

The History of Bahá'í Educational Efforts in Iran

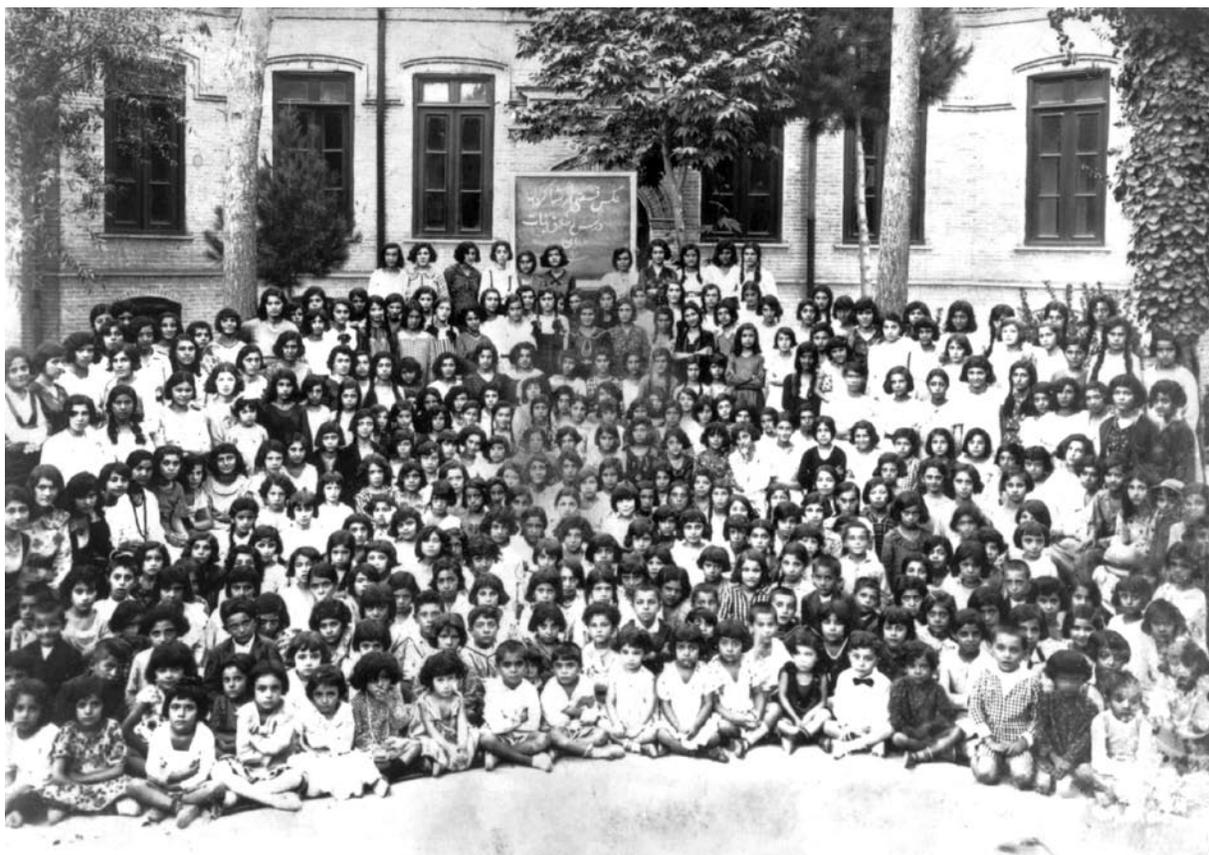
WHILE EXCLUSION FROM education is a grievous wrong in any circumstances, the situation for Iranian Bahá'ís is compounded by the degree to which the sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith stress the primary importance of education in fostering humanity's material, social, and spiritual advancement — and the strong history of the Iranian Bahá'í community in seeking and providing education.

“Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom,” wrote Bahá'u'lláh.

Since the earliest days of the Bahá'í Faith, its followers have been deeply engaged in promoting learning and knowledge, establishing and operating schools, and seeking the best possible educational opportunities for their children and the children of others.

Nowhere has this been more true than in Iran, the birthplace of the Bahá'í revelation and,

Before they were closed by government decree in 1934, Bahá'í schools in Iran attracted thousands of students. Shown here are participants in Bahá'í classes in Tehran with their teachers, in a photograph taken on 13 August 1933.



The Bahá'ís started some of the first girls' schools in Iran. Shown here are a group of pre-school girls at the Tarbiyat School for Girls in Tehran, circa 1930.



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until the persecutions that followed the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, one of the best developed national Bahá'í communities in the world.

As early as the 1880s, small village-level schools were started by Bahá'ís in Iran, and the establishment of major primary and secondary schools in urban centers soon followed.

