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Shoghi Effendi's Letters to the Baha'is of India and Burma during the 1920s

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Abstract

There are as yet few studies of the early history of the Baha'i communities of India and Burma. This paper provides a brief overview of the development of the Baha'i Faith in India and Burma up to 1921, and then offers summary notes on administrative and community developments that occurred during the 1920s under the guidance of Shoghi Effendi, including the establishment of a joint national spiritual assembly, the work of international travelling teachers, and the development of Baha'i periodical literature. The difficulties of uniting the Baha'i communities, of gaining support for the new national assembly and of expanding the Baha'i support base are noted, as is the changing role of women within the Baha'i community as a whole.

The Baha'i communities of India and Burma are some of the longest established in the Baha'i world, but have as yet received comparatively little attention from historians.¹ The present article is offered as a contribution to our knowledge of the situation of the Baha'i Faith in India and Burma during the 1920s, with particular reference to the published letters of Shoghi Effendi to the Indian and Burmese Baha'is.² It also provides material for comparison with

¹ There is as yet no detailed study of Indian and Burmese Baha'i history, although two doctoral dissertations completed in the 1970s by Garlington and Garrigues provide some overall context. See William N. Garlington, 'The Baha'i Faith in Malwa: A Study of a Contemporary Religious Movement' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 1975) and Steve L. Garrigues, 'The Baha'is of Malwa: Identity and Change Among the Urban Baha'is of Central India' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Lucknow, 1976). See also Paula Drewek, 'Cross-Cultural Testing of Fowler's Model of Faith Development: the Bahā'īs of Canada and India', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, 1996. A recent study by Moojan Momen of Jamal Effendi, the pioneer Baha'i teacher to India, provides a useful overview of early developments; see 'Jamāl Effendi and the early spread of the Bahā'ī Faith in South Asia', *Bahā'ī Studies Review* 9 (1999–2000) 47–80. There is also an account of a visit by an early western Baha'i, see Sydney Sprague, *A Year with the Bahais of India and Burma* (London: The Priory Press, 1908). For a short summary of the situation c. 1920 see Moojan Momen, 'Esslemont's survey of the Bahā'ī world, 1919–1920', in *Bahā'īs in the West* (ed. P. Smith, Studies in the Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions, vol. 14, Los Angeles, CA: Kalimāt Press, 2004) 63–106 (see 83–6). William N. Garlington has also published several articles based on his research on developments in the Malwa area: 'Bahā'ī bhajans', *World Order* 16/2 (Winter 1982) 43–9; 'Bahā'ī conversions in Malwa, central India', in *From Iran East and West* (ed. J. R. Cole and M. Momen, Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī History, vol. 2, Los Angeles, CA: Kalimāt Press, 1984) 157–85; and 'The Baha'i Faith in Malwa', in *Religion in South Asia* (ed. G. A. Odie, London: Curzon Press, 1977) 101–17. Dipchand Khianra has provided a series of short biographies of early Indian Baha'is in his *Immortals* (New Delhi: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1988).

² There are two separate compilations of Shoghi Effendi's letters to India and Burma. The later, expanded volume, *Messages of Shoghi Effendi to the Indian Subcontinent, 1923–1957* (comp. and ed. Irān Fūrūtan Muhājir, New Delhi: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1995) substantially supersedes the earlier *Dawn of a New Day* ([comp. and ed. Irān Fūrūtan Muhājir], New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, n.d. [1970?]) (hereafter cited respectively as MIS and DND). Both volumes include secretaries' letters written on Shoghi Effendi's behalf and distinguish clearly

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developments in other parts of the Baha'i world during the early years of Shoghi Effendi's Guardianship.³

The Baha'is of India and Burma up to 1921

British India – which during the period under review also included Burma as well as what are now the states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – was a vast territory covering 1.9 million square miles, with a total population of over 315 million immediately prior to the First World War.⁴ It encompassed areas directly administered by the British, several hundred semi-autonomous princely states, and a number of tribal areas under separate administrations. Following the First World War (1914–18) there were increasing political tensions, related to the growing independence movements and the burgeoning development of separate 'modern' Indian and Burmese national identities. Both 'nations' included a variety of peoples of different religious and linguistic groups as well as tribal minorities, but whilst the greater number of Indians were Hindus of various castes and persuasions, most Burmese were Buddhists. Inter-religious and inter-ethnic tensions, particularly those between Hindus and Muslims in India proper, and anti-Indian sentiment in Burma, were becoming marked.

Early Baha'i history

Several Indians became Babis, and relatives of the Bab established a trading company in Bombay in the 1850s, later becoming the first Baha'is in the subcontinent. At their request and under their sponsorship, Baha'u'llah sent Sulayman Khan Tunukabuni – now better known as Jamal Effendi (d. 1898) – as the first Baha'i missionary teacher to India, and it was with his arrival in Bombay (Mumbai) in about 1875 that the Baha'i history of India and Burma effectively began.⁵ Travelling widely over the next two decades, Jamal was able to achieve a widespread diffusion (often in a somewhat covert fashion) of general Baha'i ideas and of some knowledge of Baha'u'llah, as well as to establish a core of firm Baha'is who became an

between Shoghi Effendi's letters and postscripts and the words of the secretaries, although the names of the secretaries are not given. In addition to including far more letters than DND (particularly for Burma, with many messages from the International Bahā'ī Archives in Haifa being included that were not available in India for the earlier publication), MIS also includes beginnings and endings of letters that were omitted from DND – which often led to a loss of context in the earlier letters in DND. DND also omits the names of some particular individuals. A few passages that are present in DND are omitted from MIS.

³ The period of Shoghi Effendi's Guardianship has as yet received comparatively little attention from historians. For a general overview see Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 115–28. Studies of Baha'i developments in particular communities during the 1920s include Loni Bramson(-Lerche), 'Some aspects of the development of the Bahā'ī Administrative Order in America, 1922–1936', in *Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī History* (vol. 1, ed. M. Momen, Los Angeles, CA: Kalimāt Press, 1982) 255–300, and idem, 'The Plans of Unified Action', in *Baha'is in the West*, ed. P. Smith 155–97, both on North America; and Graham Hassall, 'Outpost of a World Religion: The Bahā'ī Faith in Australia, 1920–1947', in *Baha'is in the West*, ed. P. Smith, 201–26. The only detailed biography of Shoghi Effendi is Ruhyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1969).

⁴ Muriel Chamberlain, *The Longman Companion to the Formation of the European Empires. 1488–1920* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Educational, 2000) 125.

⁵ The following account is based on Momen, 'Jamal Effendi'. See also 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Memorials of the Faithful* (trans. Marzieh Gail, Wilmette IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1971) 134–8; *The Bahā'ī World* (vols 2–12, 1928–54, rpt, Wilmette IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1980–1) (hereafter cited as BW) 4:285; and H. M. Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahā'īs in the Time of Bahā'u'llāh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985) 119–28.

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important element in the subsequent development of the Baha'i Movement in India and more particularly in Burma.⁶

Meanwhile, more openly Baha'i communities were developing both in Bombay and in Burma. With a group of resident Baha'i merchants, Bombay became a centre of Baha'i publishing in Persian from about 1882–3, and later in Urdu, and also the base of operations for a succession of Iranian Baha'i teachers.⁷ A strong community emerged, including many newly-converted migrant Zoroastrians from Iran. During the early 1900s there was a significant diversification of the Baha'i community with the conversion of two young students: Pritam Singh (1881–1959), the first Baha'i of Sikh origin, and N. R. Vakil (1866–1943), the first Baha'i of Hindu background, both of whom were to become prominent in the Faith.⁸ There was a scattering of Baha'is in other parts of India.

The separate Burmese Baha'i community also developed strongly during these years. Several of Jamal Effendi's most dedicated converts were there, including Syed Mustafa Roumie.⁹ Both Mandalay and Rangoon (the chief cities of Upper and Lower Burma respectively) became important centres of Baha'i activity, and there were extensive conversions in two neighbouring villages in the Hanthawaddy district of Lower Burma.¹⁰

Numbers and distribution

By the late 1910s, it was estimated that there were nearly two thousand Baha'is altogether in India and Burma, with over one thousand in Burma, about four hundred in Bombay, and small groups in Calcutta, Poona, Allahabad, Jurazhee, Surat and the Punjab. Significantly, the majority of the Indian Baha'is at this date were of Zoroastrian background, whilst the majority of Burmese Baha'is were of Muslim origin (i.e. both from minority groups). There were also a number of Indian Baha'is of Muslim background and a few Burmese of Buddhist origin. Apart from the Burmese villagers, and the poorer Baha'is in one of the districts of Bombay, the Faith seemed to be making most rapid progress amongst the educated middle class, and it was from this group that the Baha'i leadership of India and Burma was increasingly drawn. Whilst women were already playing a prominent role amongst the Burmese Baha'is, Baha'i

⁶ Care in not presenting 'the truth' to those who were not ready for it was in accord with 19th century Iranian Baha'i ideas of prudent wisdom (*hikmat*), see Susan S. Maneck, 'Wisdom and dissimulation: The use and meaning of *hikmat* in the Baha'i writings and history', *Baha'i Studies Review* 6 (1996) 11–23. A similar esoteric hierarchy of knowledge was employed by Ibrahim Kheiralla during his initial Baha'i missionary teaching in the United States (Momen, 'Jamal Effendi' 77–8).

⁷ These included Mirza Mahram, who settled in India c. 1895, and Mirza Mahmud Zarqani (c. 1875–1927), who made the first of a series of missionary tours of the subcontinent in 1901 (Momen, 'Esslemont's survey' 85).

⁸ On Pritam Singh, see BW 13:874–6; Khianra, *Immortals* 109–30. On Narayenrao Rangnath Shethji Vakil, see BW 9:637–41; Khianra, *Immortals* 7–25.

⁹ See BW 10:517–20, and Barron Deems Harper, *Lights of Fortitude: Glimpses into the Lives of the Hands of the Cause of God* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1997) 123–8. There is a variety of spellings of Roumie's name in print (Rumie, Rūmī, Rumi).

¹⁰ Momen, 'Esslemont's survey' 85. The names of the villages in the 1920s are given as Kunjangoon [Kungyangoon] and Daidanaw-Kalazoo (e.g. BW 3:218, 222), with Baha'i sources giving the name of one or the other village in various spellings for the joint community. The conversion of all, or at least a majority, of the villagers was probably the first instance of what Baha'is now term 'mass conversion' outside of Iran. With the support of the Rangoon Baha'is, a village school for boys and girls was opened, as well as a prayer hall (*Mashriqu'l-Adhkār*). The Baha'i community continues to the present day but there is as yet no proper study of its history. There is an account by an early American Baha'i visitor in *The Bahā'ī Yearbook* (vol. 1, 1926, rpt, Wilmette IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1980) (hereafter cited as BYB) 84–6; BW 2:141–3, 147.

