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KASHAN VIII. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES (2) BAHAI COMMUNITY

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viii. Religious Communities

(2) Bahai Community

Like many Bahai communities in Iran, Kashan Bahais can trace their roots to the early years of the Babi movement. The Babi leader Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Bošruʾi visited Kashan in 1845 to bring news of the coming of a new religious dispensation. Although he was rejected by Kashan's leading Shiʿite cleric, Mollā Moḥammad Narāqi, son of the celebrated Mollā Aḥmad, other junior ulama (including a number of Narāqi's own relatives) accepted the Babi message and later became active Bahais or Azali Babis (see AZALI BABISM). A number of converts within the Narāqi family moved to Hamadan some time afterward, where their Babi/Bahai convictions were less known (Abbas Amanat, pp. 269-71; Ešrāq Ḵāvari, 2004, pp. 37-46, 184-97). The early history of Babis and Bahais of Kashan is characterized by persecution.

Among those outside of Kashan's ulama who accepted the Bāb's message was a young merchant, Ḥāji Mirzā Jāni Kāšāni (also known as Parpa), the author of

the wellknown, early Babi chronicle, *Noqṭat al-kāf*. His brother Ḥāji Moḥammad-Esmāʿil Kāšāni (Ḏabiḥ), who authored *Maṯnawi-e Ḏabiḥ*, a Babi account in verse, also converted. A number of their relatives, including some women, became devoted Babis and Bahais. During the Bāb's short stay in Kashan (20-23 March 1847), while he was being escorted to Tehran, Mirzā Jāni persuaded the guards to allow the Bāb to stay at his home and gathered a number of ulama and notables to meet him. Mirzā Jāni and his brother planned to arrange the escape of the Bāb and offered to give their lives to this end, a proposal the Bāb rejected (Abbas Amanat, pp. 346-47). In 1852, during a general reprisal against the Babis following an attempt made by them on the life of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, Mirzā Jāni was forced out of the sanctuary of Šāh ʿAbdal- ʿAẓim (q.v.) in Tehran and killed. In a highly unusual case, his execution was assigned to fellow Tehran merchants, who were expected to demonstrate their hatred of the Babis by killing him. They were led by Tehran's leading merchant, Mirzā Mahdi Malek-al-Tojjār (*Waqāyeʿ-e ettefāqiya*, no. 82, 10 Ḏu'l-qaʿda 1268; Abbas Amanat, pp. 344-47; for contemporary reports concerning the event, see Momen, pp. 129-46).

Among other early Babi merchants of Kashan were Ḥāji Moḥammad-Reżā Maḵmalbāf and the two brothers, Āqā Abu'l-Qāsem and Āqā Mahdi ʿAṭṭār. The latter, like Mirzā Jāni, fled to Tehran in 1849 but was killed in the 1852 persecutions. Ḥāji Moḥammad-Reżā , son of the prominent merchant Ḥāji Zayn-al-ʿĀbedin Jawāheri, also fled to Tehran, where he was arrested in 1850 and was released after payment of a fine of 4,000 tomans, only to be killed in Tehran's 1852 persecutions. His son and daughter both became active Bahais (Mousa Amanat, pp. 57-58).

The poetess Kučak Begom, also known as Ḵadija Kāšāniya, daughter of the Sufi Ḥāji Moḥammad- Ṣādeq, met the Bāb at the home of her nephew, Mirzā Jāni, and became a devout follower. Facing persecution, she left Kashan and lived and died in Ardestān (Ḏokāʾi Bayḏāʾi, I, pp. 309-14; Fāżel Māzandarāni, III, p. 310). Another noteworthy Babi figure of Kashan is Moḥammad-Mahdi Šarif Kāšāni, the son of Mollā Moḥammad-Jaʿfar Narāqi and the author of *Wāqeāt-e ettefāqiya*, a contemporary history of the Constitutional Revolution.

