

# Historical Documents and Chronicles

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## A Chronicle of the Babi-Baha'i Communities in Sangsar and Shahmirzad

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### Abstract

*Sangsar is a small town about 220 kilometres east of Tehran and Shahmīrzād is a nearby village. A Babi community existed here as a development from an earlier Shaykhi community and Babis from Shahmirzad participated in the Shaykh Tabarsi upheaval. Later this Babi community became Baha'is. A number of prominent clerics of the area became Baha'is, the best known of whom was Haji Mulla 'Ali Akbar Shahmirzadi, who was known as Haji Akhund and was named by Baha'u'llah as a Hand of the Cause. Despite suffering relentless persecution, the community grew, developed its institutions and established a number of facilities such as schools and public baths.*

### Keywords

Baha'i history  
Iran  
Sangsar  
Shahmirzad  
Haji Akhund  
Baha'i school  
Baha'i persecutions

More is known about the history of the Baha'i Faith in the larger cities in Iran than about what happened in the smaller towns and villages. It was much easier for Baha'is to remain anonymous in large cities, whereas in smaller communities everyone knew who the Baha'is were (at least those who identified themselves as such – there were a number of people who believed in the Baha'i Faith but chose not to identify themselves). This meant that they were more open to persecution and it was this (as well as economic factors and the desire for education for their children) that caused many Baha'is to flee from small towns and villages to the larger towns and cities during the 20th century. In these small towns and villages, however, it was easier, where there were a sufficient number of Baha'is, to build up a closely-knit community and to develop the Baha'i community institutions.<sup>1</sup>

This paper presents a brief chronology of the Baha'i history of the small town of Sangsar and the nearby village of Shahmīrzād, which are about 220 kilometres east of Tehran. They are situated in an area that was sometimes a separate province with its capital in Damghan and sometimes part of the province of Khurasan. They are close to the borders of Mazandaran and Tehran provinces. This history illustrates some of the problems faced by the

1. The Babi-Baha'i communities in the small towns and villages of Iran have not been studied much. Abbas Amanat devotes a chapter to Babi communities (*Resurrection and Renewal*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, 332–71), but gives small towns and villages very little consideration, despite the fact that they were almost as important as the large towns in terms of the total number of Babis in Iran – see Peter Smith and Moojan Momen, 'The Bābī Movement: A Resource Mobilization Perspective', in *In Iran*

- (ed. Peter Smith), *Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī History*, vol. 3, Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 1986, 33–93. Juan Cole has analysed the Baha'i communities of Tehran and Shiraz, but again there is nothing here on the smaller towns and villages – 'Religious Dissidence and Urban Leadership: Bahais in Qajar Shiraz and Tehran', *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 37 (1999) 123–42.
2. A photocopy of this manuscript consisting of 33 quarto pages (hereinafter TAS) is in the Afnan Library.
  3. *Tārīkh-i Vaqāyī-yi Māzandarān* (History of the Events of Mazandaran), manuscript in the hand of Muhammad 'Alī Malik-Khusravi, 84 quarto pages, Afnan Library.
  4. 'Vaqāyī-yi Qa'lih va Shahmīrzād' (The Events of the Fortress [of Shaykh Tabarsī] and Shahmirzād), 131 quarto pages, Afnan Library.
  5. The source for populations of these two places for 1914 is Ludwig Adamec, *Historical Gazetteer of Iran*, 4 vols. Graz: Akademische Druck-Verlagsanstalt, 1976–89; and for 1951 is *Farhang Jughrāfiyā'ī-yi Īrān* (ed. Razmara et al.) 10 vols. Tehran: Dā'irih Jughrāfiyā'ī-yi Sitār-i Artish, 1948–53.

Baha'i communities in small localities in Iran: the frequency of the persecutions from local clerics, the harassment by landowners and government officials and the manipulation of the Baha'i community for local political purposes. It also demonstrates the determination of the Baha'is to spread their religion, to set up their religious institutions and to establish social facilities such as modern schools and public baths.

The main source for this paper is a chronicle called 'Tārīkh-i Amrī-yi Sangsar' (The History of the [Baha'i] Faith in Sangsar). The author is not indicated but it was compiled under the supervision of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Sangsar following the request from Shoghi Effendi that all Baha'i communities in Iran write their histories. It begins in about 1834, before the advent of the Bab, and continues until the manuscript's date of completion in 1932. It includes events in Shahmirzad as well. As with the other histories written at this time, events are portrayed from a Baha'i viewpoint with little correlation to other events that were occurring and there is also little attention paid to the economic, social and political aspects of history.<sup>2</sup> There are two other manuscripts that are of relevance to the early part of the history of Shahmirzad. These are accounts by two brothers who were among the earliest Babīs of Shahmirzad. The first, by Mīr Abū Ṭālib Shahmīrzādī, is mainly about the events of Shaykh Tabarsī,<sup>3</sup> and the second by Mīr Muhammad Riḍā Shahmīrzādī is difficult to follow, with few dates or names but numerous dreams recorded.<sup>4</sup> Thus the usefulness of these two sources is limited.