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activities in India appear to have involved mostly men, presumably reflecting traditional values about the role of women.¹¹

Moves towards 'national' activities

Initially, Baha'i activities in the various centres seem to have been fairly localized. Indeed, given the enormous distances involved, apart from correspondence and the occasional visit of a missionary teacher, there was little incentive to develop 'national' Baha'i activities. There were tentative moves towards a more organized and trans-local approach in the 1910s, however, with a 'national' teaching plan being adopted (1910) and a 'national' teaching council being formed to coordinate activities (1911). Even so, it was not easy to implement active coordination across a territory of almost two million square miles, and there do not appear to have been any genuinely national Baha'i events until the first 'All-India Bahai Convention' of 27–29 December 1920.

The Convention was held at the 'Bahai Hall' in Bombay, and accounts of its proceedings provide a snapshot of the Indian Baha'i community shortly before 'Abdu'l-Baha's passing. Altogether, there were nearly 175 Baha'is present, drawn from various parts of India (including Sind, the United Provinces and Madras), as well as Upper and Lower Burma, Iran and the United States, and including individuals of Muslim, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Sikh, Christian and Jewish backgrounds.¹² As in the case of the American Bahai Temple Unity Conventions (on which the Indian event was presumably modelled), the Bombay gathering comprised both a series of public lectures and a discussion of Baha'i 'administrative' matters.¹³

A second All-India Baha'i Convention was arranged for December 1921, and a third (in Karachi) for December 1922.¹⁴ However, these events were overshadowed by the shock of 'Abdu'l-Baha's passing (28 November 1921).

Shoghi Effendi and Baha'i Administrative Developments

Shoghi Effendi's first letters to India and Burma

As in other parts of the Baha'i world, 'Abdu'l-Baha's passing came as a major shock for many of the Baha'is,¹⁵ and there was an enthusiastic turning to his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, as the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith after the announcement of his appointment in January 1922. Shoghi Effendi himself was also greatly affected by his grandfather's death and retired from Haifa for an extended retreat in the Swiss Alps a few months after his appointment,¹⁶ but shortly before his departure he met with at least one of the Indian and Burmese Baha'is – Syed

¹¹ Momen, 'Esslemont's survey' 85–6.

¹² *Star of the West* (Chicago, 1910–35; hereafter cited as *Star*) 12/1:21, 26; 12/13:220. A photograph of Convention delegates shows 22 individuals (all men); judging by their dress, most appear to be of Iranian background (*Star* 12/1:20). A photograph of the banquet and reception shows a large room full of people, with segregation between the women and girls seated at tables, boys sitting at the front and men standing at the back (*Star* 12/1:23).

¹³ Momen, 'Esslemont's survey' 85–6.

¹⁴ *Star* 12/13:215; 13/8:220.

¹⁵ One of the leading Baha'i Indian women 'wept continuously for months' (Khianra, *Immortals* 221).

¹⁶ He left Haifa on 5 April 1922 and returned on 15 December (Rabbani, *Priceless Pearl* 56–7, 63).

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Mustafa Roumie from Burma, who was one of the small international group of Baha'is that was called to Haifa in March 1922 for consultations about the future of the Faith.¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi also issued his first general letter, in which he addressed the need to establish local and national assemblies throughout the Baha'i world (5 March 1922),¹⁸ and addressed his first general message to the Iranian Baha'is (16 January 1922), encouraging them to be steadfast and to protect the Faith,¹⁹ a copy of which may well have been sent to the Baha'is of India and Burma – many of whom at this date were Iranian or at least familiar with the Persian language.

Following his return to Haifa in December 1922, Shoghi Effendi sent out a mass of telegrams and letters to the Baha'is. These included a cable to the Indian Baha'is, in which he prayed that his being now reunited with them 'in the glorious arena of service' would herald 'triumphal victories' in the 'spiritual field' of their land.²⁰ Two letters in Persian followed (a copy of a general message of encouragement addressed to all the Baha'is of 'the East', and later a letter addressed specifically to the Indian Baha'is and appealing to them to promulgate the Baha'i Faith), and then Shoghi Effendi's first English-language letter addressed directly to 'the few' (my emphasis) amongst the Indian and Burmese Baha'is who were 'as yet unfamiliar with the Persian tongue', dated 9 January 1923.²¹

As in letters addressed to other Baha'is around the world at this time, Shoghi Effendi sought to give the Indian and Burmese Baha'is encouragement and a sense of mission. Thus, in this first English letter, he referred to India as an 'alluring field of service' in which the opportunities of sowing 'the seeds of unity and loving kindness in the hearts of its divers peoples' were vast. India might now be unhappily plunged in 'the darkness of prejudice, hate and mistrust', but the present mists would soon clear away, and the darkness of the immediate prospect would be replaced by 'the dawn of a New Day'. The rays of Baha'u'llah's divine revelation would then make India into 'a spiritually-quickened, peaceful and united country'. Therefore, the Baha'is should teach the Baha'i Faith. Despite their own diversity of language, race and custom, they were 'united at heart', and were animated 'by one common desire to uplift humanity and carry out [Baha'u'llah's] Divine Purpose for this world'. Shoghi Effendi also welcomed the news of the progress of the Third All India Baha'i Convention [December 1922], and of the 'favourable comment' it had received from the Press; praised the efforts the Indian Baha'is were making to consolidate the Baha'i Movement; and expressed the hope that their spiritual activities would be 'crowned with brilliant success', that ['Abdu'l-Baha's] 'glorious Promise' regarding India's future would be 'speedily fulfilled', and that the Indian Baha'i periodical (*Bahā'ī News*, see below) would expand and develop.²²

Shoghi Effendi's first separate letter to the Burmese Baha'is appears to have been written in February 1923.²³ In it, he referred to the present days of 'strife and turmoil', when it was 'sweet and glorious' to remember how 'the mighty hand' of 'Abdu'l-Baha had gathered together peoples of 'divers tongues and distant climes', and 'united their hearts in one

¹⁷ Rabbani, *Priceless Pearl* 55. According to Mountfort Mills, an American Baha'i, himself one of the participants at this Haifa gathering, there were Baha'is present from both India and Burma (*Star* 13/4:68), but no Indian is included in the list of participants.

¹⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahā'ī Administration* (1974 ed., rpt, Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1998) 17–25.

¹⁹ Rabbani, *Priceless Pearl* 52.

²⁰ Rabbani, *Priceless Pearl* 64.

²¹ MIS 1.

²² MIS 1–2.

²³ MIS 3.

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common spirit of love and servitude to the sacred Threshold of Baha'u'llah'. The [Baha'i] spirit that had achieved 'so great a measure of reconciliation' was the one factor that could, 'amid the unceasing contentions of races, nations, creeds and classes, assure to this disillusioned world the reign of true felicity and peace'. It was the Baha'is' great privilege 'to labour for the diffusion of this spirit'. Their task was 'vital and urgent' in order to relieve humanity from 'its present state of uncertainty and peril'. It was true that the work that was to be achieved was 'immeasurably difficult' and the obstacles that had to be surmounted were 'innumerable', but the Baha'is' reliance was on 'His ['Abdu'l-Baha's?] all-conquering Spirit', which had 'effected such a change in the past' and was 'sure, according to his explicit promise, to effect a still greater change in future'. Shoghi Effendi asked the Baha'is to send a 'detailed report' of the 'present position' of the Faith in Burma and of their activities and plans, and assured them that their 'welfare and happiness' were the objects of his 'deepest care and concern', praying that their 'far-away region' would become a 'radiant centre of spiritual activity and humanitarian achievements', and expressing his 'readiness' to be of service to them in their labours for the Faith. Another general letter to the Indian and Burmese Baha'is, written in December 1923, reiterated some of these themes.²⁴

The establishment of the National Spiritual Assembly and the Burmese Central Council

Many of Shoghi Effendi's subsequent letters to the Indian and Burmese Baha'is during the 1920s concern the administration of the Baha'i Faith. This reflects what was one of his major objectives during the early years of his Guardianship: to promote a regularized system of Baha'i administration internationally, centring on the formation of 'national' spiritual assemblies in each major Baha'i community to oversee Baha'i activities and the consolidation of the local spiritual assemblies that already existed in many parts of the Baha'i world.²⁵ To this end, with his encouragement and guidance, nine *de facto* 'national' assemblies were established or recognized during the 1920s, of which the assembly for India and Burma was one of the first (1923).²⁶ As elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi built on existing institutions – in this case calling for an existing 'Executive Committee' (presumably the one responsible for organizing the successive Baha'i conventions) to be re-formed as the National Spiritual Assembly for the Baha'is of India and Burma. He also permitted the formation of a separate 'Central Council' to coordinate Baha'i activities in Burma, specifying that this body should be subordinate to the national assembly.

Shoghi Effendi's first letter to what would become the National Spiritual Assembly of India and Burma appears to have been an informal one sent by his secretary in April 1923 to

²⁴ MIS 9–10.

²⁵ For a brief summary see Smith, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, 120–2, and idem, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith* (2nd ed., Oxford: OneWorld, 2002), 'administration', 'assemblies'.

²⁶ An official list of assemblies prepared at the Baha'i World Centre in 1989 lists seven: 'the British Isles' (Britain and Eire), 'Germany and Austria', and 'India and Burma' (all from 1923); 'Egypt and the Sudan' (from 1924); and 'the Caucasus', 'Turkistan' and 'the United States and Canada' (all from 1925) (Universal House of Justice, Department of Statistics, 'National and regional spiritual assembly formation', January 1989; document in author's possession), but *The Baha'i World* volumes for the period also list 'national' assemblies for Iraq and Persia (Iran) (BYB, 101; BW 2:181; 3:217) – a reference to the 'central' local spiritual assemblies of Tehran and Baghdad which at that time acted as national coordinating bodies and fulfilled many of the duties of national assemblies. It is of note that several of these early 'national' assemblies were actually bi-national and that two (Turkistan and the Caucasus) were formed in component areas of the Soviet Union.

