they can help to overcome the crisis in education and in society successfully.

Baha'i Faith

The Baha'i faith is a new, independent, universal religion. (Zaerpoor, 1981, p.12). Baha'i faith believes that God has revealed himself to humanity through different messengers to educate and teach humanity and uplift the soul of man and for the progress of the world and its people as a society. Messengers of God include Abraham, Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammad and Bahauallah, who were all teachers and all came from the same source, being different chapters of one religion. Baha'is also believes that Bahauallah is the latest of these messengers. The origin of the Baha'i faith is in Iran (Perkins & Hainsworth, 1980, p.12). Bahauallah, "Glory of God", the messenger of Baha'i faith was born in 1817 in Tehran, the capital of Iran. He proclaimed his

message from Iran to the entire world. It was during Bahauallah's life time that his faith spread out to Ottoman Empire, Caucasus, Turkistan, India, Burma, Egypt, And Sudan (Hartz, 2009. p 13).

Iran in nineteenth century was deeply affected by war, famine, political instability, economic crisis and epidemics (Momen, 2008, p.9). According to Balyuzi (1980, p.3) people of Iran in Qajar period became intellectually starved and morally corrupt, materially impoverished and spiritually dying. Corruption oppression and tyranny were widespread.

Shahvar says that (2009, p.5) by the nineteenth century achievements of Europe in science and technology called non-western reformist for the imitation of European model. The more contact with west increased the pressure and thirst for change among people in Iran. It is logical to say that the reformist ideas of the Baha'i faith had a great role in propagation of reform and modernization of Iran.

Bahauallah (1988, p.156) states that his only purpose is that of educating people. The Prophets of God have come to educate and guide people to the straight path of truth. On the other hand, Bahauallah proclaims that his main message for the world is unity. Unity of God, unity of religions and unity of mankind. (Bahauallah et al., 1991 vol II, p. 157).

History of Education in Baha'i Community

Due to the status that education has in Baha'i philosophy, from the very beginning, the Baha'i community, whenever it was possible, planned for educational programs. During Bahauallah's time the Baha'i community, because of severe oppression, could not initiate educational plans although it was the main responsibility of every follower of Bahauallah to deliver his message to the people of the world. However, all these activities were at the individual level and not collective (Momen, 2011).

History of Education in Baha'i Community of Iran from Initiation of the Baha'i Faith

Despite the significance of child education in the writings of Bahauallah, spiritually and materially, the prolonged and severe persecution of Baha'i community in Iran prevented the process of formal education of Baha'i children to be established till 1899 and only informal educational classes, by individual believers in private homes could be held. The content of the classes were fundamental courses on the Persian and Arabic language and literatures and the history and writings of Baha'i faith. As the situation got better for the Baha'i communities in Iran, the formal schools were established under the guidance and encouragement of Abdul-Baha in several places like Iran, India, Egypt, Turkey, Palestine and southern Russia (Momen, 2011).

Baha'i Schools in Iran from 1899 to 1934

Baha'i schools in Iran were a series of government-recognized educational institutions, conducted on Baha'i principles that were initiated under the guidance and encouragement of Abdul-Baha, established, owned and controlled by Baha'i community from 1899 till 1934 (Rafati, 2011). According to Rost (1969, p.39) the first Baha'i school, Tarbiat School, was established during the period of Abdul-Baha which faced several struggles.

According to Momen different date is mentioned by historians for the start of the first modern school for boys in Iran, Tarbiat School, and its recognition by the government is mentioned differently by different historians. Most of them say that it was established in 1897 and recognized the date between 1899 till 1903. The earliest attempt to found a Baha'i school have been in the village of Mahfuruzak in Mazandaran in 1870 by a Baha'i believer and his wife,

Mullah Ali and Allaviyyeh Khanom, which established both girls and boys school in 1882. Mullah Ali was accused and then arrested, taken to Tehran and finally executed. (Momen, 2008, p.97-100)

These schools were financed and controlled by the support of Baha'i community and were started by Tarbiat School in Tehran and were followed by Tawakkol school(1908) in Qazvin, Taiyd(19-09),Wahdate Bashar in Kashan (1910), and the Mawhebat(1913for girls)in Hamadan, Saadat in Barforush(1912), Saadat in Najafabad (for boys in1926 and for girls in 1929) and a number of similar schools at the other parts of Iran and several schools outside of Iran such as Tashkent, Marv, Iskendrun (Turkey) and Daidanaw(Burma) (Rafati,2011).