### Geography of Sangsar and Shahmirzad

Sangsar, or Sangisar, is a small town (population 3,000 in 1914 and 14,000 in 1951) 18 kilometres north of Simnan. The people speak a dialect of Persian that is peculiar to the town and can be difficult for other Iranians to understand. The main occupation of the residents of the town was sheep herding, which took many of the townspeople away especially in the summer months. Shahmirzad is a large village 6 kilometres north of Sangsar (population 2,695 in 1914 and about 8,000 in 1951)<sup>5</sup> surrounded by orchards, the main products of which are walnuts and plums. There was some rivalry and conflict between these two places especially over the water from the springs of 'Aliyabad at Darband which is located between them. In Qajar times both places were under the authority of the governor of Simnan, and Simnan itself was usually under the authority of the governor of Damghan.

### Early Babi history of Shahmirzad: the family of Aqa Mir Muhammad 'Ali

Individuals such as Karbalā'ī 'Alī, Karbalā'ī Abū Muhammad and Hājī Mullā Bāqir preached the near advent of the Qa'im in Sangsar in the decade before the Bab's advent. Aqa Mīr Muhammad 'Alī, a Shaykhi leader in Shahmirzad (he had studied under Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i), also preached the same message to the people of this area and he was widely respected. He was opposed, however, by the clerics of Simnan and there were threats against his life and so, towards the end of his life, he moved with his three oldest sons and some thirty students to Karbala to study under Sayyid Kazim Rashti. Here he was still alive when news of the claim of the Bab arrived and he accepted it but died shortly thereafter in 1847. He had

instructed his sons to return to Iran and look out for news of this movement. His sons Sayyid Ahmad, Mir Abu'l-Qasim and Mir Abu Talib returned to Shahmirzad, where Sayyid Ahmad took up his father's pre-eminent position. During the course of the journey of Mulla Husayn Bushru'i and his companions from Khurasan to Shaykh Tabarsi, they passed through the area when many were away tending their herds in their summer pastures. Mir Abu Talib was however travelling in Mazandaran and brought news of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi. Some 33 set off to join the Babis there, led by Sayyid Ahmad. As they were leaving, the notables and people asked Sayyid Ahmad to investigate the matter and if he was sure that this was the promised rising of the Hidden Imam, he should inform them so that they could join him. When he reached the Babis and had spoken to both Mulla Husayn Bushru'i and Quddus, Sayyid Ahmad wrote back to Sangsar and Shahmirzad attesting to the truth of the claims of the Bab, but no one honoured their word to join him. Karbala'i 'Ali, however, who was very old by this time, did become a Babi. Most of those who had gone to Shaykh Tabarsi, including Sayyid Ahmad himself, died in this episode, but eleven survived.<sup>6</sup>

Of the two youngest sons of Aqa Mir Muhammad 'Ali, Mir Abu Talib (c.1243/1827–1311/1893) survived Shaykh Tabarsi, while Mir Muhammad Riḍā (1246/1830–1317/1899) had been left behind to look after their mother. After the end of the Shaykh Tabarsi episode, a severe persecution erupted in Shahmirzad and the family were forced to move in with their sister Ma'sūmih in Sangsar. Even here they were relentlessly persecuted, at one stage being reduced to eating grass. Although still in their teens and early twenties, the two brothers took on extensive responsibilities looking after the dependants of those who had been killed at Shaykh Tabarsi. Their property had been looted and so they began as peddlers, eventually developing a pattern of travelling together through Mazandaran in the winter months taking with them fruit and dried foods from Shahmirzad and returning to the Sangsar area in the summer with rice from Mazandaran. In all the years of their travelling, they faced many hardships and much persecution (see the episode of 1861 below) but they never hid their religion from anyone. Over the years, these two succeeded in converting many people in Mazandaran, in villages such as Īvil and Rawshankūh and towns such as 'Aliyabad (Shahi). The two brothers married the two daughters of a Babi, Mulla Amīnā of 'Arab-Khayl in Mazandaran, and established a residence in that village also. In 1861, they were arrested either in 'Arab-Khayl or Bihnamir and taken together with three of the Babis of those villages to Tehran where they were imprisoned together with several other Babis for two and a half years. At the shah's court, there was a native of Sangsar called Aqa Muhammad Sangsari of whom the shah was so fond that he called him 'Dā'ī' (uncle). This man had been a close friend of the brothers' father, Mir Muhammad 'Ali, and now managed to obtain orders for their release. (This man had also written to Mahdi Quli Mirza during the Shaykh Tabarsi episode and asked him to ensure the safety of the sons of Mir Muhammad 'Ali – an action that enabled Mir Abu Talib to survive this episode.) The two brothers would not leave the prison, however, until their fellow prisoners were also released, and Aqa Muhammad Sangsari arranged this as well. The latter took the two

6. Muhammad Rida Shahmirzadi, 'Vaqa'i' 2–10; TAS 1–6, 18; Asadu'llāh Fāḍil Māzandarānī, *Tārīkh-i Zuhūr ul-Haqq* (9 vols. vol. 3, Tehran, n.d. and vol. 8, parts one and two, Tehran: Mu'assisih-yi Millī-yi Matbū'āt-i Amrī, 131–2 BE/1974–5; vols. 4 and 6 in manuscript, Afnan Library – hereinafter ZH) 3:185–9; Muḥammad 'Alī Malik-Khusravī, *Tārīkh-i Shuhadā-yi Amr* (3 vols., Tehran: Mu'assisih-yi Millī-yi Matbū'āt-i Amrī, 130 BE/1973) 1:441–5; 'Azīzu'llāh Sulaymānī, *Maṣābiḥ-i Hidāyat* (Tehran: Mu'assisih-yi Millī-yi Matbū'āt-i Amrī, 9 vols., Tehran: 104–32 BE/1947–76 – hereinafter MH), 8:35–41, 57–61; Nabīl-i-'Azam. *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabīl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahā'ī Revelation* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1970) 405–8.

