

Dhaka Day by Day

A New Faith for Unity and Peace

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

May 29th is a special day for over 5 million Bahais all over the world. On this day they commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the passing away of their spiritual leader Bahaullah. This year, which, started according to the Bahai Calendar from April 1992, has been declared as a holy year during which significant events will happen in the world. But what ever the year is, the Bahais are concerned with one main objective: to create a world of peace and bring about the unity of mankind. This is to be done not by making a melting pot of the world. Rather, this objective will be accomplished by the acceptance of those very characteristics that make people different, through love of God and humanity.

The Bahai Centre on Circuit House road has been operating in this particular building since 1970 although the faith itself came to this part of the world about 120 years ago. Entering the building, which is quite easy, since there are no guards to stop you, one immediately experiences a sense of peace and tranquillity in the spotlessly clean library and cool mosaic floors. The people at the centre are warm and gracious, speaking in soft tones as if in a church. At the Bahai Centre anyone is welcome, no matter what his/her religion, ethnicity or political affiliation.

The Bahai Faith is one of the youngest and fastest growing religions of the world. It was founded in the mid-nineteenth century by Bahaullah, a Persian prophetic figure who devoted his entire life to impart the doctrines of the faith to the world. Although it has its origins from an Islamic matrix, the Bahai Faith is an independent religion

and not a sect of Islam as is often believed. The Bahai Faith is unique in that it universally accepts the validity of all other faiths — whether Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism etc. The Bahais believe that all religions are an integral part of one divine plan. This stems from the idea of evolution of religion that is, every religion has its relevance for specific periods, the Bahai Faith being the latest, appropriate for the present age the world is in.

This acceptance of all religions, ethnic groups, nationalities possibly accounts for the wide spread of the faith all over the world. One-third of the 6 million Bahais live in one of the other of the two largest national communities: India and Iran and they are still being persecuted in the latter country. In spite of persecution and skepticism, the Bahai Faith has managed to become a recognized, independent religion. Today there are 30,000 elected local spiritual assemblies functioning in over two hundred independent states and major territories. It is estimated that its membership represents over two thousand areas of the world. Bahai literature has been translated and published in over 800 languages.

The Bahai Centre in Dhaka is only one of the 120,000 centres worldwide. In Bangladesh there are about 4000 localities where Bahais live with around 50,000 registered Bahai families from all social and economic backgrounds. This centre like all other Bahai centres, has a 9-member local spiritual assembly that is elected by the Bahai community. Every 19 days the centre arranges a feast held on the first day of each Bahai month. It may be mentioned that there are nineteen months each having nineteen days in the Bahai calendar, the number 9 having special spiritual significance.

The Bahai Centre also involves itself in social activities. Universal education being one of the main themes of the Bahai Faith, the centre has established a school for slum children. With a nominal fee of Tk 5 per month, these children get primary education, periodic medical check-ups and health education. Bahais do not believe in handing out alms to people; they believe the only way to help is to make people self-reliant. In Rajshahi a permanent medical clinic has been set up for women and children. All this is in line with another basic Bahai theme — the equality of men and women. According to Bahaullah women have not been able to exercise their full potential because they have not got adequate educational and social opportunities. With education, it is predicted, "women will abolish war among mankind."

With a large pool of doctors, the Centre has also arranged medical camps to help victims of floods and cyclones.

Seminars and awareness programmes on social issues such as drug abuse, disarmament and equality of sexes are also a preoccupation for the Centre.

All these activities are carried out with pure altruistic motives and there is no attempt made to convert anyone through obligation, a practice that is strictly prohibited by the faith. Acceptance of the religion has to be through free will without any kind of coercion.

The Bahai Faith advocates three basic principles — the oneness of God, the oneness of mankind and the fundamental unity of religions. With these three themes forming their foundation, the Bahai world community has embarked upon a crusade to bring about universal peace and security. At the local level the Bahai Centre works forward bringing together people of diverse backgrounds and guiding them towards a path of peace through humanity and tolerance. This preoccupation with peace, in itself, seems to justify the claim of the Bahai Faith as a progressive religion for today's turbulent world.

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