The early years of the Bahai community in Kashan were also marked by repeated imprisonment and occasional killings of members. According to Bahai sources, persecutions around 1874 led to the murder of a young Bahai named Āqā Maḥmud (Nāṭeq Eṣfahāni, p. 12, apud Mousa Amanat, p. 59). The arrest of his accused killer led to ulama-led riots and large demonstrations in

the telegraph office, demanding his release from the shah. Under pressure from a leading theologian (*mojtahed*) of Kashan, Ḥāji Mollā Moḥammad, the shah ordered the execution of all those proven to be apostates (*ḵārej az din*). This led to an inquisition during which three Bahai craftsmen lost their lives, and many known Bahais either fled Kashan or concealed their faith. Mirzā ʿAbd-al-Bāqi, a dyer (*ṣabbāq*) by profession, had been imprisoned in Tehran but had received a royal pardon before he returned to Kashan, where he was killed along with another Bahai craftsman, Āqā Moḥammad-Jaʿfar Šaʿrbāf (silk weaver) and a certain Āqā Sayyed Reżā (Mousa Amanat, pp. 59-60). Three days after his burial, on the order of a local cleric, Mirzā ʿAbd-al-Bāqi's body was exhumed, beaten with sticks, and stoned, and the right arm was cut off with a shovel, presumably in an attempt to deny him salvation on the Day of Judgement (Rayḥāni, tr., in Mehrdad Amanat, p. 252).

During the 1880s and 1890s Kashan Bahais enjoyed relative calm and even experienced growth. This development may be explained by their ability to disassociate themselves from their earlier, militant Babi image. More significant, however, were the active efforts of a number of Kashani and visiting, itinerate Bahai missionaries (*moballeḡin*), most notable among them Abu'l-Fażl Golpāyagāni, who traveled to Kashan in 1886 and again in 1889. He was responsible for the conversion of a sizeable number of Kashanis. A large number of silk workers and carpet weavers were attracted to the Bahai community. Debates with Jewish leaders and other individuals also led to the conversion of a number of mostly young Jews, though many first-generation converts maintained a double Jewish/Bahai identity (see JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES v[2]). Golpāyagāni's efforts and those of other Bahai advocates also resulted in Bahai conversions in the surrounding villages; many of the converts previously had Babi sympathies or convictions.

Reacting to the Jewish conversions sometime around 1901, the rabbis, who saw themselves as protectors of their traditional religion, persuaded Kashan's governor to imprison a group of young Jewish converts in order to hamper further conversion. However, upon appeal to Tehran authorities, and later as a result of Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah's intervention, the prisoners were released upon payment of negotiated fines. Later, after the news of Moẓaffaral- Din Shah's intervention reached Kashan, some of them who were bold enough to demand a refund of the fines were bastinadoed (Rayḥāni, tr., in Mehrdad Amanat, pp. 223-33). In other instances, especially during the month of Moḥarram, when music and other forms of entertainment were banned,

insulting the Bahais became commonplace, with mobs (including Jews) dancing and singing anti- Bahai slurs (Rayḥāni, tr., in Mehrdad Amanat, pp. 253-54).

Pressures of persecution notwithstanding, some Bahais enjoyed a level of local influence. Notable among them was, according to one source, Kashan's chief sheriff (*dārugā*) around the turn of the century; another was the reputable *luṭi*, Pahlavān Moḥammad Āqā Pilband, who later joined the ranks of the constitutionalists and was murdered by a son of the former rebel Nāyeb Ḥosayn Kāši during the counterrevolutionary years (1908- 09; Rayḥāni, tr., in Mehrdad Amanat, pp. 238-40; Partow Bayżāʾi, p. 204). Prior to his rebellion in Kashan, when Nayeb Ḥosayn was a governor's agent, he was friendly with Bahais. One influential Bahai, a certain Sayyed Moḥammad Kārvansarādār, fed his men lavishly every week. Later, as a rebel during the latter 1910s, he became actively anti-Bahai, and many Bahais in the surrounding villages became victims of his indiscriminate looting, rape, and murder (Rayḥāni tr., in Mehrdad Amanat, pp. 242-44; for Nāyeb Ḥosayn, see Narāqi, pp. 304-9). Among the Qajar ruling elite in Kashan, Wazir Homāyun Mahdi Khan Ḡaffāri (1865-1917), who held a number of court and ministerial appointments, is known for his Bahai sympathy or conviction. He spent the last years of his life in Kashan but had limited contact with the Bahai community.

