The Emergence of the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore (1950-1972)

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Abstract

The advent of a world religion is usually the beginning of a significant phase in the spiritual history of a country. This paper analyses the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore in the first twenty years of its existence. This history will take us from the arrival of the first pioneers in Singapore in 1950 to the formation of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Singapore in 1972. It reviews the work of Bahá'í pioneering families, the activities of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Singapore and the strategies employed to teach and proclaim the existence of the Bahá'í Faith. The significant features of the early Bahá'í community are then summarised.

Introduction

Singapore can be said to be representative of the geographic region of "Southeast Asia". Its three million population in a tiny land area of 626 square kilometres represents a cross-section of the people of South and East Asia. There are four major races on the island - Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian, each with their own distinctive history and culture. Linguistically, the island has four official languages and in addition to these, its populace speak a large variety of other Chinese, Indian and Malay dialects. In terms of religious affiliation, almost every

major Faith has found a home. The Chinese are predominately Confucianists, Taoists, and Buddhists (what has been called "the Chinese religion")[1] the Malays predominantly Muslim, the Indians predominately Hindu and the Eurasians predominantly Christian.

Situated in the heart of the myriad islands of Southeast Asia, on the crossroads between India and China, Singapore became the natural port of transit for many sea travellers. Today, its international airport performs the identical function that its seaport had traditionally performed. It is an important centre for the exchange of goods between the countries of Southeast Asia and more generally for the world. Its strategic location and its natural harbour were in fact the main reason for its colonisation by the British in 1819.

The 1950's marked the main boundary between colonial and postcolonial era since it saw the liberation of Singapore and the rest of Southeast Asia from European rule. Like the rest of Southeast Asia and together with Africa and South America, Singapore was part of the so-called "third world". It was a time when new ideas and technology began to challenge traditional patterns of living. The period also marked the introduction of a new world religion to Singapore - the Bahá'í Faith. This paper analyses the emergence of this unique phenomenon. The first twenty-two years of the Bahá'í Faith is examined and this takes us from the arrival of the first Bahá'í pioneers in Singapore in 1950 to the formation of the National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) of the Bahá'ís of Singapore in 1972. It reviews the work of Bahá'í pioneering families, the activities of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Singapore and the central strategies employed to teach and proclaim the existence of the Bahá'í Faith.

By Way of India

The continent of India has always played a significant part in the political, social and cultural fortunes of Southeast Asia. The region's traditional link to the Indian subcontinent can be seen in the fact that it was often referred to as "Further India" by Europeans before the Second

[1] See Chew, *The Chinese Religion.*

World War.[2] The British, for instance, used to rule the Straits Settlements of Penang, Singapore and Malacca from the office of the Governor-General in India. The spiritual history of the region is also connected to India. Religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam in countries such as Burma, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia were mainly transmitted by Indian traders visiting the region. Transmission was often effected through marriage and other social contact, often facilitated through the wealth of the Indian traders and their claim to magical powers.[3] On the whole, it has been a region receptive to the advent of new religions. Before the advent of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and the Bahá'í faith (in that order), the spiritual characteristics of Southeast Asia were ancestor worship and beliefs which involved animism, a cosmological dualism between mountain and sea, and a numerology associated with magic. Thus, when more sophisticated religious systems were introduced, they were often recognised and appreciated as such and easily absorbed by the local people. New faiths were easily embraced without the necessity of prolonged conflicts or religious wars so apparent in other countries.[4]

The first Bahá'í teachers to this region, characteristically, also came from India. Like previous traders, teachers and sojourners, their intended destination was the comparatively more populated Javanese islands. A journey by sea would often take these travellers through the Straits of Malacca, forcing them to stop at the Portuguese (later Dutch and British) port of Malacca, Penang and Singapore for refuelling and recreation. In the 1880's, two Bahá'í teachers, Sulayman Khan Ilyas (popularly known as Jamal Effendi) and Siyyid Mustafa Roumie, stopped in Singapore for a few weeks on their way to the Javanese and Celebes islands.[5] Jamal Effendi was the first Persian teacher of the Faith sent to India in 1878 on the instruction of Bahá'u'lláh, while his travel companion, Mustafa Roumie was a Muslim of Iraqi decent, whom he had converted to the Bahá'í Faith during his religious teaching tour in India. In the 1880's both of them decided to team up for the purpose of teaching the Faith to the

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[2] Taylor, *Southeast Asia*, p. 3

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] See Smart, *Religions of Southeast Asia.*