7. Muhammad Rida Shahmirzadi, 'Vaqa'yi'; TAS 8-10; MH 8:64-82; ZH 8a:288-9; Asadu'llah Fāḍil Māzandarānī, *Asrār ul-Āthār* (5 vols. Tehran: Mu'assisih-yi Millī-yi Matbū'āt-i Amrī, 124-29 BE/1967-72) 4:214-5; Malik-Khusravi, *Tarikh-i Shuhada* 2:247-58, 316-26.
8. TAS 7; ZH 8a:290-1.
9. TAS 11; ZH 6:393-4; MH 8:70-74; Mazandarani, *Asrar al-Athar* 4:215-17.
10. ZH 6:400, 8a:292; MH 8:43-7.

brothers to his home as guests and they convinced him of the truth of the Baha'i Faith. After this, they undertook a trip to Tehran, Isfahan, Yazd and Khurasan in the company of Ibn Asdaq, visiting Baha'i communities. Several accounts comment on the joyful and radiant faces of these two brothers and mention that the Baha'is in each place would look forward to their visits.<sup>7</sup>

Aqa Mir Muhammad 'Ali also had three daughters. The first, Ma'sumih (d. 1297/1880) was married to a wealthy Babi of Sangsar, Mir Ibrahim, who was killed at Shaykh Tabarsi. She herself played a role in the siege at Shaykh Tabarsi by arranging for supplies and money to be sent to the Babis there. After this episode, she was faced with raising her children whilst subject to a great deal of persecution. Her home was looted several times. She continued nevertheless to play a leading role and rallied the dispirited Babis in the immediate aftermath of Shaykh Tabarsi. On one occasion Ma'sumih was seized and threatened with being stoned to death on the decree of some local clerics. She and her daughter were run through the streets under a hail of stones to the house of a *mujtahid*. Ma'sumih spoke so eloquently and courageously before the *mujtahid*, however, that he ordered she be set free. The other two daughters, Ḥalīmih and Fāṭimih, also married and gave rise to a large family of Baha'is.<sup>8</sup>

### Conversions of clerics

Among the leading religious figures of the area who were converted was Mulla Ibrahim of Shahmirzad (c. 1794-Aug. 1891), given the title Khalīl ar-Raḥmān (Friend of the All-Merciful) by Baha'u'llah. He had studied with the foremost religious leaders of Isfahan and Karbala and was a distinguished cleric. When he returned to Shahmirzad after his studies he was given an honoured place in the village and clerics from as far as Savadkuh and the Hizar-Jarib district of Mazandaran deferred to him, studied under him and regarded him as a religious authority. While he had been in Karbala, however, he had heard of the Babi religion and after his return to Shahmirzad he secretly converted, later also giving his allegiance to Baha'u'llah. He began to spread the new religion judiciously and secretly in the village, but his allegiance eventually became known and many who had sought him out before now cut him off. Several attempts were made on his life and on one occasion his house was attacked. Mulla Nasru'llah, who later became a Baha'i (see below), was one of those who defended him. A young man, Ghulam-'Ali, son of Mulla Mahdi, was converted at this time and took it upon himself to become Mulla Ibrahim's bodyguard. With a short sword in his belt, he would accompany Mulla Ibrahim to the public baths and back. Mulla Ibrahim became virtually housebound and spent his time copying the Baha'i scriptures in his fine *naskh* and *nasta'liq* script.<sup>9</sup>

Another leading cleric of the area to be converted was Mulla Yūsif Sangsari (d. 1329/1911) who had studied for 6 years in Sangsar and 16 years in the shrine cities of Iraq. He became a Babi, possibly through the above-mentioned Karbala'i 'Ali. He was later one of those who exerted themselves to bring the Babis of the area to belief in Baha'u'llah. He developed a reputation in Sangsar for being one whose prayers were answered by God and therefore many came to him with requests for prayers, while the enemies of the Baha'is feared his reputation.<sup>10</sup>

Mulla 'Ali Muhammad Mujtahid (d. 1325/1907) was another prominent cleric in the area who had studied in the shrine cities of Iraq and elsewhere and returned to an honoured position as a religious authority in Sangsar. He was fanatical in his views, even forbidding the people of the town to buy rice from Mazandaran because he said that many Babis had been killed there and their impure blood had polluted the ground and so the rice from that area should not be consumed. He would cover his head with his cloak if he encountered a Babi on the street so that his gaze would not be polluted. He lived next door, however, to the above-mentioned Mulla Yūsif and the latter began to invite him to investigate the new religion. At first he responded harshly and rudely to this invitation but eventually agreed to enter into discussions. Eventually, after reading the Bayan of the Bab, he was converted. He immediately resigned his position as prayer leader in the mosque and tried to inform those who had regarded him as their religious leader, but these people did not accept the new religion. Mulla 'Ali Muhammad spread the Baha'i Faith both in the Sangsar area and in Mazandaran and Gorgan.<sup>11</sup> A similarly important local cleric was Mulla Muhammad Hasan (d. 1322/1902) who was converted in 1285/1868 after speaking with Mir Muhammad Rida. He renounced his religious leadership and became a builder as well as a copier of the Baha'i scriptures. Nevertheless, his relatives tried to kill him. He was responsible for spreading the Baha'i Faith to the village of Aftar. His wife was also a distinguished Baha'i.<sup>12</sup>