Momen says that the second girl's school in Tehran, (the first one was Namus School,) was Madrasa-yi Taiyyddiayi Dushizegan-I Vatanand was established by a Baha'i. Shortly after that in May 1911, Tarbiat School for girls in Tehran was established in response to Abdul-Baha's stress on the girls' modern education although during those days, resistance forces were still very strong and they were sturdier in villages. Some of the American Baha'is came to serve and teach in this Baha'i school. He also mentions that a number of Baha'is initiated private schools which were influenced by Baha'i teachings. (Momen, 2008, p.97)

By 1933 there were 47 primary schools run by Baha'is, eight of which had secondary level classes. By one count, these schools had more than 4700 boys and girls students. All these schools laid stress on the study of modern sciences, moral education and arts which was not a portion of old-style education in those days (Baha'i International Community, 2005). Providing education for girls was another emphasis and necessity for Baha'i community heartened by Abdul-Baha. At a time when the women's world was limited to their home and not allowed in public by themselves, Baha'i writings encouraged them to go out and advance in different aspects of life and develop by science and industry and art during the period when even founding a modern boys school had a lot of difficulties. (Momen, 2008, p.110-117)

These schools were founded at the time when there was a lack of modern education in Iran. Shahvar (2009, p.58-60) believes that these Baha'i schools were an introduction and development of modern education in Iran, as a portion of the general changes and westernization struggles in late nineteenth and twentieth century's. Though modern schools were founded by foreign religious missions in Iran in 1830's these were restricted mostly to Christian communities. Shahvar also says that Baha'i schools were different from the other schools as they welcomed students from all different religious and it was different from other religious schools in which they did not use the academic setting for religious training. Baha'i schools were available for boys and girls and the only school which welcomed the children of various backgrounds. Most of the schools at that time were old-style and limited to memorization of Quran and poetry. The teachers of these schools were local religious leaders.

According to Momen (2008, p. 97-100) some of the practices in these schools were ground-breaking in Iran. It was uncommon not to punish children in school. Some of the Baha'i schools had co-education. the physical education was included in the curriculum of Baha'i schools; stress was on English language, partly because it was emphasized by Abdul-Baha. Most of the Iranian schools then were teaching French.

Tarbiat boy's school had six preparatory grades and four intermediate. Of the twenty six

teachers twenty were Baha'is and there were 541 students that 331 of them were Baha'i, 175 Moslem, 21 Christian, 4 Jew and 2 were Zoroastrians (N.S.A of the Baha'is of USA, 1980, p.117). Momen (2008, p.109) says that only about one-half of the children appearing in Baha'i schools were Baha'is and not all but most of the teachers were Baha'is. Religious propaganda was banned in the Baha'i schools as all other schools in Tehran. The Baha'i community also initiated a number of kindergartens in diverse cities like Tehran, Hamadan, Qazvin, Kerman and Yazd.

Almost all the schools were slowly closed in Raza Shah Period in 1934 over the course of a year. The reason for closure was that the Baha'i religion was not recognized as a minority faith like Christianity or Zoroastrian, by the people, and because of that their religious holidays were not acceptable. The Baha'is did not accept this discrimination, so the government closed slowly all the Baha'i schools (N.S.A of the Baha'is of USA, 1980, p.117).

Momen (2008, pp. 115-117) says that all Baha'i schools were not closed because some of them were considered as private schools and some of the other Baha'i schools escaped closure as the government did not recognize they were Baha'i schools. The other reason to escape closure was that there was nothing in those villages with which instead of them. From the Momen's point of view the Baha'i schools were among the first modern educational schools in Iran. The Baha'i schools pioneered development in two aspects. Taking education to villages long before there were government schools was the first one and girl schooling in towns and cities was the second one.

Character Training Classes (Dars Akhlagh)

According to Rost (1969, p.44) another educational movement was the initiation of classes of religious and moral instructions for Baha'i children and youth, which was totally different from Baha'i schools, in Tehran and some other places in Iran.