The Kashan region. The Babi message soon spread into the Kashan countryside, where a significant number of villagers converted, starting in Narāq, and soon after in Qamṣar, Māzgān, Jowšaqān, Vādeqān, Ārān, and Nušābād. Most of these Babi communities later became Bahai. However, Ṭarq, west of Kashan, was known for its Azali population. At least in one case in 1863, some Kashan rural Babi communities were associated with a peasant revolt in the region led by the *luṭi* leaders Šāhmirzā Kāši and Yaḥyā Sayyed Babr. In a letter (tablet) addressed to Šāhmirzā , Bahāʾ-Allāh expressed his disapproval of any "shedding of blood." The public execution of the eightysome- year-old Babi/Bahai leader Shaikh Abu'l-Qāsem Māzgāni, who had escaped his native village of Nušābād to live in Māzgān, along with four young followers of Šāhmirzā , which took place in Kashan in front of the gov- ernor's house in 1870, may well be an indication of continued Babi peasant protest in the region (Mehrdad Amanat, pp. 179-80; Ḡaffāri, pp. 19-20; Āyati, I, pp. 438-40; Nāṭeq Eṣfahāni, fols. 13-14; Ešrāq Ḵāvari, 1973, p. 186).

The expansion of Bahaism in the countryside seems to have continued at least until the early decades of the twentieth century, when communities such as

Ārān and Nušābād, whose Jews had converted to Islam in the nineteenth century, became a center of conversion. Other rural communities in the Kashan region that accepted the Bahai faith may have had a similar background (Rayḥāni, tr., in Mehrdad Amanat, p. 25; Shofet, p. 25). In most instances, the conversion of a village population followed that of a local religious leader. However, at least in the case of the village of Moškān, due to harsh treatment of villagers by its Bahai landowner, and despite efforts by Bahai missionaries, “not one person became a Bahai” (Rayḥāni, tr., in Mehrdad Amanat, p. 287), though later on a community was established there. By the 1920s, many of the villages in the Kashan region, including Tar, Nuš, Kak, Zohr (Zur), Abuzaydābād, Māzgān, Vādeqān, Yazdel, Fatḥābād, and Jāsb, had Baha’i populations. Some communities, such as Nušābād, did not survive the pressures of persecution, and their Bahai members were either forced to reconvert to Islam or were banished. Other communities, such as Fatḥābād and Māzgān, were predominantly made up of farmer and shopkeeper Bahais (Mousa Amanat, pp. 433-89).

Organization. Kashan’s first Bahai council (*maḥfel-e šowr-e ruḥāni*) was formed in 1908 as an assembly of elders. Starting in the 1920s, its nine members were elected in formal elections held annually. Regular weekly meetings, which had an important social function, were held on Friday afternoons, but were moved to Saturday to accommodate the increasing number of Jewish converts, who also observed the Sabbath with their families. Aside from social interaction, these meetings offered group singing and vocal performances by women, a remarkable novelty in conservative Kashan. Other community functions included regular children and youth classes for the study of Bahai ethics and scripture (Mousa Amanat, pp. 81-88). Visits by Western Bahais (as early as 1906, but mostly in the 1920s), including a number of American women, were an important source of inspiration for Kashan Bahais, who were able to make an instant connection to the Western world, which most of their compatriots at best had only heard about. The information that these visitors provided on health and hygiene was a conduit for modernity. As women, they were key role models for Kashani Bahai women in search of a modern self.