Mulla Yaḥyā of Sangsar had a *maktab* (traditional school) and a small *madrassa* (religious college) in Sangsar. One day some of the religious students brought him a *fatwā* (decree) signed by the clerics of Simnan, Sangsar and Shahmirzad for the death of a number of Babis. He asserted that this *fatwa* was contrary to Islam and then declared that he himself was a Babi. The religious students beat him severely and left him for dead. After this he left teaching in his *maktab* and *madrassa* and devoted himself to promoting the Babi religion in the area. Other prominent and learned converts included Mulla Mawla, Mulla Muhammad and Haji Muhammad Big. With such an array against them, the 'ulama of the area found themselves defeated in argument and thus persecutions in Sangsar were less frequent and severe than in other places.<sup>13</sup>

### Other converts

Another prominent Baha'i from Shahmirzad was Susan Bājī, the daughter of Mulla Mahmud. She later resided in Tehran and was one of a circle of women who were active in spreading the Baha'i Faith among the women of that city. It was she who managed to retrieve the body of Mulla 'Ali Jan Mahfuruzaki from the gallows after his execution in 1883, despite the presence of guards and a threatening mob<sup>14</sup> and it was she who stepped in front of the carriage of Nasiru'd-Din Shah in 1899 and said she would not move until the shah issued orders for the release from prison of her 'brother' Haji Baqir Najafabadi.<sup>15</sup>

A number of other notable figures of Shahmirzad became Baha'is including Haji Mulla Aqa (who had been a tutor to Haji Amīn aḍ-Ḍarb), Mulla Haji Zaman (d. 1305/1887), Ustad Muhammad Jan (d. 1342/1923), Mulla Jān 'Ali (d. 1904), Mulla Ramaḍān (d. soon after 1305/1887, son-in-law of Mir Muhammad Rida), his brother Ghulam-'Ali (d. 1922), Mulla Isma'il

11. TAS 16 (date of death here difficult to read but may be 1318/1900). ZH 6:400 gives his name as Mulla Muhammad 'Ali. MH (8:47–52, 53–5) gives his date of death as 1354/1935.
12. ZH 6:398; Mazandarani, *Asrar al-Athar* 4:219–20.
13. Muhibbatu'llah Subhani, 'Mullā Yaḥyā Sangsarī' *'Andalīb* vol. 16, no 62 (Spring 1997) 68–72; TAS 20.
14. Mazandarani, *Asrar al-Athar* 4:172–3, 218.
15. Fathu'llāh Mudarris Jānimī Najafābādī, *Tārikh-i Amr-i Bahā'ī dar Najafābād* (Darmstadt: Asr-i Jadid, 2004) 75–6.
16. TAS 13–14, 15; ZH 6:398–9, 8a:292; MH 8:71; Mazandarani, *Asrar al-Athar* 4:218–19, 221–3.

17. MH 8:52–3.
18. Muhammad Rida Shahmirzadi, 'Vaqayi' 14–22; ZH 4:206; MH 8:77–8.
19. Subhani, 'Mulla Yahya Sangsari' 71.
20. Subhani, 'Mulla Yahya Sangsari' 71.

(d. 1300/1882) and his brother Karbala'i Khanlar (d. 1312/1894). In Sangsar, there was Awaḍ Muhammad Big (who protected the Baha'is and spread the Baha'i Faith), Mulla Muhammad Subhani, Mulla Mawla Rawdih-Khan (who was arrested and bastinadoed on one occasion) and Ustad Muhammad 'Askarī Kafshdūz (d. 1322/1904).<sup>16</sup>

### Events in Sangsar and Shahmirzad in the time of Baha'u'llah

After a time, the townspeople obtained from the local clerics a *fatwa* for the death of Mulla 'Ali Muhammad, Mulla Yusif and Mulla Muhammad Subhani and sent this to Nasiru'd-Din Shah. Some executioners were sent to Simnan and the three men were summoned. They came to Simnan and stayed at the home of Mulla Ibrahim, who had been a fellow student of Mulla 'Ali Muhammad. The latter was very sorry to see how close these three were to death and sent word to Sangsar to alert their relatives to the danger. Their relatives, who were not Baha'is, came to Simnan, armed and angry. Seeing this, the executioners let the men go.<sup>17</sup>

In 1276/1859, there was an episode of persecution in Sangsar when the *mujtahid* of the town wrote to the governor of Simnan complaining about the Babis in the village. (This *mujtahid* was related to Mir Muhammad Rida and had been a Babi at first but had apostatized after the defeat of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi.) The governor sent some officials who ill-treated some of the Babis. They arrested Mir Muhammad Rida and his nephew, bound them and took them off towards Sangsar. On the way, they came to a shrine called Imamzadih Qasim (1 kilometre north of Sangsar) of which Mir Muhammad Rida had been custodian until he had been replaced (this was the original home village of the family). He spoke for over an hour to the people of the village that surrounds this shrine (population 500 in 1951) and several were converted. When they reached Sangsar, they arrested Ma'sumih, the sister of Mir Muhammad Rida, her son and their cousin as well as two other Babis and insulted and harassed them. They released Ma'sumih and took the other six off to Simnan, where they were thrown into prison. After three months of imprisonment, they were fined and released.<sup>18</sup>