The Baha'i community beside formal schools, have informal educational classes known as "character training classes" (Darse Akhlagh) that was initiated in 1898 by Sayyed Hasan Hashemizade known as Motewajjeh who gathered a group of Baha'i children of south Tehran, and gradually expanded in all parts of Iran. These classes were held on Friday mornings. The curriculum of the classes was memorization of prayers and short quotes from Baha'i and other holy texts. As the classes extended they were supervised by local and the national levels. In 1933 Ali Akbar Foroutan compiled a series of books, according to the various grades from one to twelve that contained of Baha'i history, laws and administrative principles. It was not limited to only these materials and depending on the interests of the children and teachers, some other materials could be added to the classes (Momen, 2011).

These classes are still operated throughout the Baha'i world with the participation of Baha'i and non-Baha'i children.

Seasonal Schools

Seasonal schools are another part of Baha'i educational plan that was started in 1927 in America, under the guidance and order of Shoghi Effendi. It had its own style, goals, methods of teaching and curriculum. Although it is usually held in summer, as Shoghi Effendi says, it can be held in other seasons also. It is under the direct supervision of National Spiritual Assemblies of each country and Baha'i and non-Baha'is can take part (Bahauallah., 1991, vol. I, p. 29).

Shoghi Effendi (1979, p.340) says that the Baha'i universities of the future will be founded upon this seasonal schools.

Current seasonal schools are usually held annually and take between two or three days but it is not inflexible and can change according to the demands of the community. Shoghi Effendi elucidates the goals of seasonal schools and says that it is a good means for the evolution of administrative order, (Bahauallah et al., 1991, vol. I, p. 34) to foster the spirit of fellowship in a particularly Baha'i atmosphere among the participants, to train people for teaching and to comprehend Baha'i teachings and history, to understand the relation of Baha'i teachings with other religions and the society, to catch the way that these teachings can help the world which has lots of economic and political problems and is in need of remedy. After understanding all these the programs of seasonal schools should give the participants such a courage to manifest in their deeds. The methods that Shoghi Effendi suggests for these seasonal schools are lecture and workshop (Bahauallah et al., 1997, p.558- 630).

According to Rost (1969, p.78) the first Baha'i summer school in Iran was initiated by two American women in 1936. Closing of the schools worked as motivation for the establishment of summer school already developing in America. These summer schools continued functioning all over Iran till 1979 when all social Baha'i activities were banned by the Islamic government and still is closed.

Seasonal schools are currently running by Baha'i community under the guidance of their National Spiritual Assemblies in all over the world.

History of Education in Baha'i Community of India

India is very important in the history of Baha'i education opening with a private primary school in Pune established about 1936 (Rost, 1969, p.108). India has been related to the **Baha'i faith** right from its inception in 1844. One of the first eighteen people, Sheykh Saidi-i-Hindi, who recognized and accepted the **Bab**, (the forerunner of **Baha'u'llah**), was from India. In 1880 the first Baha'i group was shaped in Bombay and expanded quickly to Pune, Calcutta, Karachi and Delhi. In 1923 the National Spiritual Assembly of India was formed following which several teaching plans were initiated (Baha'i World Centre, 1986, p.246).

According to the Association of Religion Data Archives (Most Baha'i Nations, 2010) there are close to some 1,897,000 Baha'is in India.

Different educational activities have begun from the inception of Baha'i community in India but some are more important as mentioned below.

Baha'i Schools in India

As already mentioned Baha'i schools are a series of government-recognized educational institution, conducted or inspired on Baha'i principles, owned and controlled by Baha'i community or individual Baha'is.

The main purpose of founding school beyond presenting necessary services to Baha'i families of the school is to contribute the teaching and consolidation work in India through training potential village teachers. The curriculum of school has academic, vocational and Baha'i aspects (Baha'i World Centre, 1986, p. 211-233).