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one of the members (probably N. R. Vakil, its 'auditor' and subsequently its long-serving chairman). In it, the then Executive Committee, was (1) directed to change its name to 'National Spiritual Assembly' so as to correspond with the form employed in England and America, 'uniformity in such matters' being 'most advisable'; (2) advised that Shoghi Effendi wished to receive 'regular and detailed reports' of the condition of the Faith and the activities of the Baha'is from the national assembly secretary, a request that he repeated in several subsequent letters; and (3) asked for both the postal and telegraphic addresses of the secretary so that he could send his communications via him, a request repeated in his next letter. The letter also expressed Shoghi Effendi's hope that the national assembly would be able to 'achieve a great deal and herald a new era of spiritual awakening in that land', and the hope that he placed in the younger Baha'is in teaching the Faith.²⁷

A formal letter to the now renamed assembly was penned by Shoghi Effendi himself in June 1923.²⁸ In it, he expressed his 'deep satisfaction' at the 'vigour and earnestness' with which the members of the assembly were conducting the affairs of the Baha'i movement 'throughout the length and breadth of that vast and distant land'; stressed the importance of their *Baha'i News*; reminded them that, despite the forthcoming establishment of a separate Baha'i Central Council for Burma, all Baha'i activities in that territory remained under their jurisdiction and that the local spiritual assemblies there were under the 'protection, care and direction' of the national ('All-India') assembly; prayed that the assembly members might achieve 'the highest success' in all their endeavours, both 'individually and collectively'; and stated that he would 'spare no effort' to contribute his 'humble share' to the consolidation and extension of the teaching campaign throughout 'that vast Dominion'. In a general letter to the Baha'is in December, he directed their attention to the forthcoming convention, stressing the need for 'a complete and careful arrangement' for its success to be made in the intervening months by all the Baha'is and their local assemblies, and calling for the various component elements in the Baha'i community to unite in their endeavours so as to inaugurate a period of 'unprecedented activity'.²⁹

In June 1923 Shoghi Effendi also wrote two separate letters to the Baha'is in Burma – to Rangoon, and to Mandalay, Daidanaw-Kalazoo and Tanbingyanng – acknowledging their letters and encouraging them. He expressed the hope that their endeavours to establish their own Central Council and Baha'i magazine would 'soon bear abundant fruit' and 'stand a testimony to the efficiency, the energy and the zeal' of the Burmese Baha'is, and awaited, 'with keen interest', 'the joyful news of the expansion of your work ... the consolidation of your Assemblies, the increase of your numbers'. He wished to receive 'frequent and direct letters from every Baha'i locality'.³⁰

²⁷ MIS 4. The secretary stressed the 'great hopes' that Shoghi Effendi placed in 'the younger Baha'i generation'. If they were to study the Faith 'deeply and thoroughly, read its history, find its underlying principles and become both well informed and energetic' they would surely 'achieve a great deal'. It was on 'their shoulders' that 'Abdu'l-Baha had 'laid the tremendous work of teaching'. They were the ones to 'raise the call of the Kingdom and arouse the people from slumber'. If they failed, the Baha'i Cause was 'doomed to stagnation'.

²⁸ MIS 5–6. The members of the first national assembly were: Mr M. U. Abasi, Haji Ahmad, Mr A. Bahram, Mr I. Bakhtiar [Mr I Bakhtiari], Mr Hashmatu'llah [Kureshi], Dr Kaushal (Koshal) Kishore, Mr M. Kodadad, Prof. Pritam Singh, and Mr N. R. Vakil (all men).

²⁹ MIS 9–10.

³⁰ MIS 6, 7–8.

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Aspects of administrative functioning

As the several national spiritual assemblies developed, Shoghi Effendi maintained an often detailed correspondence with them, encouraging them, guiding them through the various problems of functioning that they encountered, setting goals and directing them to undertake various tasks and activities. In the case of India and Burma – as elsewhere – the development of the assembly was often difficult, with Shoghi Effendi returning repeatedly to certain issues until he felt that the assembly was operating in the way that he desired.

A number of early letters outlined Shoghi Effendi's hopes for the national assembly. Thus, in November 1924 he called on the assembly to 'distinguish itself by its unremitting labours, its profound wisdom', and its contribution 'to the deepening of the spirit of love, service, unity, understanding and confidence' amongst the Baha'is.³¹ In March 1925 he stated that he 'strongly' desired the members of the assembly 'to meet as often as possible', and to 'direct, co-ordinate and reinforce' the activities of individual Baha'is and local assemblies throughout India and Burma. The national assembly should be active, efficient and constant in this regard.³²

Again, in April 1925, Shoghi Effendi emphasized 'the supreme necessity' of immediately establishing a national Baha'i fund and maintaining it to the best of the assembly's ability, and in May he reiterated that 'the institution' of the national fund was of 'vital importance' and should be 'stressed and emphasized in every circular or communication' addressed to the Baha'is.³³

Writing to Wakil in May 1925, Shoghi Effendi's secretary stressed the desirability of each local assembly having 'a register of the names and addresses of all declared Baha'is' in its respective district. These should be kept up to date, with any changes in the addresses or numbers of Baha'is being noted. The national assembly should maintain a similar list of all those Baha'is who did not live in areas where there were local assemblies, so that they could be kept in touch with the body of the Baha'is by letter and so that travelling Baha'is would be able to visit them. The national secretary should also have 'a full list of the members and office-bearers' of each local spiritual assembly, together with the addresses of their secretaries, and keep in as close touch as possible with the local assemblies. All local assemblies, together with those Baha'is not living in areas with assemblies ('isolated believers'), should be kept informed of important matters affecting the Faith through circular letters and the like. They should also be reminded of the importance of contributing to the national fund and sending regular reports to the national assembly. Shoghi Effendi also asked that the new national secretary send him, in addition to his own postal address: (1) 'a full list of the members and office-bearers' of the national assembly; (2) a copy of the list of the local assembly members, office-bearers, and secretaries' addresses; and (3) a copy of the list of isolated Baha'is and their addresses. Fresh lists should be sent each year 'immediately after the election' of the national assembly.³⁴

On several occasions Shoghi Effendi conveyed specific lists of goals, repeating them when he considered it necessary. Thus, in October 1926, he wrote that the 'most primary and urgent requirements of the new day that has dawned upon India' included the following: (1)

³¹ MIS 13.

³² MIS 16.

³³ MIS 17, 19.

³⁴ MIS 17–18.

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the institution of the national Baha'i fund; (2) the establishment of a 'Baha'i Bulletin', similar to the American national assembly's *News Letter*; (3) a 'rigorous and well-conceived campaign' of teaching; (4) a 'continuous and purposeful endeavour to coordinate the activities' of all the Indian and Burmese local assemblies and groups; and (5) 'the sending of detailed and frequent reports' to him in Haifa. He 'eagerly' awaited their reports and would continue to pray for the success of their 'arduous labours'.³⁵ In May 1927 he urged that the newly-elected national and local assemblies would: (1) 'widen the scope of their activities'; (2) 'initiate new and valuable measures'; (3) 'extend the circle of their correspondence with foreign Baha'i centres'; and (4) 'promote the independence and distinctiveness' of the Faith,³⁶ whilst in June 1928 his secretary stated that Shoghi Effendi expected the newly-elected national assembly to take responsibility for: (1) the coordination of Baha'i activities throughout India and Burma; (2) devising means of attracting the attention of people of 'every class and creed' to the message and 'vital dynamic spirit' of the Faith and endeavouring to increase the number of Baha'is 'and fellow-workers' [i.e. what modern Baha'is would refer to as proclamation and teaching]; and (3) 'as a cumulative and culminating step', the achievement of recognition of the Baha'i community as 'a separate religious organization', similar what had been achieved in the United States.³⁷

Initial problems

Initially, there were evidently some difficulties in establishing a unified and effective administrative system in India and Burma. The main problems appear to have concerned the functioning of the national spiritual assembly itself, the lack of unity between the Indian and Burmese Baha'is, and difficulties experienced by the national assembly in gaining support from the Baha'i community as a whole.

National assembly functioning. One problem lay in the functioning of the national assembly. The nature of the difficulty has not yet been properly established, but one consequence appears to have been that Shoghi Effendi often communicated important messages to the assembly in personal letters to Vakil rather than directly to the assembly itself.³⁸

Clearly, part of the problem was in the functioning of the national secretariat, and it would appear that, initially, important messages to the Baha'is were lost because the secretary did not

³⁵ MIS 31.

³⁶ MIS 36.

³⁷ MIS 43–4. This is presumably a reference to the legal Declaration of Trust and its attendant by-laws adopted by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Canada in April 1927 (see BW 2:89–97; 10:180; Shoghi Effendi, *Baha'i Administration* 134–5, 142–3). Earlier official recognition of the American Baha'is as a distinct religious community dates back to at least 1906, when a separate Baha'i entry was included in the *Census of Religious Bodies*. Again, the American Bahai Temple Unity, established in 1909, secured legal status in order to hold monies and buy land for the projected temple (Robert H. Stockman, *The Bahā'ī Faith in America*, vol. 2, *Early Expansion, 1900–1912* [Oxford: George Ronald, 1995] 226, 312). The North American national assembly did not achieve legal status as an incorporated body until May 1929 (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* [rev. ed., Wilmette: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1974] 335–6).

³⁸ Thus, of 35 published letters from Shoghi Effendi or written on his behalf to India and Burma between 1923 and 1926, only 4 were addressed to the national assembly, whilst 13 (or possibly 14) were addressed to Vakil (MIS 1–33). Similarly, of 41 letters between 1927 and 1930, 7 were addressed to the national assembly, whilst 26 were addressed to Vakil (MIS 34–67). Of course, given the changes in secretary and some of the problems of assembly consolidation, it may be that the successive national secretaries were in receipt of more letters than those now published, but that these have been lost or mislaid (e.g. see MIS 16).

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forward them.³⁹ This was hinted at as early as 1924,⁴⁰ but references to the problem become clearer in subsequent letters. Thus, in March 1925 Shoghi Effendi urged that the secretary should ensure that all incoming communications be 'promptly and widely distributed', whilst in April he emphasized the need for an 'earnest, capable, energetic, loyal and experienced soul' to discharge 'the responsible and arduous duties' of national secretary – most unusually, a veiled appeal to the assembly to change one of its chief officers.⁴¹

The importance of getting the national assembly to function effectively was underlined in a message to Vakil on 12 May 1925 (after the new assembly for the year would have been elected), when, after praising Vakil's past and present services, Shoghi Effendi wrote that he wished him for the present to concentrate his efforts as much as he could 'on the consolidation of the foundations' of the national assembly. This was 'the first and most essential step to further expansion in any direction'.⁴² By November, changes had evidently occurred, Shoghi Effendi writing to Vakil that he prayed that the 'newly constituted' assembly would 'grow from strength to strength'.⁴³ Again, in July 1926, Shoghi Effendi expressed his pleasure at the results of the recent election for the national assembly, his secretary noting on his behalf that as the assembly members were 'strong in their faith and unfailing in their services', and the Baha'is 'sincere in their love and devotion', there was 'full assurance of an ultimate victory and final settlement of the existing difficulties'.⁴⁴ That Shoghi Effendi was finally satisfied with the development of the national assembly is indicated in a letter to the assembly in October 1926, in which he referred to it as having now been 'properly constituted' and to its officers as being 'duly appointed'.⁴⁵

Uniting the community. As Shoghi Effendi clearly realized, the Baha'is of India and Burma were not a unified community. The two territories might well be a 'promising' field of Baha'i endeavour, but they were also 'vast', and there were significant divisions between the Baha'is. In a general letter to the Indian and Burmese Baha'is in December 1923 he identified three sub-groupings, and stated that it was his 'earnest hope' and 'most cherished desire' that their unity at the forthcoming national convention would impart 'power and brilliancy' to the proceedings such as to herald 'an era of unprecedented activity for the ultimate recognition of the Cause' by the peoples of the two countries. Each group had its contribution to make: the 'vigour and enlightened efforts of the Baha'i youth of India', coupled with 'the generous support and devotion of the old beloved Parsee friends' and reinforced by 'the vast numbers' of the 'ardent' Burmese Baha'is. The time had now come for the 'dearly-beloved pioneers' of

³⁹ Thus, in a letter to Vakil in April 1925 (MIS 16) Shoghi Effendi's secretary stated that a long letter had been sent by Shoghi Effendi to the Indian Baha'is via their national secretary only a few weeks previously, but no such letter is included in MIS.