In about 1866, when the split between Baha'u'llah and Azal occurred in Edirne, there was also a split in the community in this area. When Mulla Yahya heard, one day, that the Azalis were meeting at a particular house, he went there immediately. When the Azalis saw him coming, they locked the door but he broke the door down and entered. He took the Bayan, which they were reading, and put it respectfully aside and then began to speak to them about Baha'u'llah, chanting some of the writings of Baha'u'llah. It is reported that all present at the meeting became Baha'is and within a short period of time, no Azalis remained in the area.<sup>19</sup>

Each time a new tablet arrived from Baha'u'llah, the learned Baha'is of the area, Mir Abu Talib, Mir Muhammad Rida, Mulla Mawla, Mulla Yusif and Mulla Muhammad would gather in Mulla Yahya's house at night and would recite the tablet. Then they would disperse, the first two to Shahmirzad and the others to their homes in Sangsar and they would then recite the tablet for the other Baha'is.<sup>20</sup> A large number of travelling Baha'i teachers also came to this area including Samandar, Varqa, Jamal Burujirdi and Tarazu'llah Samandari.

### Mulla 'Ali Akbar Shahmirzadi, Hand of the Cause

The most prominent Baha'i to emerge from this area was Mullā 'Alī-Akbar Shahmīrzādī, known as Haji Akhūnd (1258/1842–4 Mar. 1910), who was named a Hand of the Cause by Baha'u'llah. Although his father Mulla 'Abbas had been a follower of Aqa Mir Muhammad 'Ali and had accompanied him to Karbala and become a Babi, he had subsequently fallen away from the new religion after the defeat of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi. It was not until Haji Akhund had grown up and was studying at a *madrassa* in Mashhad that, after investigating Sufism and Shaykhism, he became a Babi in 1861 as a result of reading Baha'u'llah's *Kitab-i-Iqan* and speaking with Mulla Sadiq Muqaddas. Haji Akhund began to teach the new religion to others and experienced so much antagonism and persecution that he was forced to leave Shahmirzad and settle in Tehran in about 1868. He did however manage to rekindle the faith of his father and bring his brothers and sisters into the new religion. His nephew, whom he also converted, was Mirza Badī'u'llāh Badī' ul-Ḥukamā, a distinguished physician of Shahmirzad. In Tehran Haji Akhund became one of the lynchpins of the Baha'i community, teaching the Baha'i Faith, acting as a channel of communications with Baha'u'llah for the Baha'i community and, for a time, being responsible for the remains of the Bab. He became so well known as a leading Baha'i that whenever there was an outburst of persecution, he would wrap his cloak around him and await the arrival of the guards to arrest him. He was imprisoned in 1868, 1289/1872 (spending seven months in prison), 1882–4 (two years in prison), 1887, and 1891–3 (two years in prison). He visited Akka on several occasions, in 1287/1870, about 1874, about 1305/1887, and 1312/1894. During this last visit, with 'Abdu'l-Baha's permission, he met with Mirza Muhammad 'Ali and unsuccessfully tried to persuade him to abandon his movement towards rebellion against 'Abdu'l-Baha. He was also much involved in the administrative developments of the community. Together with the other three Hands of the Cause, he established a consultative assembly in Tehran in 1897.<sup>21</sup>

### Prominent teachers in the time of 'Abdu'l-Baha

Mulla Naṣru'llāh Shahmirzadi (1255/1839–1915) came from a family that had held religious leadership in Sangsar and Shahmirzad for centuries. Although his father, Mulla Mu'min, and one brother were not Babis, his two uncles Mulla Mirza Ahmad and Mulla Mirza Husayn<sup>22</sup> (d. 1280/1863) were, as was his other brother. Mulla Nasru'llah received his early education in Shahmirzad and then went to Simnan where he studied under Haj Mulla 'Ali. When he had completed his studies, he was installed as the prayer leader in the Jāmi' Mosque and in the mosque of one of the quarters of Shahmirzad and was the foremost religious authority in the village. He also established classes and students would come to him from Hizar-Jarib and other parts of Mazandaran during the summer months. He was upright in his dealings, never accepting bribes or inducements, and fanatical in his views about the Baha'is, considering that they should be killed – although he always insisted on clear proof of belief and so the Baha'is did not suffer greatly under him.<sup>23</sup>

Although, as mentioned above, several of Mulla Nasru'llah's close relatives were Baha'is, they were too frightened of him to reveal this. In 1310/1892,

21. Biography by Shāpūr Rāsikh in 'Abdu'l-'Alī 'Alā'ī, *Mu'assisih-yi Ayādī-yi Amru'llāh*, (Tehran: Mu'assisih-yi Millī-yi Matbū'āt-i Amrī, 130 BE/1973) 371–401; ZH 6:394–8; 8a:327–9; 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Memorials of the Faithful* (Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1971) 9–12; Shaykh Kāzīm Samandar, *Tārīkh-i Samandar* (Tehran: Mu'assisih-yi Millī-yi Matbū'āt-i Amrī, 131 BE/1974) 233–6; Hasan M. Balyuzi, *Bahā'u'llāh: The King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980) 265–6.
22. Mazandarani, *Asrar al-Athar* 4:221.
23. MH 1:335–8.