There are some Baha'i schools, under the guidance of National Spiritual Assembly of India, and lots of Baha'i inspired schools in India that are owned by individual Baha'is. The most famous one, the *New Era High School* founded in 1945, located in Panchgani in the state of Maharashtra, is a private international Baha'i school, drawing students from all over the world and

from different religious background like Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslims and others under the supervision of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of India. The New era has educational, moral, social and artistic activity to enhance potentiality for the goal of service to mankind. *Rabbani School* is another famous Baha'i school established in 1977 located in Gwalior under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly of India. These two schools are not only schools but centers of community development, social service projects and adult literacy and training programs. These were developed under the guidance of Universal House of Justice and the National Spiritual Assembly of India. A number of smaller schools and educational programs in India include Baha'i Saramsa School (1984 in Sikkim, Saramsa), Barli development institute (1985 in MadhyaPradesh), Baha'i' I Secondary School Tadong (1975, Gangtok in Sikkim), Mona school (1986 in Satara), Ruhiiyih School (1985 in Darjeeling). Glory School (1981 in Sahantiniketan), Anis School (1983). (Official Website of Baha'is of India, n.d).

Tutorial Schools

Momen (1997, p. 17) says that one of the educational projects running by Baha'i community is tutorial school, where one or two teachers, who have been specially trained for this work, conduct classes for children and adults. These classes are frequently held in the open air. The curriculum includes reading, writing, character training, and other elementary subjects. This pattern has been fruitful in countries as diverse as India, Zaire, Bolivia, and the Philippines. The Universal House of Justice explaining the goals and styles of the tutorial schools says that it must be as a tool for the consolidation of Baha'i and non-Baha'i communities and aims to educate the children that are ready to serve the faith and their communities. The attitude for these schools is not only to be self-sufficient but to educate the children to contribute other regions and communities. (Bahauallah et al., 1997, p.555)

Seasonal Schools

India like other countries has conducted a lot of seasonal schools every year. The first seasonal school was held in Simla in 1938 under the guidance of Shoghi Effendi. (Effendi, 1970, p.173) Seasonal schools are still functioning every year in India and they are directed by National Spiritual Assembly of India. Its aims, style and methods are the same as explained before.

Ruhi Institute

Ruhi Institute is an educational institution, initiated in Columbia in 1964 under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly of Columbia and developed after 1970 and since 1992 registered as the "Ruhi Foundation"- a legally independent non-profit organization. It dedicates its effort to the development of human resources for the spiritual, social and cultural development of Colombian people. The Ruhi programs were progressively embraced by all countries around the world, including India. The programs of Ruhi Institute are for three different age groups. Children classes for spiritual education includes ages from 5 to 11 years old, junior youth empowerment program, includes ages between 12 and 15 years old and youth and adult classes for those 15 and above. Educational activities are planned to aid the participants to acquire proper understanding of relevant concepts, develop spiritual qualities, and gain those approaches, skills and aptitudes that qualify an individual to direct his or her energies towards the elevation of the well-being in the community. The participants of the Ruhi Institute in one activity act as students and in another one as tutor. Thus, participants in the Ruhi programs play two different roles at the same time. All the

people who take part in the different activities of the Ruhi Institute are named collaborators. All the programs are according to the requirements and situations of the local people served by the institute and a collaborator follows it according to his/her personal capacities and concern. The courses are intended to prepare the trainee to serve the community. In the beginning the collaborator learns new concepts and skills and then takes part in courses that make them ready to act as tutors of the earlier courses. This forms a dynamic environment for the growth of human resources. Ruhi Institute like any other institution has its own strategy and framework. The Ruhi Institute has two main theories. On the one hand it disagrees with the individualistic concepts of social change and on the other hand it also rejects the concepts that believes human is a product of the society. Ruhi Institute believes that any change happens over the interactions between the change of both the individual and the structures of society. Developing the individual helps the social progress and structural change in society prepares a readier environment for an individual to promote his capacities. The participation is one of the main concepts in Ruhi Institute and it means a *systematic learning process within each community. In this manner the community the community is not considered only as the object of the social experimentation of others but itself experiments with new ideas, technologies, methods and procedures (Ruhi institute, 2008).

Summary

In sum, there is a great emphasize on education in Baha'i faith and from its inception the Baha'i community was encouraged to start social activities and educational plans.

Although the Baha'i educational plans in Iran was strongly developing in late 19th and beginning of 20th century but because of religious prejudice all Baha'i schools were closed in Raza Shah period and after Islamic revolution in 1978 all social activities of Baha'i community was totally prevented and forbidden.