[5] See Abbasali Butt. An Account of the Services of Siyyid Mustafa Rumi. *A Compendium of Volumes of the Bahá'í World*, I - XII, 1925-1954.

inhabitants of the countries of Southeast Asia. An account of this particular journey was written by Roumie and subsequently published.[6] Although Roumie does not give a specific date of arrival, one can infer from his account of the events leading up to the journey that they visited the Dutch East Indies in 1883.[7]

Their sea route to the Javanese islands meant that they had to pass through the Straits of Malacca. They docked at the ports of Penang, Malacca and Singapore for refuelling and rest. There are verbal accounts that they may have engaged in some trading of horses.[8] In Singapore, they stayed at the Arab quarters of the town, as guests of the Turkish Vice Consul, a well-known Arab merchant. During this period, they mixed freely with the Arab community. It is very likely that they taught the Bahá'í Faith although it is unlikely that they managed to reach the Chinese race (the majority racial group in Singapore) due to language problems and the fact that 19th Century Singapore was generally segregated geographically along racial lines. From Singapore, they caught a boat for Batavia (Jakarta), then the chief seaport of Java, where they encountered a lot more success in their teaching endeavours.[9]

It was to be in the 20th Century, a few more decades later, before any other Bahá'í stepped foot on the island. It is likely that two well-known Bahá'í teachers, Mason Remey and Martha Root, in their travels to China and Japan may have stopped on the island of Singapore although it is unlikely that they would have stayed long enough to do any effective teaching work.[10]

Bahá'í Pioneers

[6] The editorial synopsis of Siyyid Mustaffa's account was published in *Bahá'í Weekly*, 19.3.1932.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Butt, *op.cit.*

[9] See Mobine-Kesheh, *op.cit.*

[10] One notes that in 1930, a Chinese female student, on a hearing a talk by Martha Root at the Hong Kong University in 1930 was so impressed by the teachings that she asked Root: "What can I do to promote the Bahá'í movement in Singapore, my home city?" See Seow, *The Pure in Heart*, p. 59.

It was only in the 1950's that the first Bahá'í "pioneer" chose to settle in Singapore. A pioneer is different from a travel-teacher in the sense that unlike the latter who has chosen to teach the Faith for a temporary period in the countries of their travel, a pioneer is one who leaves his place of residence to promote his belief in a new location, whether within his country or outside it. They often stay longer than a travel teacher. They are not "missionaries" in the commonly understood sense of the term since no special theological training is involved. While "pioneering" may constitute an individual's sole purpose, Bahá'í pioneers often combine it with furthering their formal education, with business opportunity or career enhancement, or with a creative retirement. Few receive any funding although they may be assisted financially at critical moments, especially during the process of establishing themselves.[11]

The first Bahá'í pioneers to settle in Singapore were Dr K. M. Fozdar and his wife, Mrs. Shirin Fozdar. In 1950, as part of the goals of the second seven-year plan (1946-1953), Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, instructed the National Spiritual Assembly of India to send pioneers to the whole of Southeast Asia. Requests were made to the believers in India to volunteer to relocate to the region. Heeding the call, the Fozdars volunteered to pioneer to Indonesia.

Accordingly, Dr Fozdar resigned from his medical appointment with the State Railways in India and made plans to leave for Indonesia. As it was easier to obtain a visa to Jakarta from Singapore rather than from India, he booked a one-way ticket on a P and O Liner to Singapore. The journey by ship took three weeks and he arrived in Singapore on the 26th May 1950. On alighting, he immediately sought entry to Indonesia. Despite several attempts at the Indonesian consulate in Singapore, he was unsuccessful in obtaining a visa for entry into the country. Failing in his mission and reluctant to return to India, he decided to stay on in Singapore in the hope of reapplying again for re-entry in the near future. There were other advantages for staying on in Singapore. For one, it was in close proximity to the Indonesian islands. Its affairs were also conducted in English, a language in which he was fluent. Being an Indian national, he was also not unfamiliar with British administrative rule. Thus, very quickly and with the help of friends which he had made on

[11] *See Hassall, Pacific Bahá'í Communities.*

board ship, he quickly found employment as a private medical practitioner in the colony.[12] However, he was never to realise his goal of pioneering to the Indonesian islands. He remained in Singapore until his sudden passing from a heart attack eight years later - in 1958.