24. MH 1:338–41.  
 25. MH 1:341–7.  
 26. MH 1:347–58.

Nayyir and Sina came to Shahmirzad. They observed that the Baha'is here were more secretive than elsewhere and asked the reason for this. They said that it was because of Mulla Nasru'llah's fanaticism. Since they were told that he was a just and moral man, however, they asked to meet with him. At this meeting, they showed Mulla Nasru'llah Baha'u'llah's Lawh-i-Sultan (Tablet to Nasiru'd-Din Shah). Reading just part of this was sufficient to convince Mulla Nasru'llah of the truth of Baha'u'llah's claim. He then studied as much as he could about the new religion and began to convey some of the new insights that he had learned in his lectures from the pulpit without mentioning their source.<sup>24</sup>

Over the years, Mulla Nasru'llah convinced many of the truth of the Baha'i Faith but he also aroused suspicion among the people of the village. His maternal uncle urged him to curse the 'Babi' religion but when Mulla Nasru'llah offered to withdraw from his religious leadership, everyone urged him to stay. All the time, however, his adherence to the Baha'i Faith was becoming more evident. Haji Amin ar-Ra'āyā and Amin al-Haram were two brothers who were sons of Mulla Nasru'llah's maternal aunt; the former was one-eyed and the latter was the fief-holder and tax-farmer (*tuyūl-dār*) of Shahmirzad and held a high position in Nasiru'd-Din Shah's court as a personal attendant to the shah. They were very hostile to the Baha'i Faith and plotted against their cousin. They eventually installed Mulla Nasru'llah's maternal cousin Shaykh Muhammad Husayn in the mosque and forced Mulla Nasru'llah out. The latter then began to earn his living by farming together with his sons. He was now free to be more open about his beliefs and he spoke to many people and wrote to many of the clerics in the area about the new religion. Many became Baha'is as a result of his teaching, including two clerics, Mulla 'Ali Akbar Surkhrabātī and Mulla Sulayman Kisilyānī, who had both been former pupils of his. At first, the wife of Mulla Nasru'llah and one of his sons were very opposed to his new belief and even tried to have him killed during the turmoil of the Constitutional Revolution. They eventually relented from their antagonism, however, and even became Baha'is.<sup>25</sup>

Mulla Nasru'llah was affected by the 1907 persecution of Baha'is (see below). In about 1905 and about 1911 he went on journeys through Mazandaran, during which he converted many people. During the 1911 journey, Mazandaran was in a state of disorder due to the attempt by Muhammad 'Ali Shah to regain the throne. The main supporter of Muhammad 'Ali Shah in the area was Rashid us-Sultan, an enemy of Mulla Nasru'llah's cousin Amin al-Haram. He tried to arrest Mulla Nasru'llah's son Muhammad Aqa in Babul but the latter escaped; then he sent someone to assassinate Mulla Nasru'llah in the Lur quarter of Barfurush, where he was staying, but the shots fired did not find their mark. Over the next few years, Mulla Nasru'llah survived a few further attempts on his life.<sup>26</sup>

On 25 July 1915 (13 Ramadan 1333), some 300 of the people of Shahmirzad met to plot Mulla Nasru'llah's death. They chose 82 people to take the appropriate steps and 4 people were chosen to lead them. Eight persons, both men and women, were set to spy on Mulla Nasru'llah and find an appropriate opportunity to kill him. A sum of 2,800 tumans was collected with which to bribe anyone sent to investigate the murder, 4 people were armed, ready to carry out the crime, and 80 of those chosen

took a solemn oath to accomplish the task. The other 2 declined to take the oath and sent word to Mulla Nasru'llah of what was happening. Mulla Nasru'llah thanked them and said that he had been wishing for such a day for a long time. On 8 August 1915 (27 Ramadan), about two hours after nightfall, the assassins attacked the house and shot Mulla Nasru'llah. He remained alive until dawn the next day before dying. The governor of Simnan together with armed men and some 300 Baha'is of Sangsar came to Shahmirzad to investigate the crime but the conspirators remained defiant and silent and no one was arrested.<sup>27</sup>

Another prominent Baha'i of Sangsar was Aqa Mirza Haji Aqa Rahmaniyan (1294/1877–Sept. 1950), who was the grandson of Haji Mulla Baqir (one of those mentioned above who preached of the near advent of the Imam Mahdi before the advent of the Bab) and the grandson of Halimih, a daughter of Mir Muhammad `Ali. His father had been a Baha'i but had died when he was two and he had been brought up by his mother. He had studied the Baha'i proofs with the various learned Baha'is who came to Sangsar. In 1319/1901 he went to Tehran to meet the Baha'is and while there volunteered to accompany the Hand of the Cause Ibn Abhar to Qumm, Isfahan, Yazd and Kirman. Rahmaniyan then spent two years in Tehran and while there he attended the Baha'i classes of Sadr us-Sudur. After this he undertook journeys for the propagation for the Baha'i Faith to Mazandaran, to Qazvin and Rasht (with Rastigar in 1326/1908), Qumm, Kashan and Isfahan (with Sayyid Jalal, son of Sina, in 1327/1909), Khurasan (in 1922) and so forth until the end of his life.<sup>28</sup>

Other prominent Baha'is of Shahmirzad from the time of `Abdu'l-Baha include Allah-Quli Subhani, who travelled through Iran propagating the Baha'i Faith, and Mirza `Abdu'l-`Ali Shahab (1882–?), who was a school-teacher and set up the Husayniyyih School in Sangsar and later taught in the Baha'i school in Būr Khayl, Aratih, in Mazandaran. He was for a time secretary of the local spiritual assembly in Shahmirzad.<sup>29</sup>