Around 1900, for example, the Madrissih-yi Tarbiyat-i Banin (the Tarbiyat School for

Boys) was founded in Tehran, and by 1911 the ground-breaking Tarbiyat School for Girls had been established. Other Bahá'í schools likewise quickly sprang up in Hamadan, Qazvin, Kashan, and Barfurush.

The schools were open to all, and many children who were not from Bahá'í families enrolled. About half of the students in the schools in Tehran were not Bahá'ís, for example.

By 1920, some 10 percent of the estimated 28,000 primary and secondary school children in Iran were enrolled in Bahá'í-run schools, according to one source.

Although exact figures are hard to come by, it appears that more than 50 schools were founded and operated by Bahá'ís through the first half of the 20th century.

Sadly, most of the Bahá'í schools were closed by government decree in the mid-1930s in an episode of religious persecution. By that time, the schools had gained considerable prominence as top-notch institutions and had attracted numerous students from prominent families.

The government of Reza Shah, as part of a policy of standardization and Iranianization of all social institutions in the country, demanded that the Bahá'í schools close only on government-specified holidays. Bahá'í communities, however, required by the principles of their Faith to close also on Bahá'í holy days, refused to comply. In response, government officials suspended their licenses.

The Bahá'í community's strong commitment to education nevertheless remained. Bahá'í parents sent their children to the then expanding network of state-run schools and also set up special classes in private homes to ensure continuing training in moral and religious education.

Overall, this emphasis on education had a remarkable effect on the Iranian Bahá'í community. By the time of the mid-to-late 1970s, just prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic,

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With their emphasis on the education of girls, Bahá'í schools promoted an entire generation of highly educated women in Iran. Shown here are members of the Bahá'í Committee for the Advancement of Women, in Tehran, 1950.



Bahá'í Quotes on Education

THE BAHÁ'Í SACRED writings emphasize the importance of education as the key to material and spiritual progress. The Bahá'í teachings exalt knowledge, promote free inquiry and learning, and emphasize the importance of acquiring expertise in such arts and sciences as will promote human prosperity. Here are some quotations from the Bahá'í writings about education and its importance:

“Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.” — Bahá'u'lláh

“Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone.” — Bahá'u'lláh

“Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City....” — Bahá'u'lláh

“Close investigation will show that the primary cause of oppression and injustice, of unrighteousness, irregularity and disorder, is the people's lack of religious faith and the fact that they are uneducated.” — 'Abdu'l-Bahá

By 1973, for example, literacy among Bahá'í women under forty had reached nearly 100 percent, in contrast to a national literacy rate among women of less than 25 percent.

Progressive principles

In their approach to education, Bahá'ís were at the forefront of educational advances that were occurring in Iran between the end of the nineteenth and start of the early 20th century.

The traditional educational system in Iran was based on teaching by local religious leaders (*mullahs*), who usually had no training in educational methods. They often taught in their own homes, focusing on memorization of the Qur'an and poetry, without any governmental oversight or adherence to professional standards. These local schools were known as *mukhtabs*.

At the secondary level was the *madrasah*, the religious college, which likewise focused on Qur'anic education, although astronomy, medicine and mathematics were taught at a few using medieval texts and traditional methods.

“During the second half of the nineteenth century there were increasing calls among Iranian intellectuals, who were concerned about the fact that Iran was so far behind Europe, for the establishment of modern educational facilities in Iran,” said Bahá'í scholar Moojan Momen.

Accordingly, a number of “modern” schools were established in Tehran, Tabriz, Rasht, Mashhad, and Bushihr at the turn of the century. Some, however, were soon closed in the face of conservative opposition.

Schools for girls faced even stronger opposition, with clerics at one point issuing a fatwa stating that girls' schools were contrary to the principles of Shia Islam. An attempt to found a school in 1903 lasted only four days, another school founded in 1907 was similarly forced to close.

Bahá'ís, inspired by the progressive principles of their Faith, sought to break away from traditional Islamic education in their approach to teaching methods and curriculum. Both

Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged the study of modern sciences and arts, which were not part of a traditional education. Bahá'ís were also keen to establish schools where the emphasis on moral education in Bahá'í scriptures could be adequately realized. The importance of providing education to girls was another incentive for the founding of Bahá'í schools.

In addition, Bahá'ís were motivated to establish their own schools because Bahá'í children were sometimes prevented from attending local *maktabs*.

The earliest effort to establish a Bahá'í school appears to have been in the village of Mahfuzak in Mazandaran, probably in the late 1870s, according to Dr. Momen. There a local religious leader, Mullah Ali, had become a Bahá'í, along with most of the rest of the populace.

