

fathers, had dropped dramatically as the men had cut back on drinking after becoming Bahá'ís. There may have been no women serving on the local Assembly yet, but the women were quick to assert that the Faith had dramatically improved their lives and those of their children in concrete and fundamental ways.

While these stories are interesting, it is hard to know how widespread such experiences are and hence they are inconclusive. There is no way to tell which patterns may be more common and most evaluations depend largely upon hunches.

Observations on Uttar Pradesh Because of my interest in the nature of mass teaching and the character of rural Bahá'í communities in India, I was invited

to visit the heart of one of the largest mass teaching areas in India. I was particularly interested in trying to get a handle on the Bahá'í demographics of the area. Briefly stated, this is what I saw.

The area, which was completely rural and quite densely populated, is possibly the largest "mass teaching" area in the world, with an estimated 400,000 Bahá'ís within a radius of about 70 km from the center. At the same time, if there is any place where one would expect to find extreme inflation of numbers, this would certainly be a prime candidate.

The village of Malhausi houses a number of the administrative offices for the state Bahá'í Council of U.P. including its office of statistics. At the time of my visit, the State Councils were fairly new and grappling with how to organize themselves for their work. For those, who may not be familiar with this early form of decentralization, the House of Justice called for the creation of separate state councils for each of the Indian states. These Councils are elected, in much the same fashion as the National Spiritual Assembly and function in much the same way and an NSA. Although they function under the jurisdiction of the National Assembly, they are elected independently, elect their own officers, administer and collect their own funds, make and carry out many of their own plans, and were authorized to communicate directly with the House of Justice should they feel the need to do so. They had few resources and were lacking in certain kinds of administrative experience. To a western observer, it did not look at first glance like a very competent organizational structure at that early stage. I was happily surprised however.

Exhibit one:

There was a small office that was being used for Bahá'í record keeping and some

other administrative purposes. In addition to Bahá'í charts, the walls were lined with all kinds of statistical charts, many of which were beautifully illustrated by hand. When I inquired about these, I learned that they were records of a whole host of agricultural experiments they had been carrying out over the past several years in order to improve crop yields and monitor the

effects of various techniques on the yield of the chicken farms. They had done all kinds of controlled experiments and were meticulous in documenting the results. This was resulting in more profitable agricultural practices. They then went on to explain that they were using the same systematic techniques to track and study the growth of the Bahá'í communities in the area. I had already learned that there is no national data base in India. In many of the mass teaching areas, names of new declarants are recorded on long sheets of paper so that up to fifty or sixty persons can enroll on a single page. They gave considerable training to the teachers about how to enroll people. They said that they still had occasional problems with inappropriate "enrollments" and that when they detected this, they would make an adjustment in the numbers reported to the National Spiritual Assembly. Since they can not possibly track withdrawals and deaths, other adjustments are made for these factors as well. For example, I was told that it is the practice nationwide to automatically reduce the previous year's total population by a factor equalling the national mortality rate. The number of new believers is then added to this reduced figure and the net is reported as the growth for that year. All other things being equal, over a matter of decades, this will result in more accurate figures than in a country like the U.S. where everyone is tracked on computer, but where there is no mechanism to ever remove someone unless they are positively reported to have died or withdrawn.

Exhibit two: A second area of relevant observation was that there was a strong cadre of regional teachers and administrators who were much more knowledgeable about what was happening at village level than the Bahá'ís in the urban centers. One truly remarkable board member serving this area had no less than 600 assistants. When I asked how he could possibly keep track of them, he showed me his hand made directory which contained names, addresses, photographs and assignments for each of them. They were systematically trained in group sessions and were active in their communities. In addition, full time teachers and consolidation teams made up of deepened Bahá'ís who are themselves of rural background and know the cultural landscape, were constantly moving about, working with communities and filing regular reports.

Exhibit three: Some other experiences were more subjective but still telling. Women are very secluded in this area. While not fully veiled, they will instantly cover their face and look away rather than meet the glance of a man, even at a great distance. When teaching in these areas, men and women sit in different areas. In short, the seclusion of women was much as you would expect to find in a middle eastern Muslim country. One morning, I slipped out on my own and walked alone to a nearby village. I had wanted to see how it felt when not in the presence of the Indian Bahá'ís who were my hosts. My presence did not cause a lot of stir and I spent some time taking photographs. In the process, I attracted the attention of a few children. They spoke no English but I tried

to explain to them that I was a Bahá'í, repeating the words, Bahá'í, Bahá'u'lláh and Allah'u'Abha. One of the children disappeared into the house and soon reappeared with a young mother. She did not approach at first but met my gaze openly. I spoke to her with the same words, which she and the children repeated as familiar. There were smiles, I showed them photos of my children, we exchanged bows and other gestures of courtesy and I bid them all goodbye. It was a simple encounter, yet it struck me deeply how different was this woman's behaviour from that of all the other women in that village. She was reserved and restrained but yet she felt the courage to socially engage this strange man in a way that no one else dared to do. It was obvious from our limited "conversation" that the connection was only one thing, the name of Bahá'u'lláh. Anecdotal to be sure but nonetheless, quite a striking experience in that cultural context.

