



## FORUTAN, 'ALI-AKBAR

**FORUTAN, 'ALI-AKBAR** (b. Sabzevār, 29 April 1905; d. Haifa, 25 November 2003, [Figure 1](#)), prominent Bahai teacher, educator, public speaker, and author. He was born into a Bahai family in Sabzevār in northeast Iran, where he received his early education at a traditional school (*maktab*). In 1914, however, in order to escape persecution as Bahais, his parents, Karbalā'i Moḥammad-'Ali Sabzevāri and Ṣoḡrā Kānom, moved with Forutan and his three siblings to [Ashkhabad](#), Turkmenistan, which was then a part of Tsarist Russia. Here Forutan attended a modern school for boys that was established and managed by the Bahai community. He had to start from the first grade, since he did not know Russian. Upon completion of elementary school, when he was only fourteen years old and studying at the secondary school, he was appointed as the teacher of the first grade (Forutan, *Ḥekāyat-e del*, p. 17)

In Ashkhabad, Forutan had the opportunity to study under the Bahai scholar, Mirzā Mahdi Golpāygāni, and at his bidding gave lectures at Bahai meetings and wrote articles for the Bahai magazines *Fekr-e-javān* and *Ḳoršid-e kāvar*. When he was in secondary school, Forutan served as a member of the Bahai Youth Committee in Ashkhabad and spent several months as a Bahai teacher in Baku (Forutan *Ḥekāyat-e del*, tr., p. 14). After graduation from secondary school in 1925, he was appointed the principal of the two Bahai schools in Ashkhabad. He moved to Moscow in 1926 to study education and psychology at the University of Moscow, for which had been awarded a scholarship. In 1928 he was elected to serve as a member of the Local Spiritual Assembly (*Maḥfel-e ruḥāni*), the local governing council of the Bahais of Moscow.



Forutan graduated from the University of Moscow in the field of education and child psychology in 1930. His thesis, a critique of the educational method of Shapushnikov and his book *The Live Voice of Children*, was published in the official journal of the Ministry of Education of the Soviet Union in the same year. Despite his academic excellence, he was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1930 due to his involvement in Bahai activities (Forutan, *Ḥekāyat-e del*, tr., p. 34). Forutan knew and fluently spoke five languages: Persian, Russian, Turkish, English, and Arabic (Harper, p. 155).

Forutan proceeded to Tabriz. While there he began teaching a course on the moral education of children and junior youth in order to train teachers and parents. He continued working on this project for many years and developed a comprehensive curriculum and twelve volumes of textbooks on Bahai moral education, using the methodology of modern systems of education. He was the first person in Iran to produce a teacher's manual to go with the textbooks that he produced. The revised versions of these textbooks are translated into more than thirty languages and are currently being used in Bahai classes for children around the world. In addition to the development of curricula and textbooks, he was instrumental in creating a countrywide network of voluntary spiritual and moral education services for children, young adults, and parents in the Bahai community of Iran (Forutan, *Ḥekāyat-e del*; 'Alā'i).

In 1931 Forutan married 'Aṭā'īya Ḳorāsāni, and they had two daughters, Irān and Parvin. After two years in Tabriz, Forutan and his wife volunteered to move to Sisān, a village near Tabriz with a sizeable Bahai community. With the assistance of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of that village, he administered and developed the school there into a modern facility for a few hundred pupils, both Bahai and non-Bahai, boys and girls (Forutan, *Ḥekāyat-e del*, tr., p. 44).

In 1934 Forutan was elected to the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Iran; so he moved to Tehran and served as the Executive Secretary of that National Assembly for the next twenty-four years. During the first ten of those years, he simultaneously served as a member and the Executive Secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Tehran. He had a small number of assistants, who, in spite of the lack of modern communication technologies in Iran and government-imposed restrictions on the Bahai community, maintained regular contact with over 1,500 Bahai local communities in Iran. In spite of all such problems, Forutan managed to introduce and establish a properly functioning and nationwide administrative



structure in the Bahai community of Iran. He was at the same time also serving as the chief editor and publisher of *Aḳbār-e amri* (the Bahai news journal of Iran), and he wrote articles for it throughout his tenure as the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly.