Inspired by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh on education, Mullah Ali and his wife, 'Alaviyyih Khanum, founded both a boys' school and a girls' school in the village. In 1882, however, Mullah Ali was denounced by neighboring religious leaders, arrested, taken to Tehran and executed.

The Tarbiyat School for Boys in Tehran, founded about 1899, was the first modern Bahá'í school in Iran and it soon became known as one of the best schools in the country. In 1905, it was the only school in Tehran where mathematics was studied every day and students were separated by ability.

Apart from the American School, it was also the only school to offer English language classes in addition to government-prescribed classes in Persian, Arabic and French. Despite the strong prejudice against the Faith in Iran, numerous prominent people sent their children to the Tarbiyat School.

Schools for Girls

The Tarbiyat School for Girls, established in 1911, was likewise a leader in educational innovation at the time. It offered gymnastics and recess to girls more than 15 years before government schools

“The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. The principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance.

Today the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time.” — 'Abdu'l-Bahá

“...knowledge is the cause of human progress.” — 'Abdu'l-Bahá

“To promote knowledge is thus an inescapable duty imposed on every one of the friends of God.” — 'Abdu'l-Bahá

“The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind and draweth down the grace and favor of the All-Merciful, for education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence and alloweth man to work his way to the heights of abiding glory. If a child be trained from his infancy, he will, through the loving care of the Holy Gardener, drink in the crystal waters of the spirit and of knowledge, like a young tree amid the rilling brooks. And certainly he will gather to himself the bright rays of the Sun of Truth, and through its light and heat will grow ever fresh and fair in the garden of life.” — 'Abdu'l-Bahá

allowed physical education for girls.

The success of the Tarbiyat School for Girls inspired other Bahá'í communities around the country to found girls' schools. By the time the government forced most Bahá'í schools to close in 1934, at least 25 schools for girls had been established by Bahá'ís.

Over time, the progress achieved by Bahá'í women was remarkable. At a time when the women's world was confined to the home, the Bahá'í writings encouraged women to direct their minds to science, industry, and subjects that would improve the human condition. Bahá'í schools for girls were, accordingly, a radical departure from the standards of the society at large. In some places, girl students had to be escorted to and from home, because girls were not permitted in public by themselves.

Indeed, the Bahá'í community faced formidable obstacles in every way in establishing their schools. Since its founding in 1844 in Iran, the Bahá'í Faith had faced periodic episodes of persecution. In the mid-1800s, more than 20,000 early Bahá'ís were killed.

"In many places, after fifty years of hiding and keeping a low profile following the Bábí persecutions, the establishment of a Bahá'í school was the first occasion that the Bahá'í stepped into the public arena," said Dr. Momen. "The schools thus became the visible sign of the existence of a Bahá'í community in each locality and therefore often bore the brunt of the ignorance and prejudices of the masses of Iranians, who had grown up fearing and hating the 'Bábís' for no particular reason other than that this was what they were taught by their religious leaders and elders. Opposition to the Bahá'í schools was also encountered from local Islamic religious leaders, who would stir up the masses against these schools, and from local officials, who would refuse the necessary permissions and certifications."

The Bahá'ís took whatever steps they could to

mitigate the opposition. For example, no classes on the Bahá'í Faith were taught in the schools, and Bahá'í pupils would have a separate religious class, outside of school, on Friday. The schools were also careful to follow all government decrees on the curriculum, including giving classes in Arabic, the Qur'an and Islam.

Despite these measures, opposition to and attacks on the schools occurred. In Sangsar in 1921, for example, a mob incited by the local Islamic religious leaders burst into the school and burnt it down. In 1913 in Abadih, where a girls' school was established in 1908, newly appointed provincial governor ordered the school closed in response to complaints from local religious leaders. The governor told the Bahá'ís: "We have not even been able to establish a girls' school in Shiraz. To do this in Abadih is premature." The pupils of almost all of Bahá'í schools faced a certain degree of harassment on their way to and from school.

In spite of these obstacles, the network of Bahá'í schools in Iran grew in number and each school grew in size. Initially most of these schools were primary schools but in later years, secondary grades were added to those in the cities. The Vahdat Bashar School in Kashan, for example started as a primary school in 1909 with six primary grades; a secondary grade was added in 1913-14. By 1910, the Tarbiyat School in Tehran had some 270 pupils, and it offered advanced courses in history, physics, chemistry, and botany, in addition to Persian, Arabic and English.

By 1933, just before they were closed by the government, there were at least 47 primary schools operated by Bahá'ís in Iran, of which at least eight also had secondary level classes. By one scholar's count, these schools had a combined enrollment of more than 4,700 students. They had been established in virtually every region of Iran, including in the cities of Tehran, Mashhad, Yazd, Qazvin, Kashan, Hamadan, and Samsan.