Exhibit Four: I also visited a number of Bahá'í tutorial schools in the area. The visits were unannounced and while, I'm sure I was taken to schools that were known to be among the better functioning ones, it was still impressive to see. Facilities were simplicity itself but the instruction was in earnest, the classes disciplined and the children knew many prayers, tablets and songs. Furthermore, I learned that the Bahá'í schools were functioning with much greater regularity than the government schools which had better facilities but were largely empty due to rampant absenteeism by both students and teachers. These schools number in the hundreds. I cannot say how many of these function at the level that I say but all of the ones I visited were creating a stronger sense of Bahá'í identity and deeper knowledge than any programs I have seen in North America.

Exhibit five: In response to my questions, I was taken to see how mass teaching is done. One example was through the Shanti Rath, or "peace chariot," an oxcart which is fitted out with a small generator, two TV monitors, sound system and VCR that goes from village to village operated by two trained villagers who stay in the village for a day or more at a time in order to teach and deepen the friends. This attracts large crowds as might be expected and there was great interest, though I should note, that while I was there, a lot of teaching was done but no enrollments were gathered. I went on a second trip to visit a village that had never yet been opened to the Faith. It was an all day affair. We arrived at the village, informed the people that we wished to deliver a spiritual message and asked those who were interested to gather. In a short while there was a crowd of close to 100 people. The Faith was presented quite thoroughly and seriously over a period of a couple of hours. People asked serious questions. Some were uninterested and left. A few seemed a bit disdainful and some were genuinely interested. There was clearly no mass group psychology at work here as the responses varied a great deal. After the presentation was complete, people were invited to become Bahá'ís and a couple of dozen people expressed interest. The enrollment process was explained and people began to sign the sheets. Then an immediate deepening began. Literature was distributed to those who could read and some photos were passed

around and explained as well. In rural, India, the people recount historical narratives and stories through a kind of narrative song or chant which is performed with a traditional style of semi-poetic verse. The Bahá'ís have put the teaching and history of the Faith into these traditional forms of verse and they are printed in books. These stories were given to one of the village elders who had expressed the desire to become a Bahá'í and he immediately began

to chant these stories in the traditional style, in effect leading a deepening session which they went on for a couple more hours.

By the end of it, more than 50 people had declared and had been through about a half day of intensive deepening. Teachers were assigned to revisit and have further consolidation within two weeks. Nothing was withheld. They learned about the Central Figures, the laws, the Fund, the Covenant and many other things. Obviously, their knowledge at the time of declaration was not great. However, they had met together as a community, already they had literature and an experience of how to deepen together on their own in a way that they were comfortable with and competent in. All in all it was a much more sophisticated and developed process than any mass teaching I have observed or been involved with in North America. I'm sure not all of the teaching is so well done and there are certainly many glitches and problems. The believers regaled me with some hilarious stories of human foibles in their efforts to teach the Faith in that area. Nonetheless, I was struck by the sense that they were aware of these things, were working quite systematically to improve their processes and that they were indeed making some real progress. All of this comes from one who is very often skeptical of the value of much of the "mass teaching" that is going on.

Exhibit six: The final piece of evidence is perhaps the most telling of all in terms of its

utility for assessing the validity of Bahá'í population reports in this area.

It came from my meeting with the State Bahá'í Council which just happened to have a meeting while I was in the area. It had been suggested to me that it would be nice to meet them briefly to exchange courtesies and perhaps offer a word of encouragement. When I entered the meeting, I asked them what they were working on and how the work was progressing. The members replied that they were feeling somewhat depressed and overwhelmed by the magnitude of the work before them. I imagined that they must be wondering how they could ever try and mobilize all of these village communities which surely, must not have any capacity to function administratively. They stated that after their Council was elected some months earlier, they did not have a clear sense of the state of the communities and Assemblies under their jurisdiction (over 900 Assemblies for this single State Council). Their response, following consultation, was a decision to write to all 900 assemblies and ask them to report on their plans and activities. It was a very innovative move because as far as they knew, no administrative institution had ever written directly to these Assemblies before. I then asked about the response, rather expecting