⁴⁰ MIS 13.

⁴¹ MIS 16, 17. Dr Kaushal Kishore, praised for his 'great zeal' as a Baha'i teacher in spreading the Movement (MIS 4), was the first secretary (1923), but evidently found Baha'i administrative work difficult, and was later replaced by Mr Hashmatu'llah (Hishmatu'llah, Hashmatu'llah) Kureshi, who appears to have been secretary from 1925 to 1929, when he was replaced by Mr Badri (BYB 101; BW 2:146, 181; MIS 54-5).

⁴² MIS 19.

⁴³ MIS 22.

⁴⁴ MIS 27.

⁴⁵ MIS 31. That there was also concern about voting arrangements for the national assembly is perhaps indicated by a letter of May 1926 in which Shoghi Effendi expressed the hope that the elections just concluded had been conducted 'in the proper manner' (MIS 26).

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'Abdu'l-Baha's Cause who were now scattered throughout the country to 'unite, consolidate their forces', and 'combine' to lay 'a firm foundation for the future progress of their noble task'.⁴⁶

That there were tensions between the Indian and Burmese Baha'is was perhaps first hinted at in a cable sent by Shoghi Effendi in December 1924, stating that 'Burma's participation' – presumably in national administration – was 'extremely desirable for success'.⁴⁷ More directly, in March 1925, Shoghi Effendi stressed that the national assembly was responsible for India 'and Burma' (Shoghi Effendi's emphasis), and expressed his pleasure at measures that Vakil had taken to bring about 'a better understanding' between the two parties.⁴⁸ He also sent a long letter (not included in MIS, see footnote 39) to the Baha'is of both territories, hoping that this would draw them together, and wrote later to Vakil of his sadness at 'the state of tension' that existed between the Baha'is of the two countries and their inability to work in harmony. He prayed that all the 'petty misunderstandings' would be forgotten and that, with the election of a new national assembly, the Baha'is would 'wholeheartedly unite in promoting the work of the Cause' and their activities would start 'on a new basis firmer than before'.⁴⁹

Whilst calling for greater unity between the Indian and Burmese Baha'is, Shoghi Effendi also acknowledged that Burma had a separate and distinctive identity as a Baha'i community. Thus, writing to the editors of the newly-established Burmese Baha'i magazine (*The Dawn*, see below) in February 1925, he outlined a plan of action for the Baha'is of Burma – 'that beloved and picturesque country' which stood as 'sentinel on the eastern confines of the Baha'i world'. With its 'vast number of modest yet ardent' Baha'is, it should 'pursue diligently' its work of extending 'the sphere of its healing mission in life' ever further into 'the very heart of the Far East'. It should maintain the most close and cordial cooperation with the Indian Baha'is as a sign of the 'growing solidarity' of the Faith, but at the same time 'it should concentrate its energies on the consolidation of its work' in its 'own particular field'. It was the 'privilege' of the Burmese Baha'is to 're-adjust and stimulate their own activities, lay down their own programme for an intensive and systematic campaign of Teaching, and, with an unshakable resolve, arise to carry it to a successful conclusion'.⁵⁰

By March 1926, the national assembly's relations with the Burmese Baha'is had evidently greatly improved, Shoghi Effendi noting that the Burmese Baha'is were now 'very satisfied and pleased with the consideration shown' (presumably towards them), as well as with 'the activity displayed' by the national assembly.⁵¹

Local assembly support. Another problem lay in the lack of support for the national assembly from some of the local spiritual assemblies – whose members may possibly have resented the assertion of the authority of the national assembly vis-à-vis their own. Thus, in July 1926 Shoghi Effendi notified Vakil that he had written personally to the long-established Bombay assembly, 'most emphatically' urging its members to support the national assembly both

⁴⁶ MIS 9.

⁴⁷ MIS 13.

⁴⁸ MIS 15–16.

⁴⁹ MIS 16–17.

⁵⁰ MIS 14–15.

⁵¹ MIS 25.

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morally and financially, adding that it was necessary to repeat things over and again until 'the truth, the necessity and the urgency' of 'Abdu'l-Baha's instructions sank into 'the hearts and minds' of the Baha'is.⁵² He repeated the gist of this message in September by cable and letter to Bombay. As Shoghi Effendi's secretary noted, it always took time for people 'to change from one administration to another'. Having been accustomed to thinking of local assemblies as 'next only to the Centre of the Cause', the Baha'is would find it difficult to straightaway accept a new authority, and would have to be trained to do so. Shoghi Effendi was well aware of the difficulties that the national assembly was encountering, but its members should be assured of ultimate success.⁵³ A few days later, his secretary wrote that Shoghi Effendi had been somewhat 'comforted' to hear that the Bombay Baha'is had made a 'favourable approach' to the national assembly, and hoped that this would prove to be 'the first step towards a complete mutual understanding',⁵⁴ and in November 1926 the secretary referred to the recent difficulties 'which for a time prevailed and threatened grave disturbances' between the national and local assemblies, that had surely been due to misunderstandings that 'would be easily overcome', and Shoghi Effendi's pleasure that these had now 'vanished'.⁵⁵ Shoghi Effendi's secretary also referred to the fact that the national assembly had a duty, in return, to 'inspire the necessary confidence' of the local assemblies in its own leadership by 'keeping the management of its work as efficient as possible'.⁵⁶

More generally, it may have been difficult for the national assembly to secure the support of the community as a whole. Thus, in April 1925, Shoghi Effendi expressed the hope that the Indian and Burmese Baha'is would support the new national assembly when it was elected, and 'whole-heartedly unite in promoting the work of the Cause', and in an October telegram he wished that the national assembly members might 'FULFIL OUR HIGHEST EXPECTATIONS'.⁵⁷

Developments after 1926

It is evident that Shoghi Effendi considered that at least some of the problems of consolidating the Indian-Burmese national assembly were moving towards resolution by late 1926, but it is also obvious that some problems remained.

Thus, after the difficulties of the past, Shoghi Effendi's October 1926 letter to the national assembly held out the hope of a new beginning. 'Now' that the assembly had been 'properly constituted', Shoghi Effendi called upon its members to 'promote such measures' as would 'consolidate the work' that the assembly had already begun 'so well' and referred to 'the new day' that had dawned upon India. His secretary wrote of the 'glorious Spirit' that Shoghi Effendi hoped to see 'emanating' from and through the members of the assembly, and of the expectation that through their 'earnest endeavours', 'consummate wisdom' and 'unflinching faith' they would lead the Baha'is of 'that great country' to 'ultimate victory'. It was 'a joy

⁵² MIS 27.

⁵³ MIS 29.

⁵⁴ MIS 30.

⁵⁵ DND 15. This passage is from a paragraph that does not appear in MIS 31-2.

⁵⁶ MIS 32.

⁵⁷ MIS 17, 21.

⁵⁸ MIS 30-1.

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beyond words' for him to do all he could to help them in the 'noble work' they had undertaken.⁵⁸ Vakil apparently replied to the effect that former difficulties had 'vanished' and that the national and local assemblies were now united in working for the Cause.⁵⁹

In two letters of May 1927, his secretary noted Shoghi Effendi's expectations regarding the election of the new national spiritual assembly and his hope that a 'strong and capable' body had been elected for the new year, able to accomplish 'something more than routine work'.⁶⁰ In a letter to Vakil in August, Shoghi Effendi urged that the assembly try to 'follow the example' of the American national assembly 'in method, action, and procedure', and urged Vakil to encourage the Baha'is 'to follow and adopt the method outlined' in the American assembly's newsletter, as an exemplar of the methods that should be followed.⁶¹

It would seem, however, that Shoghi Effendi's expectations of a new beginning were at least partly disappointed, for in November 1927 he was asking if there were any recent developments that might have affected Baha'i teaching work in the sub-continent, whilst his secretary, in a later letter that month, opined that despite some recent successes, the progress of the Faith in India still did not 'come up to expectations' – particularly in view of the long period since the Faith had first been established there.⁶² Then, in a dramatic note to Vakil in May 1928, Shoghi Effendi announced that he would make special supplication in ['Abdu'l-Baha's] shrine for the Baha'is of India and Burma, that they might 'arise with heart and soul and in perfect harmony and understanding' to promote the Baha'i Faith there.⁶³

A sudden surge of administrative developments then occurred in late 1928 and 1929, with the holding of a proper administrative convention, the election of a new national secretary, the commencement of a plan to hold alternate national assembly meetings in India and Burma, and the beginning of the preparatory work for legal incorporation.

National convention. The sheer size of British India evidently made it difficult both to hold well-attended conventions to vote for the national assembly members and to have frequent and well-attended meetings of the assembly.⁶⁴ Thus, in October 1928, Shoghi Effendi gave approval for the idea of holding a 'Baha'i [electoral] Convention', returning to the topic in several subsequent letters – making 'the choice of the site and other arrangements' the responsibility of the national assembly.⁶⁵ In November he wrote that it was 'absolutely essential' for the Baha'is throughout India and Burma to be in 'closer touch' and to have a 'more frequent interchange of thought', and that the proposed Convention would enable them to achieve this. Later in the month his secretary expressed Shoghi Effendi's hope that it would

⁵⁹ MIS 33.

⁶⁰ MIS 35–6.

⁶¹ MIS 38.

⁶² MIS 39.

⁶³ MIS 43.

⁶⁴ Prior to Shoghi Effendi's development of the administrative system, Baha'i Conventions had been, essentially, a combination of a series of public proclamatory meetings with a general administrative meeting (as in the Baha'i Temple Unity in North America and the All-India Baha'i Convention of 1920). Under the system of Baha'i administration established by Shoghi Effendi, however, the primary responsibility of national conventions became the electing of national assemblies. He also specified that the conventions should be held annually, ideally during the Ridvan period, and that when it was not possible to elect the national assembly by delegate meeting, voting should be conducted by post (BW 2:75, 77–8; Shoghi Effendi, *Baha'i Administration* 79–80, 91–2). It would appear that the Indian and Burmese Baha'is initially had to rely on postal elections.