Forutan was a popular and impressive public speaker and constantly traveled around the country to deliver talks on various Bahai topics, including the education of children and the principles of Bahai administrative order. During his years of service at the National Spiritual Assembly, despite his heavy load of duties, Forutan conducted various study courses for youth and adults and wrote a number of essays on topics related to the Bahai Faith for various Bahai periodicals and print media. He greatly impacted the formation and development of the administrative organization of the Bahai community and moral education of Bahai children in Iran ('Alā'i, pp. 547-60; Harper, pp. 149-52).

In 1934 Forutan was appointed the principal of the Tarbiat schools for boys and girls in Tehran, which were owned and managed by the Bahai community. He served in that position until a year later, when all of the Bahai schools in Iran were closed by the order of the government, since they had refused to stay open during a Bahai holy day. The appointment of Forutan as the principal of the Tarbiat schools, particularly the one for boys, began a new trend in school administration in Iran. As a Western-trained pedagogue and educational psychologist, he changed the traditional practices of Iranian schools. The Tarbiat schools became the first native Iranian schools to abolish harsh discipline, including corporal punishment, and introduced various motivational methods (only the Western missionary schools had done this previously). The changes that Forutan introduced at the Tarbiat schools pioneered changes in the school system and in disciplinary measures in educational institutions throughout Iran. Forutan was a firm believer and a prominent promoter of comprehensive or holistic education, emphasizing the importance of a multi-dimensional education covering the physical, intellectual, and spiritual development of children and youth in a balanced manner. The curriculum that he developed for moral education of children and junior youth, contained all these three elements (see Shahvar).

In 1946, Forutan was invited by the newly-established Radio Iran to conduct weekly talks on various educational topics for teachers and parents. These talks were designed to advise parents on how to raise their children, and they became very popular. During these radio talks, he raised issues such as the



inadvisability of the corporal punishment of children. He delivered a total of twenty-four talks before his broadcasts were abruptly discontinued because of his religious affiliation. Transcripts of those radio talks were collated in a volume entitled *Majmu'a-ye resālāt tarbiati* and published in 1968. In 1980 an expanded version of this book was translated into English and published under the title of *Mothers, Fathers and Children. Practical Advice to Parents*, which was subsequently translated and published in more than a dozen languages, including Russian and Chinese (by the governments of those countries). Its Braille version was published by Royal National Institute for the Blind in 1995.

In December 1951, Forutan was appointed a Hand of the Cause of God ([Ayādi-e Amr Allāh](#)) by [Shoghi Effendi](#), Guardian of the Bahai Faith and Head of the Bahai community (Shoghi Effendi, p. 123). In this capacity he embarked on his international Bahai services and traveled to more than sixty countries delivering lectures at hundreds of Bahai gatherings and conferences around the world.

In 1957, after the passing of Shoghi Effendi, he was appointed as one of the nine Hands of the Cause of God to reside permanently at the Bahai World Center in Haifa, where he settled with his wife (Bahai World Center, 1992, p. 25). He continued these duties and his travels around the world until his passing. Those travels included representing the Universal House of Justice at Bahai conferences and at the establishment of several National Spiritual Assemblies around the world.

One of his most cherished visits was to the Soviet Union in 1991, from where he had been banished sixty years earlier. During his sojourn of over two months there, he gave a lecture in Russian at his former University Faculty and visited Bahais in Moscow and some cities in Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. In a second visit he represented the Universal House of Justice at the first National Convention of the Bahais of Soviet Union, held in Moscow in April 1991, when the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of Soviet Union was elected and established (*Andalib*, 1992, no. 35, pp. 9-21).



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