### Difficulties and persecutions in the time of `Abdu'l-Baha

In 1893, following the death of Baha'u'llah, Mir Muhammad Rida (see above) visited `Abdu'l-Baha in Akka. During this trip, he became aware of the schemings of Mirza Muhammad `Ali (even though these had not yet become public) and upon his return, he warned the Baha'is of the area so effectively of the dangers of failing to follow `Abdu'l-Baha that no one from the area later followed Mirza Muhammad `Ali, despite two visits to the area by Aqa Jamal Burujirdi, a Baha'i who sided with Mirza Muhammad `Ali.<sup>30</sup>

Although in earlier years, this area had been comparatively free of persecution, from about 1896 onwards, Amin al-Haram became the fief-holder of Shahmirzad (see above), and he was much opposed to the Baha'is. He would try to prevent Baha'i meetings from taking place and barred travelling Baha'is from entering the village. In 1319/1901, he had Ustad Haji Kaffash tied to a tree and whipped. When his mother tried to protect her son, he ordered the mother to be tied up and whipped as well. Then the mother was freed while the son was thrown in prison. When his cousin tried to take him food, he was arrested and thrown in prison and severely bastinadoed until the executioner was worn out. Eventually their families bought their freedom for 30 tumans. Following this, the Baha'is of

27. MH 1:358–67;  
ZH 8a:298–301.

28. MH 4:538–83;  
ZH 8a:302.

29. ZH 8a:302;  
Ni'matu'llāh Dhukā'ī-  
Baydžā'ī, *Tadhkirih-yi*  
*Shu'arā-yi Bahā'ī-yi*  
*Qarn-i Avval-i Badī'*  
(4 vols. Tehran:  
Mu'assisih-yi Millī-yi  
Matbū'āt-i Amrī,  
122–7 BE/1965–70)  
4:96–106.

30. MH 8:79–80;  
ZH 8a:291.

31. ZH 8a:292–3.
32. Mahdī Bāmdād, *Tārīkh-i Rijāl-i Irān* (6 vols. Tehran: Zavvar, 1347/1968–1351/1972) 5:58–61; Hāj Aqā Muḥammad ‘Alāqihband Yazdī, ‘Tārīkh-i Mashrūṭiyyat’ (published as vol. 2 of a photocopied series from the Iranian National Baha’i Archives) 421–5.
33. ‘Alāqihband, ‘Tarikh’ 422.
34. MH 4:550–51 gives the date of this episode as 1325/1907, which would fit in with the other events mentioned in ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s letter that is cited immediately afterwards, MH 4:522–6. However, TAS 23–5 (and ZH 7:253, 8a:293–4 following it) gives the year as 1324/1906.

Shahmirzad telegraphed a plea for justice to Prime Minister Amin us-Sultan, and for a time after this they experienced some relief.<sup>31</sup>

During the reign of Muhammad ‘Ali Shah (1907–9), Habibu’llah Khan Muvaqqar as-Saltanih (1877–1910) was appointed governor of Simnan. He was an unprincipled man who jumped from side to side according to what he thought was his advantage. He had at one time been a supporter of the Constitutionalist reformers, then during the reign of Muhammad ‘Ali Shah had sided with the latter. After the triumph of the Constitutionals he was executed in 1910.<sup>32</sup> He had some acquaintance with the Baha’i Faith and used this first to obtain information about the Baha’i community in the area and then to sow discord among the Baha’is of Sangsar and Shahmirzad. Then he began to denounce the Baha’is, had them arrested and beaten, fined them, confiscated their property and destroyed some of their houses.<sup>33</sup>

Among the events that occurred during the governorship of Muvaqqar as-Saltanih was an episode involving the Sufis of the Ṣafī ‘Ali Shah (Ni’matu’llahi) Order, three hundred of whom lived in Sangsar. In the summer of 1907, these Sufis decided to pretend to act as peacemakers between the Baha’is and the other Muslims, while in reality trying to draw the Baha’is out and then attack them. The Baha’is, who at that time were depleted in numbers (during the hot summer months many left the town) and numbered only 30 men, were aware of this ploy and when the Sufis attacked, they ran away up onto a hill and then suddenly turned on their attackers and put them to flight, causing them many injuries. The Baha’is who had left the village were then summoned back. This episode, however, only served to increase the animosity of some of the Muslims of the area, and during the following Ramadan (October 1907) 4 Baha’is were shot, one of whom, a young man named ‘Ali Muhammad, was killed, and many houses were attacked and looted.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time in Shahmirzad, Amin ur-Ra’aya, who appears to have succeeded his brother as fief-holder of the village, closed the shops of several Baha’is, looted them and caused several Baha’is to be assaulted. ‘Ali Muhammad Khan Sar-rishtih-dār was visiting the Shahmirzad Baha’i community and there was an upsurge in activities. The local clerics announced a general massacre of the Baha’is and ordered the people to congregate in the mosque with weapons so as to attack the Baha’is. They sent for Mulla Nasru’llah and the Baha’is to come to the mosque to discuss their beliefs but Mulla Nasru’llah refused, saying that the heated atmosphere of the mob in the mosque was no place for religious discussions and that the clerics should come to the house where the Baha’is were meeting. In the meantime he told the Baha’is to disperse until there remained only his son, Sar-rishtih-dar and the owner of the house. As the mob approached, Sar-rishtih-dar mounted a horse and after a confrontation with the mob was allowed to leave the village, whereupon the mob dispersed. The Baha’is sent a plea for justice to the parliament, the central government and the new governor of Simnan. The latter sent some officials to Shahmirzad to investigate. The enemies of the Baha’is arranged for the investigating commission to hold their sessions in a mosque, and when three Baha’is appeared before the commission a mob that had collected in the mosque fell upon them, beat them and bound them. They were dragged off to the house of Amin ur-Ra’aya where they were ill-treated and sent to be detained