⁶⁵ MIS 45.

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prove to be an event of major significance in the history of the Faith in the subcontinent and lead to 'wonderful results'.⁶⁶ Again, in two letters in December, Shoghi Effendi prayed for its success, trusting that it would be 'fully and widely represented by the divers elements' that constituted the joint community, and that it would 'remedy most if not all of the present deficiencies' in the Cause in India, and provide 'an unprecedented impetus to the progress of the Faith'.⁶⁷ In November he wrote also of his hope that the efforts of the national assembly would give a 'great impetus' to the spread of the Faith in India and Burma that winter season, and that the Baha'is would 'increasingly realize the sacredness and pressing nature of their obligations and responsibilities'.⁶⁸ In December his secretary referred to the assembly's hopes that the Convention would re-establish a 'sense of love and harmony' amongst the Indian and Burmese Baha'is, since without that it was impossible to 'preach the gospel of love' to the rest of mankind.⁶⁹

Although successful, the Convention was evidently marred by the non-attendance of the Burmese delegates.⁷⁰ Another problem was the continuing differences between individual assembly members, a situation which Shoghi Effendi's secretary attributed (in February 1929) to the lack of frequent contact between the individuals concerned, and the misunderstandings and lack of mutual trust that this ultimately generated. The Guardian knew them as individuals and was sure that they desired only to serve the Cause and not retard its progress. Of course, there were basic physical problems – given that the country was so vast, it was not possible for meetings to be frequent or well attended – but for two or three years he had hoped that 'a spirit of mutual trust' would overcome these difficulties. Sadly, this had not happened.⁷¹ Shoghi Effendi himself added that 'the utmost effort' would have to be exerted in the next election for the national assembly to elect only those who were 'best fitted for this supreme and responsible position'. Once elected, members should not be allowed to resign. The assembly members should 'meet and consult in person'. It was necessary to 'maintain and strengthen' the unity of the national assembly 'at all costs'. Everything else should 'be subordinated to this end'. Now that the Iranian Baha'is were preparing to hold national elections [and adopt the national administrative system delineated by Shoghi Effendi], it would be 'a decidedly retrograde step' if the Baha'is of India and Burma abandoned the new system and reverted to the old one [of 'central' local assemblies acting to coordinate activities].⁷²

As to the conventions, Shoghi Effendi hoped that the Indian and Burmese Baha'is would now hold them on an annual basis and that, as in other countries, the gatherings would 'lead to a better understanding' amongst the Baha'is. Indeed, as his secretary noted, as the number of Baha'is increased, the diversity of opinion within the community would surely grow, and it would become even more important to have an occasion at which these differences could be discussed and 'true unity of purpose and activity' be obtained.⁷³

⁶⁶ MIS 46.

⁶⁷ MIS 47–8.

⁶⁸ MIS 46–7.

⁶⁹ MIS 47.

⁷⁰ Wakil dispatched his report to Shoghi Effendi in mid-January 1929. The Convention had presumably been held in late December. MIS 52.

⁷¹ DND 25. This passage is based on a paragraph that does not appear in MIS 51.

⁷² MIS 51–2.

⁷³ MIS 51.

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A new secretary. In 1929 the national assembly acquired a new secretary, a Mr Badri, apparently an Iranian student from Shiraz who was studying in India.⁷⁴ In his letters of June and July 1929 Shoghi Effendi conveyed his pleasure at Badri's election, and praised his 'sustained and unsparing efforts' to spread the Baha'i Cause in India as well as his endeavours to fulfil the duties of national secretary, despite limitations of time (presumably caused by the demands of his studies). Shoghi Effendi hoped that the newly-elected assembly would maintain both its own unity and the unity of the national community, and infuse a new spirit into Baha'i activities in India and Burma, vigorously promoting teaching of the Faith and trying to establish 'a progressive and representative Baha'i community in both countries'. He was delighted with the proposal that the national assembly should meet once each in Burma and India, and suggested that more frequent meetings be held in each of the countries if this were feasible – through this means, and by the 'individual effort' of each national assembly member, he hoped that the misunderstandings that existed between the Indian and Burmese Baha'is would be ended, so that a fresh start could be made in a spirit of true accord. These themes were reiterated in a letter of August 1929.⁷⁵

Badri sent Shoghi Effendi his assessment of the Baha'i situation in India in August 1929. Replying in September 1929, Shoghi Effendi welcomed Badri's 'frank expression' of the situation and his 'energetic desire' to get things moving again after 'years of practical stagnation'. It was refreshing to see that many of the Indian and Burmese Baha'is were now dissatisfied with the present situation and desired 'fresh endeavours along enlightened lines'. He was particularly pleased with Badri's realization that the world was developing and becoming enlightened through the operation of unseen divine forces, and that it would be shameful for the Baha'is then to go around proclaiming principles that they had learnt from the Faith 'so many years before' but had failed to live up to.⁷⁶ Later (probably in February 1930), Badri suggested that a national secretariat (presumably a full-time secretary with a formal office) be established in India, a suggestion which Shoghi Effendi viewed favourably but left for the national assembly to determine.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, Badri himself seems to have had to leave India shortly after this.

Alternate meetings. The plan to have alternate meetings of the national assembly in India and Burma began in the autumn of 1929 with a meeting in Bombay. This was apparently successful, and in December Shoghi Effendi referred to the forthcoming meeting in Rangoon as having the potential to be a 'landmark' in the history of the Faith in the two countries. He prayed that it would 'lend a fresh and unprecedented impetus to the onward march of the Cause in those lands', and hoped that a meeting between the national assembly and the Burmese Baha'is in a spirit of goodwill would lead to the development of a 'new and enduring unity of purpose and effort'.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ In March 1930 his secretary conveyed Shoghi Effendi's sympathies at the news of Badri's father's death in Shiraz and referred to the ('unfortunate') possibility that Badri might return home after he had graduated (MIS 60). Badri's tenure as secretary seems to have ceased some time after this, as there are no more messages addressed to him – presumably he had returned to Iran.

⁷⁵ MIS 54–5.

⁷⁶ MIS 56.

⁷⁷ MIS 60.

⁷⁸ MIS 57–8.

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Preparation for legal incorporation. Also by late 1929, Vakil was beginning work on the documents required in order to gain some sort of legal status for the Faith in India – a significant step in consolidating the Faith. As in the United States, the documents consisted of a declaration of trust and a set of national assembly by-laws, jointly referred to as a ‘Baha’i constitution’ by Shoghi Effendi, who instructed Vakil to follow the American text as closely as possible in ‘subject matter, arrangement and form’.⁷⁹

Aspects of Community Activity and Development

The distribution of Baha’is

Compared to the initial successes of Baha’i activity in India and Burma, the 1920s appear to have been a period of limited results. No Baha’i population estimates for the period are available,⁸⁰ but it seems unlikely that there was any significant increase in numbers over the decade, and there may even have been a decline from the estimate of fewer than two thousand Baha’is in the late 1910s (above). Certainly, the official listings of Baha’i groups during the period show meagre results, particularly for India, some places – such as Madras – that had previously had large and active Baha’i groups no longer being included. Thus, the first international listing of Baha’i centres (in 1925) included the names of only five localities in India (Bombay, Surat and Poona in the west, Calcutta in the east and Karachi in what is now Pakistan), with another four in Burma (the villages of Daidanaw-Kalazoo and Kunjangoon, and the cities of Mandalay and Rangoon).⁸¹ These figures subsequently increased: to nine in India by 1928 (with the addition of Hyderabad, Cawnpore, Amritsar and Delhi), and to ten by 1930 (with the addition of Agra); and to five in Burma by 1928 (with the addition of Kyigon), and to seven by 1930 (with the addition of Kungyan and Taubingyoung).⁸² Overall the number of groups remained extremely limited, however, and by 1930, in the two territories together (with a prewar population of well over 300 million), there were still only 17 localities in which there was a recorded Baha’i presence. Comparatively, of course, the Baha’i ‘presence’ was greater in Burma than in India, because of the much smaller environing population. Whilst the Indian Baha’i localities were all cities, most of those in Burma were villages, indicating a quite different kind of Baha’i community.

In terms of administrative development, of the ten Indian Baha’i ‘centres’, only four (Bombay, Calcutta, [Camp] Karachi and Poona) formed local spiritual assemblies during this period. Of the Burmese centres, three had formed local assemblies by 1928 (Kunjangoon, Mandalay and Rangoon) and four (out of seven) by 1930 (with the addition of Kungyan).⁸³

⁷⁹ MIS 58. An official certificate of registration of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of India and Burma was issued on 20 January 1933 at Lahore (BW 5:236).

⁸⁰ In April 1930 Syed Mustafa Roumie sent to Shoghi Effendi a ‘comprehensive report’ of a Baha’i census that had been conducted for Burma (MIS 64), but this remains unpublished.

⁸¹ BYB 103.

⁸² BW 2:182, 187; 3:218, 222. It seems probable that Taubingyoung was in fact the same as Tanbingyang mentioned above.

⁸³ BW 2:182; 3:218.

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Restraints on growth

What were the reasons for this seeming lack of progress? Shoghi Effendi himself was aware of the situation and was concerned with this question, as is evident from his letters. Thus, on Shoghi Effendi's behalf in March 1925, his secretary noted that for the past few years, the 'harvest' of the Baha'is' endeavours in that 'vast and promising' country had not been 'as rich and abundant' as the Guardian or the Indian Baha'is wished,⁸⁴ and he returned to this theme in letters written in May 1926 and April 1927.⁸⁵ In November 1927, he again expressed his disappointment with overall progress.⁸⁶

One possible reason for frustration of the Baha'is' efforts may have been the political situation. This had changed dramatically after the First World War, with a marked increase in pro-independence sentiment and political action.⁸⁷ The rise in nationalist fervour may have affected Baha'i teaching endeavours by focusing the attention of many people on the possibilities of political action and away from interest in 'religious' solutions to India's problems. Certainly, Shoghi Effendi was aware of this explanation, for in March 1925 his secretary observed that the political struggles of recent years and the resulting general unrest were 'undoubtedly' a major reason for the 'comparative unfruitfulness' of the Baha'is' 'self-sacrificing efforts'. He lamented 'the formidable difficulties and obstacles' with which the Indian Baha'is had to cope in their efforts 'to imbue the individual with a new spirit and to bring new measures of reform in the social order'.⁸⁸ In April 1930 Shoghi Effendi's secretary hoped that a forthcoming visit to India by the American Baha'i teacher Martha Root (below) would 'prove to be of some value' in attracting the attention of 'the intelligent classes', although the 'political agitation' might 'entirely defeat that purpose'.⁸⁹

Another factor that may have impeded Baha'i success was the state of the Baha'i community itself during the period. The apparent instances of squabbling and petty resentments that divided the Indian and Burmese Baha'is and the difficulties that the national spiritual assembly experienced both in functioning effectively and in securing the allegiance and support of the Baha'i community as a whole may have dampened spirits and diminished the energies and enthusiasm necessary for successful Baha'i teaching endeavour. Certainly, several letters from Haifa implied a linkage between Baha'i unity and the spread of the Faith. Thus, in March 1926 Shoghi Effendi's secretary stated that the unity of the Baha'is, combined with effective teaching work, would be both a 'real accomplishment' and an important means of lightening Shoghi Effendi's 'stupendous task', giving him 'deepest joy and confidence'.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ MIS 15.