Education and culture. A large number of Bahai poets contributed to Kashan’s notable literary tradition. Many were part of a network of freethinkers of Kashan, a city of mainly conservative people. Sayyed Faraj-Allāh Kāšāni, a learned merchant living in Cairo, became the editor of the weekly paper Ṯorayyā , which had been established in Cairo by Mirzā ʿAli-Moḥammad

Kāšāni in 1900 and eventually became a pro-Constitution paper. Sayyed Faraj-Allāh later published the paper in Tehran in 1903, and then, in 1909, his associate Faḵr-al-Wāʿeẓin Ḵāvari, started publishing it in Kashan, where he also established the first printing press (Ṣadr Hāšemi, II, pp. 151-58; Kasravi, I, pp. 57-58). Faḵr-al-Wāʿeẓin was a reform-minded poet, preacher, and secret Bahai. Faraj-Allāh's nephew, Sayyed Naṣr-Allāh Monzawi, was an accomplished poet and a native of Fatḥābād (near Kashan), the home of a number of literary figures, including the poetess Fāṭema Monzawi. Mirzā Māšā-Allāh Kāšāni (1868?-1928?), pen name Laqāʾi, was an apothecary (*ʿaṭṭār*) with poetic talent. He was beaten and banished from Kashan in 1908 after discussions with a neighbor sack weaver, Ḥāšem Kisagar (Ḏokāʾi Bayżāʾi, III, pp. 267-320; Mousa Amanat, pp. 110-13).

Moḥammad- Mahdi Moršed Kāšāni was a weaver (*nassāj*) and a talented humorist poet from a family with Sufi inclinations and a background of Jewish conversion to Islam. Moršed was a humorist poet. His famous satirical poem addressing the Hidden Imam Mahdi urged him not to rush giving up the comforts of Occultation for the troubles of Return. Under pressure from Kashan's leading theologian, Mollā Ḥabib-Allāh Šarif Kāšāni (1845-1921), he later composed a poem begging the Imam to return "to rid me from all this mischief" (Ḏokāʾi Bayżāʾi, I, pp. 244-53; Mousa Amanat, pp. 118-21). Also nothworthy are the two Bayżāʾi brothers from the village of Ārān, the renowned poet Mirzā ʿAli-Moḥammad Adib Bayżāʾi (1881-1933), and the historian and poet Neʿmat-Allāh Ḏokāʾi Bayḏāʾi (1904-86; Ḏokāʾi Bayḏāʾi, pp. 84-162). Among many other, less recognized Bahai poets, mention must be made of Ḥaqnaẓar Šāyān (poet and playwright) for his satirical poetry in the Judeo-Persian Kashani dialect on themes such as Kashan's chaotic kosher butchery and rabbi rivalries (Mousa Amanat, pp. 254-55).

Bahai schools. Kashan's first Bahai school, Madrasa-ye Mobāraka-ye Waḥdat-e Bašar-e Kāšān, a boys' school, was founded in March 1909, during Moḥammad- ʿAli Shah's brief reign (1907-09), when Bahais experienced relative freedom. It was, almost certainly, Kashan's first modern school and was mostly a result of the initiative of local Bahais and guidance from Mirzā Mahdi Eḵwān-al- Ṣafā , a Bahai teacher (*moballeḡ*) and promoter of modern schools. Many Jewish converts, who because of strict enforcement of Shiʿite impurity laws had been deprived of learning Persian and Arabic, participated in the school's formation in a conscious effort to achieve social and cultural assimilation and as a way for their children to learn to read the Bahai