Subsequent years also saw the arrival of other Bahá'í pioneering families in Singapore. They came to settle, and simultaneously, to pursue their own career and business opportunities. There was, for instance, Col. Eshraghian, a Persian who came as a pioneer with his family in 1958 and stayed for two years before leaving for Australia. Other pioneers who resided in Singapore in the late fifties and who stayed for at least a year included Mahesh Dayal and Manguhbhai Patel from India, Mr and Mrs Wesley Huxtable from Canada and John McHenry III from the United States. In the sixties, these pioneers were joined by Mr. and Mrs. Rostrum Rahnema from Persia and Mary Robinson from Britain.[13].

The Proclamation of the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore

After securing accommodation and a stable means of income, Dr Fozdar cabled his wife, Shirin, to join him in Singapore. From the day Shirin Fozdar arrived on the island (19th September 1950), the Bahá'í Faith became very well known. This was because she was able to generate enormous publicity for herself and the Faith in whatever she was doing. When the liner which brought her from India was about to arrive, Dr Fozdar seized the opportunity to inform the local press that "an eminent feminist from India" had arrived and would be giving public talks on women's rights. This bold gesture on a rather conservative British colony in the 1950 led the *Straits Times*, the leading English daily,[14] to announce her arrival on its front page with the caption "A women with a message".

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[12] Dr Arthur Thevathasan offered him a job in his clinic within a month of his arrival in Singapore. Dr Fozdar accepted, and worked with him throughout his stay in Singapore.

[13] However, Dr and Mrs. Fozdar stayed the longest, with Mrs Fozdar taking up Singapore citizenship in 1959. Both of them are buried in the Bahá'í Cemetery in Singapore.

[14] *Straits Times*, 20 9. 1950.

This first article not only reported about her feminist activities in India but also the fact that she was the "Vice President of the National Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India and Burma" and that "Bahá'ís are dotted all over the world." The report also mentioned that "They believe in universal brotherhood, the unity of mankind, a spiritual civilisation, a universal language and universal peace and the establishment of world government."[15] Thus, the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore was born, from the very beginning, in a blaze of publicity.

The day after her arrival, Mrs. Fozdar gave a public lecture at the Singapore Rotary Club, then the most prestigious club in the colony. As this was the first public lecture given by a woman at the Rotary Club (then an all-male preserve), the press found this newsworthy and reported parts of her speech the following day under the caption "No more nonsense from men, says Mrs. Fozdar." Once again, the article had a concluding paragraph which mentioned that "Mrs. Fozdar spoke on the new world order which she said was originated by Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith."[16]

Mrs. Shirin Fozdar was now in constant demand as a public speaker. From the day of her arrival up to the year of her departure (1961)[17], she spoke on topics such as "the Brotherhood of Man" "The Solution to World Peace" and "Religion should be the Cause of Unity" in associations, clubs, societies, schools, libraries and over the radio.[18] One such society in which members were interested in what the Bahá'í Faith had to say regarding "the unity of religion" and "the oneness of mankind" was the Theosophical Society. A significant portion of the early believers on the island were in fact, former members of the society. A prominent member of the Singapore Bahá'í community, Teo Geok Leng, a

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[15] *Straits Times*, 15.9.1950, p. 10. This was to be the first of many press reports on Mrs. Fozdar in the newspapers of Singapore in the 1950's. It is not inaccurate to say that Mrs. Fozdar became one of the most widely written-about women during this period.

[16] See *Straits Times*, 21.9.1951. See also 17.11.1951; 20.1.1952; 18.2.1952; 22.2.1952; 29.2.1952.

[17] Mrs. Fozdar left Singapore to fulfil a pioneering post in Thailand.

[18] *Straits Times*, 22.2.1952; 16.2.1953; 3.4.1956; *Singapore Free Press* 10.3.1952; 5.4. 1952; *The Weekender*, 4.11.1955; 7.3.1958; *Borneo Bulletin*, 19.3.1954; *Malay Mail* 23.5.1955. She also became the first woman to speak to prison inmates in the prisons of Singapore (See Chew, *The Singapore Council*).

professional accountant, was for example, a former President of the Theosophical Society.[19]

The Women's Platform

The Bahá'í Faith is closely connected with the rise of the early women's movement in Singapore. Indeed, the Faith was effectively proclaimed in Singapore (and to a lesser extent, Southeast Asia and the world), on the wings of the movement. In the 1950's in Singapore, women had begun to participate more actively in public life and to speak up on issues which affected them adversely.[20] Shirin Fozdar's contribution to and ideas about the women's cause were very much motivated by her Bahá'í beliefs. The Faith urges its adherents to "walk the spiritual path with practical feet" and emphasised that a good Bahá'í was one who would dedicate his or her life to the advancement of human civilisation.[21] The direct promotion of the equality of the status of men and women, one of the tenets of the Faith, was one such measure which the Bahá'ís believe would bring about a "new world order."