⁸⁵ MIS 26 and 34-5.

⁸⁶ MIS 39. See similar letters in November 1928 (MIS 45) and early December 1928 (MIS 47). In the November letter, the secretary stated that Shoghi Effendi would appreciate Vakil's personal opinion of the reasons for the lack of Baha'i growth in India (MIS 45-6). In response, Vakil evidently consulted with other Baha'is, and by December a full-scale national survey of Baha'i opinion on the matter was being conducted, Shoghi Effendi's secretary advising the national assembly to consider the Baha'is' written responses carefully, rapidly remedying any problem and inspiring the community to do what was needed in order to spread the Cause (MIS 48).

⁸⁷ India had given massive support to the British war effort, and many educated Indians expected this loyalty to be rewarded by moves towards self-government. Instead, they found that the British were intent on continuing wartime curtailment of freedoms and were unwilling to do more than mildly condemn a British general responsible for a massacre of unarmed Indian protestors in Amritsar (1919). It was in this context that Gandhi emerged as a popular leader of an increasingly radical pro-independence movement.

⁸⁸ MIS 15-16.

⁸⁹ MIS 63. See a similar letter in July 1930 (MIS 65).

⁹⁰ MIS 24. These thoughts were repeated in May and July 1926 (MIS 26, 27), and in December 1928 Shoghi

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As in other parts of the world, another possible reason for the relative lack of growth in the 1920s in India and Burma was the passing of 'Abdu'l-Baha and the dawning of a new and less charismatic age of Baha'i endeavour. A specifically Indian factor may have been the rising level of communal religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims, which may have made the Baha'i teachings of unity seem more problematic and impractical to some people.

Encouragement and guidance

One of Shoghi Effendi's responses to the Baha'i situation in India was to offer regular encouragement, both to those individuals who were in the forefront of the teaching work and to the Baha'is more generally. Thus, writing to Vakil in March 1925, Shoghi Effendi's secretary stated that nothing could be 'more encouraging and gladsome' to the Guardian than news of the activities of the Indian Baha'is. They should not be discouraged at their lack of success, not letting anything dampen their zeal, nor should they for a moment doubt 'Abdu'l-Baha's prediction of 'the remarkable change' that would take place in their country.⁹¹ In November 1928 Shoghi Effendi's secretary noted the recent and very sudden prominence which the Baha'is of Turkey had gained, musing that perhaps a 'similar awakening' would occur in India.⁹²

Shoghi Effendi also encouraged or endorsed specific courses of action. Two letters in 1926 are of particular interest in setting the Baha'is four 'external' goals (in addition to achieving unity amongst themselves):

- 1] Spreading the Faith in 'that vast country', in particular amongst 'the real natives'.
- 2] Making 'intelligent connections with the universities and schools', so that their students would gain a 'proper understanding' of the Faith and its mission (27 March 1926).⁹³
- 3] Attempting to bring Hindus and Muslims together (in the wider society), demonstrating to them a spirit of 'goodwill, devotion to humanity, and disinterestedness in the material result obtained' (i.e. not to be discouraged if their efforts had only limited success – or perhaps to be without the ulterior motive of making converts and to have the aim purely of bringing the two sides together).
- 4] Attracting the attention of prominent leaders to 'the reality of the Cause' (10 July 1926).⁹⁴

Effendi expressed his hope that the forthcoming national Baha'i Convention would remedy most of the present 'deficiencies' in the Indian community and lead to 'an unprecedented impetus' to Baha'i progress (MIS 48–9).

⁹¹ MIS 15. This thought was repeated in Shoghi Effendi's letters of 1927 (MIS 36, 37).

⁹² MIS 45–6. An investigation by the Turkish police into the activities of the Baha'is (as part of government moves to restrict unsupervised religious activity) led to the temporary arrest of a number of Baha'is, followed by the establishment of their innocence of any wrong intent, as well as widespread publicity for the Faith (Shoghi Effendi, *Baha'i Administration* 151–2, 167–9).

⁹³ MIS 24.

⁹⁴ MIS 27.

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Action

In India and Burma, as elsewhere, much Baha'i teaching endeavour was no doubt conducted on a personal basis and not recorded. In terms of public means of action, however, one common approach was for prominent Baha'is to visit a number of cities and give lectures relating to the Baha'i Faith in schools and colleges and to sympathetic organizations. Several such tours by both Indian Baha'is and international Baha'i teachers from Iran and the West are recorded. For example, for two months (1 January–28 February 1921) immediately after the first All-India Convention in December 1920, N. R. Vakil toured northern cities (Allahabad, Benares, Calcutta, Dacca, Patna, Lucknow, Agra, Karachi), speaking in colleges and hostels on such subjects as 'Universal Peace', the 'Bahai Movement', and 'Universal Religion', visiting the Brahmo Samaj centre at Uymensingh and Rabindranath Tagore's school near Bolpur (both in Bengal), and gaining good press coverage from two English-language dailies for his lectures in Allahabad.⁹⁵

Other Indian Baha'is prominent in the teaching effort included Prof. Pritam Singh, Dr Kaushal (Koshal) Kishore, Mr Hashmatu'llah Koreshi and Syed Ilmi, all of whom were specifically praised for their efforts in letters from Haifa – as in July 1926, when Shoghi Effendi's secretary stated that the competence of Hishmatu'llah [Hashmatu'llah] and Singh, combined with 'the necessary divine blessings and guidance' assured that the potential results of their teaching work would be great.⁹⁶ Singh appears to have been particularly energetic and successful. A university teacher who resigned from his profession in 1927 in order to devote himself full time to Baha'i activity, he travelled and lectured extensively. As the Guardian's secretary noted, Singh and his wife were firm in the Faith and possessed of 'education and intellectual training', and as such had a duty to see that the Cause was 'properly presented to the outside world' and to attract 'the choicest' class of people.⁹⁷

International teachers included several Iranians – such as Mirza Mahmud Zarqani and Aqa Mirza Munir, who both visited India in 1926. Shoghi Effendi conveyed his hopes that Munir's visit would 'cause another stir' in India, drawing many individuals into 'a full understanding of the Movement'.⁹⁸ Of westerners, three were noted in Shoghi Effendi's letters: Mrs Jean Stannard, Mrs Florence Evelyn (Lorol) Schopflocher and Miss Martha Root.⁹⁹

Stannard seems to have been resident in India for a year or so in 1923–4.¹⁰⁰ Writing in December 1923, Shoghi Effendi described her as a 'talented and untiring servant of Bahá'u'lláh', and 'our highly esteemed sister'. He would welcome 'every effort' she might exert towards obtaining 'ultimate recognition' for the Faith in India and Burma, and hoped that she would play 'a conspicuous part' in presenting it to the 'enlightened public'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ *Star* 12/13: 220–1.

⁹⁶ MIS 27.

⁹⁷ MIS 28. See also Shoghi Effendi's comments on Singh's work in MIS 42.

⁹⁸ MIS 32, 33.

⁹⁹ Published English-language sources, such as *The Baha'i World*, focus on the activities of the two North Americans, Schopflocher and Root, reports from or about the other teachers presumably not being available. Stannard, an Englishwoman whom Shoghi Effendi described as 'devoted and able' (MIS 3), later moved to Geneva, where she established the International Baha'i Bureau in 1925 (see Smith, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 'International Bahá'í Bureau').

¹⁰⁰ There is a reference in February 1923 to Mrs Stannard's work in Burma (MIS 3), and later to her 'patient' pioneering efforts in Calcutta (BW 2:147). She was still in India in December (MIS 9). By March 1925 she had evidently visited Haifa, providing 'first-hand information' on the conditions of the Faith in India (MIS 15).

¹⁰¹ MIS 9.

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Schopflocher visited India and Burma in 1927.¹⁰² By April 1927, Shoghi Effendi was beginning to receive reports of her travels, and he regarded her work as a splendid beginning on which the Indian Baha'is should follow up.¹⁰³ In May, he noted that her letters breathed 'a spirit of hope and triumph', although, as his secretary observed, flying from one end of India to the other was 'not sufficient' – it was necessary for a teacher to 'stay long enough in one place and start regular gatherings' for 'definite and permanent results' to be achieved.¹⁰⁴ By Schopflocher's own account of her experiences, she was able to meet a number of Indian princes and ministers, as well as academics and a prominent feminist, and to visit the Tagore school in Bolpur.¹⁰⁵ Whatever the limitations of her tour, she evidently had sufficient impact for Shoghi Effendi to consider very seriously the idea of arranging for an 'experienced' western Baha'i to visit the following year and follow up on Schopflocher's work in a 'patient and enlightened' manner.¹⁰⁶

Finding another western Baha'i teacher to visit India was apparently not easy, and it was not until 1930 that Martha Root was able to add India to her formidable itinerary. Shoghi Effendi wrote to the national assembly, and also to Vakil, in March 1930 to say that Root would soon be with them. She was 'a great soul', and he prayed that she might 'lend a fresh and much needed impetus' to the work of consolidating and spreading the Cause. In his letter to Vakil, he urged him to do all he could to make her trip 'fruitful and profitable'.¹⁰⁷ Root arrived in Bombay in mid-May, remaining in India until 22 July, and then spending a further two weeks in Burma before departing for Singapore (7 August), en route for China. As expected, nationalist agitation was a distracting force during her tour,¹⁰⁸ but she was still able to engage in an intensive array of activities, including meetings with Indian princes, officials, women's leaders (amongst them the poet Sarojini Naidu,¹⁰⁹ who was in jail at the time for her nationalist activities) and educationalists. She donated Baha'i books to libraries, prominent individuals and others, and delivered lectures – to Parsees in Karachi, at universities, at colleges and schools, and in Theosophical Society halls and Brahma Samaj temples, these two organizations arranging meetings for her. Although her time was limited, she travelled extensively (by rail), visiting Poona, Hyderabad (in the Deccan), Surat, Karachi, Lahore,

¹⁰² MIS letters misspell her name 'Schopflocker' and 'Schopplocher' (MIS 34, 35). For Schopflocher's own account of her tour see BW 2:145–50, 'Through India and Burma' (reprinted from *Star of the West*).