scriptures (Mousa Amanat, p. 143) The Bahai school was funded in part by tuition, but mostly through community fundraising. Under the supervision of a school committee, over 1,100 tomans were raised, a remarkable sum in a society generally disinterested in non-religious donations. The monthly school salaries started from a modest sum of 6 tomans for some teachers to a range of 15 to 45 tomans for the principals. In 1329/ 1911, the school was moved from its original location, the house of a Jewish convert, Ḵᵛāja Rabiʿ Kāšāni, to a newly purchased location in the Dyers Quarter (*Maḥalla-ye rangrazān*) with ten rooms, accommodating six grades. In 1913 the school was officially certified by the Ministry of Education. But in 1921, a coalition of local ulama and officials caused its temporary closure. The school was reopened soon after on the order of Mirzā Ḥasan Khan Woṯuq-al-Dawla, the prime minister, presumably in response to an appeal from ʿAbd-al-Bahāʾ, the Bahai leader in exile in Palestine. The Tehran ministry officials required that the state program be strictly followed (Nāṭeq, fols. 24-29).

Waḥdat-e Bašar enjoyed a reputation for being Kashan's leading school, especially in the areas of Persian literature and Arabic. In contrast to Kashan's often unforgiving class and communal divisions, the school accommodated students of all religious and class backgrounds and provided a relatively cordial environment. A lasting sense of camaraderie was achieved among the students, although on occasion children of influential families were favored. The school also introduced such novelties as a football team and a theater group used for fundraising purposes. The Bahai girls' school was not established until 1921. In the beginning, girls who attended the school were the subject of hostile remarks by some conservatives. Gradually, the education of girls became more accepted, if not routine, under Pahlavi rule. The teachers were strictly chosen from among women, mostly from educated Bahai families.

By the 1930s, the Bahai schools' eminence was overshadowed by a better financed and more professional, state-run school system. In 1934, Kashan's Bahai schools were closed down on the order of the Ministry of Education as part of an indiscriminate decision to close all of Iran's Bahai schools, supposedly due to the Bahais' refusal to abandon observance of Bahai holidays, but also as a move to maintain the state's monopoly on education (Shahvar, pp. 107-38).

Post-World War II period. The post-World War II period saw an increasing trend towards immigration to Tehran among Kashan's Bahais, especially

among the well-to-do, as a part of Iran's economic centralization. Life in Tehran was more anonymous and relatively immune from the daily harassments and insults that Bahais could expect in Kashan. Nevertheless, opposition to Bahais became more fierce and organized. In Jowšaqān around 1949, the anti-Bahai activities of a certain Shaikh ʿAli-Akbar led to his humiliation by a Bahai landowner, Arbāb Fażl-Allāh Ruḥāni Jowšaqāni, who confined him in his stable. The incident led to riots and the exile of Arbāb Fażl-Allāh from Jowšaqān and may have led to a conspiracy for the murder of a prominent Kashan Bahai (personal correspondence with Mrs. Rommān Paymāni). In February 1950, Solaymān Berjis, a physician practicing in Kashan, was called on the pretext of visiting a critically ill patient and was stabbed to death by a group of four Fedāʾiān-e Eslām enthusiasts as he was approaching the destination. Some conspirators even confessed their involvement to the authorities, calling it part of their "religious duties." Nonetheless, they were eventually acquitted by a court in Tehran under pressure from both the Fedāʾiān network and notable supporters such as Ayatollah Sayyed Abu'l-Qāsem Kāšāni, who enjoyed much leverage in Iran's volatile political environment of the time. Kashan's prosecutor later referred to the case's outcome as a disgrace for Iran's judicial system (Dāmḡāni and Moʾmeni, p. 209) The affair was part of a series of assassinations of secular intellectuals (e.g., Aḥmad Kasravi) and leading political figures committed by the Fedāʾiān, the most daring of which was that of Prime Minister Ḥāji-ʿAli Razmārā (Dāmḡāni and Moʾmeni, pp. 207-10; Vahman, pp. 186-200; Mohājer), for which the assassins received little or no punishment. Under the Islamic Republic, many of the remaining, mostly rural, Bahais in the Kashan region were forced out of their communities. Under increasing pressure from the state and the local population, many became refugees in the West.

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