in a ruined house for two days, before being sent in chains to Simnan. In the meantime in Simnan, Haji Mulla 'Ali Mujtahid had intervened with the governor on behalf of the Baha'is and the governor sent another official towards Simnan. This official met the chained prisoners at Sangsar and ordered their release. Some of them continued to Simnan, however, and raised a complaint against Amin ur-Ra'aya. As a result, the latter was severely condemned and lost his position as fief-holder of Shahmirzad.<sup>35</sup>

### Baha'i institutions and facilities

The Baha'is of Shahmirzad formed a local spiritual assembly in 1327/1909 and established the Taraqqī Baha'i School there in 1335/1916. The Husayniyyih Baha'i School in Sangsar was established in 1910. During his journey with Ibn Abhar, Rahmaniyan had become aware of 'Abdu'l-Baha's instructions to start the practice of *mashriqu'l-adhkar* (dawn prayers). Upon his return to Sangsar in 1903, Rahmaniyan established this practice in his home. At first, some people complained to the governor in Simnan, who sent men to investigate but they returned satisfied. Eventually many of the Muslims of the town also came to the *mashriqu'l-adhkar*s so that there was standing room only. The result was a transformation of the town such that 'when they met each other in the streets and bazaar a chorus of "Allāhu Abhā" [God is Most Glorious, the Baha'i greeting] would go up and this became so general that someone coming to Sangsar might have thought that there was no-one apart from Baha'is in the town.'<sup>36</sup> From this time onward the Baha'is began to fast openly during the Baha'i month of fasting and to close their businesses on Baha'i holy days.<sup>37</sup>

The practice of gathering at dawn for prayers (*mashriqu'l-adhkar*) began in Sangsar in 1317/1899 and the Baha'is of that town began a building for a Mashriqu'l-Adhkar (house of worship) in 1921. It was a particularly fine building with doors made of walnut wood and the ceiling also framed in walnut. The enemies of the Baha'is raised an uproar about this development and sent letters to Tehran and elsewhere. At this time Riḍā Khan (later Reza Shah) was minister for war and he sent instructions to the military governor of Simnan to destroy this Mashriqu'l-Adhkar. Cossack troops arrived in Sangsar in 1922 and arrested 15 of the Baha'is and took them to the deputy governor of Sangsar (they were later transferred to prison in Simnan). They then set off with a large mob to destroy the building, but the Baha'i women had blockaded themselves in the building and refused to let the men destroy it. Eventually they poured paraffin on the building and set fire to it, thus forcing the women to leave, after which they destroyed it. They also burned and destroyed the Baha'i school and all its furniture. Some 80 of the Baha'is fled to Firuzkuh (40 kilometres to the west, in Mazandaran) and began to send telegrams from there to Tehran pleading their case. At this, a large mob surrounded the telegraph station and the governor was unable to prevent them from attacking the Baha'is. But the Baha'is defended themselves and the attackers were dispersed.<sup>38</sup> The Baha'is of Firuzkuh sent a brave young man, Muhammad 'Ali Akhavan to Tehran with a petition for Rida Khan. When his petition was refused at the front office of the War Ministry, he forced his way into the presence of Rida Khan and handed it over. Rida Khan took a liking to the impetuous young man and sent orders for the persecution to stop.<sup>39</sup>

35. TAS 20; ZH 8a:294-7; MH 1:349-53.

36. TAS 22-3; quote on p. 23.

37. TAS 24.

38. TAS 22-3; MH 4:542-3, 567-70; ZH 8a:292, 302-3.

39. From the notes of Dr Badi'u'llah Parsa in note *thā* of the notes of the translator, Kiumars Mazlum, of this article in *Payām Bahā'ī*, no. 331 (June 2007) 43-4.

40. TAS 30-3; ZH 8a:304,  
9:31, 71, 91-2.

There were further episodes of persecution in 1341/1922, when two Baha'is were attacked and injured, in 1344/1925, when a Baha'i woman was killed as she slept at night in her home, and in 1348/1929, when public readings of Avarih's book attacking the Baha'i Faith caused a resurgence of hostility towards the Baha'is.<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

This history demonstrates a number of points which apply to many other Baha'i communities in Iran: the dependence of the Baha'i community on a prior Babi community which in turn had come into existence on the back of a previous Shaykhi community; the pressure exerted by the Muslim clerics of the area; the vulnerability of the Baha'i communities in small towns and villages to the notables and landowners of the area; the development of Baha'i institutions (such as local assemblies and devotional meetings) and facilities (such as a bath and schools); and the manner in which these Baha'i communities were constantly having to negotiate for their survival in a dialogue with clerics, governors, landowners and the mob. A number of features of the community, however, were unusual. The number of well-qualified clerics who became Baha'is is particularly notable. It was not unusual for one or two clerics to convert to the Baha'i Faith in each area, but these were often minor clerics. In this area, we have seven or eight major clerics and a number of minor ones converting. Presumably this must be due to the individuals mentioned at the start of this account, who prepared people for this event, and the Shaykhi movement, which carried out the same function.

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