¹⁰³ Shoghi Effendi's secretary was less complimentary, describing Schopflocher's teaching work as having 'broken the ground in many places', but as being 'hasty and in many places insufficient services', which the faithful Indian Baha'is now had to consolidate so as to produce results of 'a more permanent and lasting character' (MIS 34).

¹⁰⁴ MIS 34–6.

¹⁰⁵ BW 2:145–50.

¹⁰⁶ MIS 35–6. There may also have been a plan for an American Baha'i teacher to be based in Bombay, as Shoghi Effendi's secretary advised the national spiritual assembly in December 1929 that it would be informed when a 'suitable person' had been found (MIS 58).

¹⁰⁷ MIS 60–1.

¹⁰⁸ The independence movement entered a new phase at this time, with the civil disobedience campaign being inaugurated by Gandhi's march to the sea to protest symbolically against the government's salt monopoly (6 April 1930).

¹⁰⁹ Mrs Naidu was one of Gandhi's leading supporters and had led 2,500 volunteers in a march on the Dharasana Salt Works (15 May) in a peaceful protest that was bloodily suppressed by the authorities. Root was able to give her a set of Baha'i books, which were well received, Baha'i sources stating that Naidu later became 'a strong proponent of the Baha'i Faith'. Root also tried (unsuccessfully) to visit Gandhi, also then in prison (Mabel R. Garis, *Martha Root: Lioness at the Threshold* [Wilmette, IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1983] 353–4).

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Simla, Delhi, Lucknow, Benares (Varanasi), Patna, Bolpur and Calcutta in India, and Mandalay, Kunjagoon and Rangoon in Burma.¹¹⁰

Important though the work of these international teachers was, the temporary nature of their presence in the subcontinent necessarily limited their impact. As Shoghi Effendi's secretary noted in May 1927, after the 'good work' recently accomplished by international teachers, there was a need for resident teachers who could start regular gatherings in specific places. This was a task that fell 'naturally' to the Indian Baha'is.¹¹¹

Sympathetic organizations

One element of Baha'i endeavour that Shoghi Effendi repeatedly encouraged was contact with other religious organizations. This was a well established practice amongst the Indian Baha'is, repeated contacts being recorded with three groups, the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and Theosophical Society, as well as less frequent contacts with the Ahmadiyya.

Baha'i contacts with the Brahmo Samaj can be seen as a form of elective affinity. Growing out of the teachings of the Bengali reformer Rammohun Roy (1772–1833), the Brahmo movement advocated a rationalistic reform of Hinduism based on its early scriptures and the abolition of what it considered were ignorant social practices such as widow burning (suttee). It was sympathetic to the ethical teachings of Christianity and to 'universal' religion, and advocated liberal social reformism.¹¹² Although not numerous, and in decline as a movement by the 1920s, the Brahmos offered the Baha'is a sympathetic point of contact, welcoming speakers to their temples. It is of note that the Brahmo Samaj invited Shoghi Effendi to attend their centenary in Calcutta in 1928. Shoghi Effendi asked Vakil to send someone in his stead as he himself was too busy to attend, and to make sure that arrangements were made in good time for 'duly authorized' Baha'i delegates to be present and so maintain 'the most cordial relations' between the two movements.¹¹³ After the centennial, Shoghi Effendi's secretary noted that such meetings were 'wonderful occasions for showing the spirit and teachings of the Cause', Shoghi Effendi's hope being that they would provide the Baha'is with opportunities to present the teachings to persons who might be 'otherwise inaccessible for individual contact'.¹¹⁴

Baha'i contacts with the Arya Samaj seem stranger in doctrinal terms (because of the movement's strident Hinduism and condemnation of Islam), and were probably less long-lasting. Originating with the teachings of Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83), the Arya Samaj aimed to reform Hinduism by returning to what Dayananda saw as the purity of the Vedas, cutting away most of Hindu ritual, opposing child marriage, providing a means of integrating low caste and untouchable individuals into Hindu society, and promoting education – including for girls. The Aryas carried out an active missionary programme and by 1931 had close on one million members, both in India and amongst the Indian diaspora.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ BW 4:89–90, 432–3; Garis, *Martha Root* 353–8.

¹¹¹ MIS 36.

¹¹² Kenneth Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India. The New Cambridge History of India, III.1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 30–9.

¹¹³ MIS 41.

¹¹⁴ MIS 44.

¹¹⁵ Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements* 95–103, 192–9.

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Jamal Effendi met with Saraswati himself in Delhi in 1877,¹¹⁶ and subsequent contacts with the Aryas were made by Shaykh 'Abdu'r-Rahman Hindi of Damascus, Zarqani and Shaykh Muhyu'd-din Sabri. Lectures on the Faith to the Aryas of Agra led to the Baha'is being given an open invitation to attend Arya meetings, and to participate in the celebrations of the centenary of the birth of their founder at a grand conference held in Mathura, some thirty miles north of Agra, from 15 to 21 February 1925 – Shoghi Effendi conveying his interest and pleasure at learning of the invitation.¹¹⁷ The Baha'is sent a delegation of ten, and were given their own site, labelled 'Baha'i Camp'. They delivered a lecture on the Faith, attracted large numbers of enquirers, and distributed about five thousand booklets on the Faith – the only non-Arya organization allowed to do so.¹¹⁸

Although founded by westerners – the Russian Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) and the American Colonel H. S. Olcott (1832–1907) – the Theosophical movement thrived in India from the 1880s onwards, its world headquarters being established at Adyar, south of Madras, and its leaders praising the Hindu tradition – and in the case of Annie Besant (1847–1933), taking a leading role in the Indian nationalist movement.¹¹⁹ Teaching the universal brotherhood of all humanity and the unity of religions, and promoting education, Theosophy had obvious points of contact with the Baha'i Faith, despite its esotericism and spiritualism, and it is not surprising that Theosophical Society venues were opened to Baha'is in various parts of the world, nor that some early western Baha'is were drawn from a Theosophical background. The Baha'is seem to have found Indian Theosophy a particularly sympathetic environment for lectures, and amicable relations between the two movements continued well into the 1930s.¹²⁰

The Ahmadiyya were the only Indian Islamic movement with which close Baha'i contacts were recorded. The Ahmadiyya movement was centred on the person of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), a member of a Punjabi landowning family who, in 1890–1, had publicly claimed to be the Islamic Mahdi and the Christian Messiah. Adopting elements of a modernist view of Islam, the Ahmadiyya proved popular amongst literate, middle class Muslims. After Ghulam Ahmad's death the movement split into two rival groups based respectively in Qadiyan and Lahore.¹²¹ The extent of Baha'i contact with the movement is difficult to gauge, but certainly one of the most energetic members of the Indian Baha'i community at this time (Syed Ilmi) was a convert from the Ahmadiyya (Qādiyānī), and in March 1926 Shoghi Effendi himself made special note of the teaching work amongst that community, and said he would pray specially for the success of the endeavours of the Baha'i teachers.¹²² Again, in 1932, the Indian national assembly secretary enthusiastically portrayed the Ahmadiyya as being the Indian religious group having the closest doctrinal unity with the Faith.¹²³

¹¹⁶ Momen, 'Jamal Effendi' 52.

¹¹⁷ MIS 15.

¹¹⁸ BW 2:42–3.

¹¹⁹ Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements* 167–79.

¹²⁰ Whilst the Baha'is responded warmly to an invitation to attend the All Faiths Conference organized by the Theosophists for their diamond jubilee celebrations in 1935, by 1937 Shoghi Effendi's secretary was referring to the Theosophists as 'opponents' of the Faith, and warning the Indian Baha'is to avoid contact with them (MIS 135, 154). In 1950 Shoghi Effendi's secretary wrote that dual membership of Theosophy and the Baha'i Faith was not permissible (MIS 312).

¹²¹ Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements* 115–19, 199–203.

¹²² MIS 25.

¹²³ BW 4:91.

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Publications

The Baha'is of India and Burma published a number of Baha'i books and periodicals during this period. Of books, the official Baha'i bibliography for 1930 records nine items of Baha'i literature published in Urdu (all translations: five from the writings of Baha'u'llah, two from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, and one each of works by Isabella Brittingham, an American Baha'i, and Mirza Mahmud Zarqani) and one in Burmese ('Abdu'l-Baha's *Some Answered Questions*). Eleven items were published in Persian in Bombay.¹²⁴ No books were produced in India or Burma in any of the other languages of the subcontinent or in English, nor is there any record of books authored by Indian or Burmese Baha'is.

Periodicals. Shoghi Effendi frequently emphasized the importance of Baha'i periodicals as a means both of keeping Baha'is informed about events and developments within the Faith and of presenting the Baha'i teachings to the general public. Various such publications were produced by the Indian and Burmese Baha'is during the 1920s, but most seem to have faced production problems and to have been short lived.

The earliest Indian Baha'i periodical appears to have been the *Herald of the East* (1921–4), possibly the same publication as that referred to by Shoghi Effendi in January 1923 as the '*Baha'i News*' of India (above).¹²⁵ Shoghi Effendi expressed his hope that this 'representative organ' of the Indian Baha'i community would 'expand and develop' and 'widen the sphere of its correspondence', adding to 'the number and quality of its articles in Persian as well as in English', reporting regularly the news of the 'spiritual activities of all Baha'i centres in India and elsewhere', and providing for the 'full, correct and dignified presentation of the Cause to the general public'.¹²⁶ In June, he urged those responsible for its production to 'do their utmost' to increase the 'volume' of the magazine, 'widen' its scope, 'broaden' its outlook, 'improve' its 'style and general presentation', and reflect the activities of the Baha'is, both in India and Burma and elsewhere, 'more extensively'. As it had been 'established in the days' of 'Abdu'l-Baha, and been 'the recipient of his special favours and blessings', it would no doubt 'carry out the great plan' that it was 'destined to fulfil in this world'. It needed the 'active support' and 'constant and general supervision' of the national spiritual assembly in order to do this.¹²⁷ That there were problems in its production is indicated by discussion in the early months of 1925 about possible suspension of publication (a decision Shoghi Effendi placed with the national assembly) – the assembly evidently deciding for this action.¹²⁸

More successful was *The Dawn* (September 1923–June 1929), a 'Monthly Baha'i Journal' of the Burmese Baha'is produced by Mustafa Roumie in English, Persian and Burmese.¹²⁹ Writing to its editors and publishers in February 1925, Shoghi Effendi expressed

¹²⁴ BW 3:241–2.