But India had a different story. The Baha'i educational activities were welcomed in India and step by step educational plans of Baha'i faith increased and developed. The number of Baha'i schools increased significantly. The Ruhi institute could accomplish its educational programs in India but not in Iran. The seasonal schools are hold in different cities in India but in Iran it is banned.

Thus, India is a good place for individual Baha'is and Baha'i communities to implement their educational plans.

References

- Thiessen, E. J. (2001). In defense of religious schools and colleges. London: McGills- Queen's University Press.
- Abdul-Baha. (1982a). *the promulgation of universal peace*. Trans. Macnut, H. Wilmette, Illinois, USA: Baha'i Publishing Trust. Originally published in 1922.
- Momen, M & Momen, W. (2006). *Understanding the Baha'i Faith*. Edinburgh, UK: Dunedin Academic Press.
- Arbab, F. (2004). The training institute and the main sequence of courses. Baha'i Online Library. Retrieved 12 Oct, 2014 from http://bahai-library.com/arbab_training_institute
- Jordan, D & Streets, D. (1972). *Releasing the potentialities of the child, a new conceptual basis for comprehensive educational planning*. Amherest, Ma University of Massachusetts.

Retrieved Sep 30, 2014 from: [www.teach.valdosta.edu/anisa/overview/jordanstreetsreleasing .pdf](http://www.teach.valdosta.edu/anisa/overview/jordanstreetsreleasing.pdf).

- Zaerpoor, M. (1981). *Educational implications of Baha'i philosophy with a special consideration of the concept of unity* (Ph.D. Thesis). University of Southern California. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Perkins, M. & Hainsworth, P. (1980). *The Baha'i Faith*. London: Ward Lock Educational.
- Hartz, P. (2009). *World religions, Baha'i faith*, (3rd ed). New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Momen, M. (2008). *The Baha'i Schools of Iran*. Brookshaw, D.P& Fazel, S. (Ed). The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies. vol. 12. USA: Psychology Press.
- Balyuzi, H. M. (1980). *The king of glory*. U.K, Oxford: George Ronald.
- Shahvar, S. (2009). *Forgotten schools*. London: Tauris Academic Studio.
- Bahauallah. (1988). *Gleanings from the writings of Baha'u'llah*. Effendi, S. (trans). Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust. Originally published in 1935.
- Bahauallah, Abdul-Baha, Shoghi, E.& Universal House of Justice. (1991). *The compilation of compilations* (vol. 2). Research Department of Universal House of Justice (Ed). Australia: Baha'i Publications Australia. Baha'i library online. Retrieved 12 May, 2014 From http://bahai-library.com/compilation_compilations_2.
- Bahauallah, Abdul-Baha, Shoghi, E.& Universal House of Justice. (1991). *The compilation of compilations* (vol. 1). Research Department of Universal House of Justice (Ed). Australia: Baha'i Publications Australia. Baha'i library online. Retrieved 12 May, 2014 From http://bahai-library.com/compilation_compilations_1.
- Abdul-Baha. (1978). *Selections from the writings of Abdul-Baha*. Trans. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice & Gali. Haifa: Baha'i World Centre. Originally published in 1978.
- Momen, M. (2011). Shoghi Effendi. *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Retrieved 12 May, 2014 From <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shoghi-effendi>.
- Rafati, v. (2011). Bahaism x. Baha'i schools. *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Retrieved 12 May, 2014 From <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahaism-x>
- Baha'i International Community. (2005). Closed doors. *The website of Baha'i International Community*. Retrieved 12 Oct, 2015 from <http://denial.bahai.org/index.php>.
- National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States by approval of Shoghi Effendi. (1980). *The Baha'i world*. (Reprint). Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust. Originally Published in 1936.
- Rost, H.T.D. (1969). *The possible nature and establishment of Baha'i colleges and universities based on Baha'i writings*, unpublished, (Ph.D Thesis). University of Dakota. Retrieved Sep 22, 2015 from http://bahai-library.com/theses_dissertations_list
- Shoghi Effendi. (1979). *God passes by*. (2nded). Wilmette, USA: Baha'i Publishing Trust.
- Bahauallah, Abdul-Baha, Shoghi, E.,1& Universal House of Justice. (1997). *Lights of guidance*. Hornby, H. (ed). Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust. Retrieved Sep 30, 2014, from http://bahai-library.com/hornby_lights_guidance.