The platform which Mrs. Fozdar used to promote the principle of the equality of the sexes was that of the Singapore Council of Women (SCW). In November 1951, she called a meeting of prominent women in the colony to discuss the formation of an organisation which would act as an "umbrella" body for the various women's organisations then existing in Singapore. This would give the SCW the license to act as the collective

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[19] Teo was a member of the Local Spiritual Assembly (LSA) of Singapore for over twenty years.

[20] For example, in 1949, Mrs. Robert Eu, a close friend of Mrs Shirin Fozdar and a member of the protem committee of the *Singapore Council of Women*, became the first woman to be elected into the Legislative Assembly of Singapore. In the next few years, other women would be nominated or elected into the same Assembly as well as the Municipal Council.

[21] The motif that was on display was that of social reformism. This was basically a program advocating specific social reforms and universal social principles, such as the abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty, the emancipation of women, universal compulsory education, the adoption of an international auxiliary language, and the fostering of means to promote the unity, harmony and spiritual development of the human race.

voice of women in Singapore and enable it to "ensure through legislation if necessary, justice to all women and to further their welfare as embodied in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights."[22] The idea was appealing and the SCW was formally registered in April 1952 amidst intense public interest and press coverage.[23]

As the elected secretary-general of the SCW throughout the 1950's,[24] Mrs. Fozdar spoke fearlessly on the controversial issues of polygamy and divorce which affected women's welfare adversely, e.g. "Shame and misery are forced on Muslim women in Malaya in the name of God and religion," "Malay beats Hollywood: 60 out of 100 marriages end on rocks" and "Polygamy feeds the wolf in man". Such statements would often make the headlines.[25] This prompted a local paper, the *Malay Mail* to write an editorial on "Women Leaders", pointing out that Mrs. Fozdar had a rapidly increasing following throughout Malaya and Singapore and not from the womenfolk only."[26]

The formation of the SCW was an important milestone for the proclamation of the Bahá'í Faith in Singapore because on many occasions when Mrs. Fozdar was speaking on "women's rights", there would be the accompanying paragraph that this notion was part of the "new world order", which was originated by Bahá'u'lláh, "the prophet founder of the Bahá'í Faith." In this indirect fashion, the general public became familiar with terms such as "Bahá'í" and associated it with notions such as "human rights", "women's rights", "world language" and "world tribunal".[27]

In addition, because of Mrs. Fozdar's fame as a crusader of women's rights, the papers were willing to report on other talks she delivered which were not on "women rights" but on the Bahá'í Faith. Thus, Singapore readers were exposed to brief summaries of her views

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[22] Chew, *The Singapore Council of Women.*

[23] *Straits Times* 4.4.1952, *Singapore Free Press* 4.4.1952.

[24] Another Bahá'í, Mrs. George Lee, was the President of the SCW thought the 1950's.

[25] *The Weekender*, 7.3.1958; *Straits Times* 20.6.1958.

[26] See *Malay Mail* 25.4.1958. See also *Malay Mail* editorials 30.5.1955; 9.7.1955

[27] See e.g. *Hong Kong Standard* 11.8.1958, *Straits Times* 15.9.1950; 4.9.1959.

such as the "Concept of a World Commonwealth", "A Universal Language", "A World Legislature", and how "national rivalries could be replaced by racial harmony, understanding and Cupertino.[28]

The SCW also provided an avenue for women from all walks of life to meet. To encourage mass participation, membership fees were kept low and open to all women regardless of race, religion and nationality. Mrs. Fozdar's "progressive" ideas captured the imagination of the populace and before long, SWC's ideas were adopted by other women groups hoping to seize political power. The Women's League of the People's Action Party, organised in 1956, for example, encouraged women to organise themselves in order to press for legal reforms.[29] In 1958, a Singapore branch of the Pan Pacific Southeast Asian Women's Association (PPSEAWA) came into existence and began to host seminars to promote the social and legal status of women. One Singaporean woman leader, Mrs. George Lee, became so impressed with the SCW's agenda that she later became a Bahá'í.[30]

Another way in which the Faith was proclaimed was through the establishment of a "girls" club in Singapore by the SCW. This idea was first mooted by the Social Welfare Department who noted that there were at present eight "boys club" but no "girls club" in Singapore. The Department asked the SCW to consider the sponsoring of one. The SCW took up the idea and formed the first girls' club in Singapore. This club began functioning in February 1953 at the Joo Chiat Welfare Center[31] with volunteers recruited from both the SCW and the Bahá'í community to help in the organisation of lessons such as English, the vernacular languages, cooking, sewing and the art of self defence.[32]

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[28] See e.g. Singapore Tiger Standard, 28.11.1958. The SCW had 100 paid-up member two months after its formation (*Straits Times* 29.5.1952) and 1,000 members a year later (*Straits Times*, 2.4.1953).