that it would naturally be very low and so they must be trying to figure out what to do next. To my complete surprise, they stated that their problem was just the opposite. In just a couple of months, they had received written reports from 620 Assemblies in their region, detailing their plans and current activities. In addition, many of the letters and reports sought additional guidance from the State Council. In the face of this response, the Council felt totally overwhelmed, saying, how can we, without equipment, staff or funds, possibly answer all of the questions of the friends and provide all the guidance they are seeking. This is a written response rate of more than two-thirds from Assemblies formed in rural areas by mass teaching and consolidation over the years. This is truly a remarkable figure from an area where one might reasonably expect that few Assemblies would be able to function to a level of submitting, on their own a written report in response to a single request from a senior Bahá'í institution.

There was more, but suffice it to say that I left U.P. with a strong sense that I had witnessed something wholly unlike the growth and development processes I have witnessed in the American Bahá'í Community. Furthermore, I was quite convinced that the population reports for India, though not without problems and uncertainties, are probably much more accurate than those of the U.S.

India is a vast and infinitely complex country and the Bahá'í community is also diverse, scattered, heterogeneous and complex. I would not suggest by any means that all of the states function at the same level in this regard as U.P. but I did ask if many of the equalizing demographic procedures were used nationally and was told that indeed they were. Finally, I did not sense a strong urge to put up the largest number possible which seems to characterize the American community. Finally, it struck me, especially after returning to the cities, how much the residue of caste, which is still extremely strong in India, is a challenge for the Bahá'ís in much the same way that race prejudice

is in this country. It seems to me that one attitudinal effect of this is that the national leadership, which is prominently urban and high caste, tends not to have too much knowledge or place too much importance on developments in the rural areas. There is little tendency to romanticize about these communities, and perhaps even a tendency to discount their importance. I can't help but wonder if the estimate of 100,000 active believers reported to Juan Cole might not have been influenced by these factors.

It would be good if these discussions could help generate some more sophisticated and accurate means of judging Bahá'í populations in various countries. In the meantime, I think we should be cautious about overgeneralizing in either direction based upon a few experiences. After all, a lot of what makes good science is to refrain from giving answers for which we do not have sufficient evidence.

In the meantime, at least a part of this whole controversy could have been avoided if communities would continue to follow the advice of the Guardian only to report the number of centers, groups and assemblies and to avoid estimates

of individual membership.

P.S. The question of multiple identities is also an interesting one. I documented some clear patterns that were quite interesting during my fieldwork among the Sioux and Assiniboine Indians in Montana. Very different types of religious responses with very different cultural antecedents popped up pretty systematically in certain contexts and this was true of the Bahá'ís there as well. However, I would take issue with the notion that this is specifically a third world issue. One might posit that it is more of an issue with people who belong to non-exclusivist traditions. It tends to exist where there is a mixing of ethnic and religious identities. For example, just a couple of weeks ago in Chicago, we had what might best be described as a Russian, Messianic Jewish funeral carried out in traditional Jewish surroundings, with content and organization by the Bahá'í community and active participation from a Muslim relative. It was all reflective of the complex multi-polar religious identity of the deceased (who incidentally, was not a declared Bahá'í).

Addendum by William Garlington

...From my own experiences in the mass teaching areas of Madhya Pradesh in 1973-74 it was fairly apparent that declaring oneself a Bahá'í did not mean that an individual was being put in the position of having to *leave* his own religious tradition (which in this case was primarily Hindu). Indeed, in the villages that I visited it seemed apparent that declared Bahá'ís for the most part continued to practice traditional behavioral idioms. Moreover there was little indication that they had abandoned the Hindu *world view*. They had declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh as an avatar and were

compartmentalizing

their Bahá'í activities so as not to directly come into conflict with traditional village or regional norms. As many were from the lower castes (unclean and untouchable) ritual purity was not as big a factor as for higher caste Hindus. My own conclusion was that the Bahá'í Faith better fit the category of a *bhakti* movement rather than a new religion in that it 1) allowed for *converts* to express their *deviant* attitudes within a compartmentalized frame of reference (Bahá'í institutions such as Feast and Assembly Meetings)

2)

was highly devotional in nature and 3) tended to show a preference for symbolic and utopian expressions of change rather than direct social action. (With the onset of specific development programs in the 80s and 90s this aspect of the Faith in India may well have changed to some degree, although I would doubt that there has been much attempt to openly combat caste prejudice in the name of the Faith.) All of this is to say that IMO what allows for the large numbers is the fact that in India one can be a Bahá'í and still be a Hindu. If such an

approach were taken in the United States I would imagine that the number of Bahá'ís here would also be dramatically increased.

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