¹²⁵ The *Herald of the East* (March 1921–December 1924) was edited and published by Prof. Pritam Singh at Cawnpore for the national assembly (William P. Collins, *Bibliography of English-Language Works on the Bābī and Bahā'ī Faiths, 1844–1985* [Oxford: George Ronald, 1990] 174, no. 9.257). There is no publication under the name *Baha'i News* referred to in either Collins' inventory of Baha'i periodicals (Collins 164–84) or BYB/BW 2–3. Whatever its name, Pritam Singh, Vakil, Abasi, Haji Ahmad and Hashmatu'llah from the national assembly were all associated with its production, as were Mr Ardeshir Khodadad and Mirza Niku (MIS 5).

¹²⁶ MIS 2.

¹²⁷ MIS 5.

¹²⁸ MIS 17. The last issue recorded in Collins, *Bibliography* is November–December 1924 (174, no. 9.257).

¹²⁹ BYB 103; BW 2:190; 3:227; Collins, *Bibliography* 172, no. 9.218.

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his admiration and gratitude for what they had produced. *The Dawn* was a 'valuable organ' of the Burmese Baha'i community, and had in the past 'displayed magnificent efforts' and 'earned the satisfaction and esteem of its readers'. It was now 'steadily and determinedly' coming to 'establish its claim of providing for a long-standing need and fulfilling a vital function'. He hoped that this 'cherished and promising Journal' would 'eloquently recount the tale' of the deeds of the Burmese Baha'is, acquaint Baha'is elsewhere with their 'hopes ... plans, and ... achievements', 'reflect the spirit' of their 'selfless endeavours', and 'stand as witness of the growing vitality of the noble work' that they were 'destined to achieve'.¹³⁰

A third periodical seems eventually to have begun regular publication in 1929. This was the *Kaukab-i Hind* ('Star of India'), published in Urdu. Earlier attempts to get it started, in 1926, seem to have foundered. In March 1926 Shoghi Effendi stated that he was waiting eagerly to receive the first issue of the national assembly's (new) publication – presumably *Kaukab*.¹³¹ In September he urged the national assembly to continue publishing *Kaukab*, even if this entailed heavily subsidizing it for the time being. It was 'of great importance' and would 'gradually show its far-reaching influence in promoting the Cause in India'.¹³² In November, he cabled that its 'EFFECTIVE CONTINUANCE' was 'ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL', and sent 19 pounds (£19) as his 'HUMBLE CONTRIBUTION' to its cost. The Baha'is should be urged to support it.¹³³ In a separate letter to Vakil he stressed that the journal should be continued 'at all costs' and desired that it would 'play an important role in drawing the attention of the more thoughtful and seeking people to the potency' of the Baha'i Cause. He also recommended the national assembly to appoint a committee under its own 'direct supervision' to manage all matters relating to the magazine.¹³⁴ In December, Shoghi Effendi expressed his eagerness to hear that *Kaukab* had been re-established.¹³⁵ For the immediate time, however, production difficulties appear to have been insurmountable, and it was only in March 1929 that Shoghi Effendi returned to the topic of the *Kaukab-i Hind*, conveying his 'increasing interest' in its 'permanent establishment and development', and sending 9 pounds (£9) as his contribution towards its running costs. He felt that the magazine had great potential as a means of spreading the Baha'i teachings in the subcontinent.¹³⁶ This time the national assembly was able to get the project going, the new monthly magazine appearing regularly for at least the next decade.¹³⁷

Shoghi Effendi also wanted the national spiritual assembly to publish a 'Baha'i Bulletin', similar to the newsletter put out by the American national assembly, and included it in a list of goals he set the Indian assembly in October 1926.¹³⁸ He returned to the issue in a letter to Vakil in December, when he emphasized that this was an objective of 'utmost importance',

¹³⁰ MIS 14–15.

¹³¹ MIS 25.

¹³² MIS 30.

¹³³ MIS 31.

¹³⁴ MIS 32. He suggested the appointment of the two present editors – 'our Qādiyānī friends'.

¹³⁵ MIS 33.

¹³⁶ MIS 53–4.

¹³⁷ It was published in Delhi under the editorship of Syed Mahfuzu'l-Haq 'Ilmi ('Mawlawi Fāḍil'). It is included in the official listing of Baha'i periodicals from 1930 until 1940 (BW 3:229; 4:307; 5:478; 6:550; 7:603; 8:749). By 1944 its name had been changed to *Payambar* (Messenger) (BW 9:710–11).

¹³⁸ MIS 31.

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expressing the hope that contributions to the national fund would be sufficient to make it 'a truly worthy and representative Baha'i periodical'.¹³⁹ This suggestion appears not to have borne immediate fruit.¹⁴⁰

Finally, we may note that a limited-circulation *Bahā'ī Weekly* was started at Lahore early in 1930 with the objective of 'popularizing the Cause' amongst English-speaking Indians.¹⁴¹

Women

As yet, there has not been any study of the nature of early Indian and Burmese Baha'i community life, but mention should be made of one aspect of Baha'i social life with which Shoghi Effendi was evidently concerned, namely the role of women in the community. 'Abdu'l-Baha's insistence on gender equality is well known,¹⁴² but the implementation of this Baha'i principle was often difficult, particularly in parts of Asia where prevailing social norms required the public subordination of women. In these circumstances, Baha'i communities in the Middle East remained conservative in their social practice, at least in part, so as not to antagonize public opinion. Thus, Baha'i men and women generally continued to be segregated in Baha'i meetings, veiling was widely practised, and women were not eligible for election to Baha'i administrative bodies. There was greater possibility for implementation of gender equality amongst the Baha'is in British India: not only was there a different legal framework, but western influences and an indigenous women's movement were much stronger.

Initially, however, the role of women in the Indian Baha'i community seems to have been quite restricted, reflecting both the cultural attitudes of the more conservative elements of the environing society and those of the Middle Eastern (particularly Iranian) Baha'i communities that provided the cultural model for many of the Indian Baha'is (themselves often either recent Iranian migrants or heavily Persianate). In this regard, all the prominent early Indian Baha'is were men (including early public speakers and the members of the first national spiritual assembly). Again, it is of note that at the 1920 Bahai Convention, despite the emphasis being given in the public talks to the Baha'i teaching on gender equality, the organizers had originally intended to open the meeting solely to men, only allowing in Indian women at the last moment after the arrival of Elizabeth Stewart, an American woman and then a pioneer Baha'i medical worker in Iran. Stewart herself believed that the inclusion of 'Native women' in a public gathering of this nature was unprecedented in India and was in itself a significant event.¹⁴³ For the most part, Baha'i women presumably played a supportive role as wives and child-rearers – though it seems likely that there was a difference here between India and Burma, more Burmese Baha'i women playing a prominent role at an earlier date.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ MIS 33.

¹⁴⁰ Again, there is no record of it in either Collins, *Bibliography* or volumes of *The Baha'i World*.

¹⁴¹ BW 4:90. Its editor was Prof. Singh.

¹⁴² See Smith, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 'women'.

¹⁴³ *Star* 12/1:23–4, 27.

¹⁴⁴ An undated photograph in BW 3 (1928–30) of the 'Service Committee' of the Mandalay local assembly shows eight women members and two men. Another photograph is of Miss Hla Hla in her academic robes (she had obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree [MIS 19]). She was a member of both the Mandalay and national assemblies (BW 3:231). This seems to contradict Khianra's statement that Shirin Fozdar was the first woman to be elected as a national assembly member, in 1936 (Khianra, *Immortals* 222). Amongst the Indian Baha'i women, the first to acquire national prominence was Shirin Irani (1905–92), a daughter of Iranian immigrant Zoroastrians who married K. M. Fozdar (Foujdar) in Bombay in 1925, and was described at the time as holding 'a unique position'

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Shoghi Effendi encouraged change in Indian Baha'i gender roles. Of particular importance was his announcement in December 1923 that henceforth all those Baha'i women who had 'already conformed to the prevailing custom' of the region and discarded the veil should be given the right both to vote for the members of their local and national assemblies and to be eligible for election to those assemblies, thus opening the way for administrative equality between Baha'i men and women in India and Burma. Limiting the franchise to the 'modernized' women who had already unveiled presumably both acknowledged the cultural conservatism of some elements of the community and served as an incentive for all Baha'i women to unveil. Certainly, Shoghi Effendi hoped that 'this momentous decision' would cause Baha'i women to 'bestir themselves and endeavour to the best of their ability' both 'to acquire a better and more profound knowledge of the Cause' and 'to take a more active and systematic part in the general affairs of the Movement'. In this way, they would prove themselves to be 'in every way enlightened, responsible and efficient co-workers' with the men, and together advance the Faith throughout the country. He trusted that the women would fully realize their 'high responsibilities in this day', 'do all in their power to justify the high hopes' that he cherished for their future, and prove themselves worthy in every way of the 'noble mission' that the Baha'i world was now 'entrusting to their charge'. Recognizing the sensitivity of the cultural issues involved, he directed that 'the greatest care and caution, prudence and thoughtfulness' should be exercised in taking 'this definite and most important step'. Again, in electing women to Baha'i office, due regard should be paid to 'their actual capacity and present attainments'. Regardless of sex and social standing, only those Baha'is who were 'best qualified for membership' should be elected to the assemblies – membership being an 'extremely responsible position'.¹⁴⁵

Conclusions

Given the present paucity of studies of this period of Baha'i history, the observations made in this paper can only be provisional. There is a need for further studies both of the work of Shoghi Effendi in directing and guiding the Baha'i world during these years and of the histories of individual Baha'i communities. In the case of India and Burma – as with the rest of the Baha'i world – an examination of the published messages of Shoghi Effendi is useful in pointing to the issues that he considered important and in providing some insight into the situation and responses of the local Baha'is, but much more is evidently needed before we can begin to construct a more comprehensive portrayal of these early communities.

This having been said, the 1920s were clearly an important decade of transition in Indian and Burmese Baha'i history, particularly as regards the (often difficult) establishment of a more standardized and 'national' system of Baha'i administration, the expansion of Baha'i publishing, and a crucial change in the role that women could occupy within the Baha'i community. The consequences of these developments were sometimes slow to emerge, but eventually helped to define the modern successor communities of the region.

One area of Baha'i activity that does not appear to have changed significantly during the period, however, was the 'work' of propagating the Baha'i teachings – and, for that matter, nor does there appear to have been any significant growth in the size of the community.

in being 'the first Eastern woman to be able to speak in public in the East' (BYB 148), and who subsequently became one of the leading figures in the expansion of the Faith in Southeast Asia (Rose Ong, *Shirin Fozdar: Asia's Foremost Feminist. Vignettes from the Life of Shirin Fozdar* ([Singapore:] n.p., 2000)). Shirin's mother, Dawlat-i Iran, was the first woman elected to the Bombay local spiritual assembly, in 1920 (Khianra 219).

¹⁴⁵ MIS 10–11.