[29] *Petir* 1, no. 8, May 1957, p.2.

[30] Mrs. George Lee was a prominent member of the Methodist Women's Group and was President of the SCW from 1953-1961.

[31] See Chew, *The Singapore Council*, p. 119.

[32] This well-used platform was no longer available with the passing of the Women's Charter of 1961 which made into law most of the demands made by the SCW and with the departure of Mrs. Fozdar from Singapore soon after.

The Early Bahá'í Community of Singapore

The Local Spiritual Assembly (LSA) of Singapore

The Bahá'í administrative system is characterised by the absence of clergy. It is the responsibility of each individual Bahá'í to assist in propagating the religion, according to a code which favours dissemination of information and which prohibits proselytism. While the Fozdars were unable to find any believers in the first two years of their stay in Singapore, things began to change from the beginning of the third year.[33] The first Bahá'í was enrolled into the Faith in early 1952. He was Naraindas Jethanand, an Indian national working as a textile salesman whom Mrs. Fozdar had invited to a "fireside" at her home.[34] He was soon followed by Mr. and Mrs. Cheng Wei Min, neighbours of the Fozdars and Mr. Teo Geok Leng and Goh Beng Wan, both of whom were friends of Dr Fozdar from the Theosophical Society. This small group began to introduce the Faith to other friends and from then on, there was a slow but steady trickle of declarants.

There being now more than nine members in March 1952, the Fozdars began to look into the formation of an assembly which could administer the religious and administrative affairs of the infant community.[35] This could not be done earlier since there were not enough new Bahá'ís to participate in an election which would elect nine members to sit on the Assembly. By April 1952, there was a total of 12 declared

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[33] In late 1951, a little discouraged, the Fozdars wrote to the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith expressing doubts on staying. The Guardian encouraged their continued efforts, and compared the region to initial "difficult places" such as Italy and Switzerland but which had later became strongholds of the Faith. He told them not to be disheartened, assuring them that he would pray for "the harvest to come in." (Letter from the Guardian to Dr and Mrs Fozdar, n.d.)

[34] Narain Das was an Indian national working in Singapore as a textile salesman. Mrs. Fozdar had made his acquaintance while buying some materials for a sari. The same day she invited him for a fireside and he declared his belief. Little else is known of him but he is reputably the first believer on the island (Interview with Mrs. Fozdar, August 1986)

[35] Following the guidelines set down by the Bahá'í administrative order, this had to be done by secret ballot, without nominations or the campaigning of votes.

believers. The Fozdars began to make plans for electing the nine members who would constitute the first Local Spiritual Assembly (LSA) of the Bahá'ís of Singapore.[36] The first election was held in April 1952 and the first elected members were (in alphabetical order): Mr. Gianchand Datswani, Mr. Goh Beng Wan, Dr John Fozdar,[37] Dr K. M.Fozdar, Mrs. Shirin Fozdar, Mr. Kishenchand, Mr. Motiram, Mr. Ramsay, and Mr. Teo Geok Leng.[38]

In the early years, the Faith was attractive to the Indian community. There were seven of Indian origin on the Assembly - three of them members of the Fozdar family and four others of Indian nationality who had met the Fozdars in the course of their work in Singapore. Only two members were Chinese and they were English-speaking, close friends of Dr K. M. Fozdar from the Singapore Theosophical Society. The Fozdars were not successful in drawing in the Malays (who were predominantly Muslims) or the Eurasian (who were predominantly Christian). Indian believers distinguished themselves as stalwart adherents of the Faith. Some other Indian nationals who were key members of the early Singapore community were Kishen Khemani and Shatur Chotrani.[39] Another was Gian Datwani, who later pioneered to Japan and Hong Kong. There were also other active Singapore believers of the fifties such as Pishu and Vashi, who eventually pioneered to West Africa.

The early community was active in holding weekly "firesides" which were publicised by word-of-mouth to their friends and which were conducted at the members' respective homes. Regular firesides are a means for Bahá'ís to talk about their Faith. It involves sharing the Bahá'í principles with those willing to give it a hearing and seeking a positive

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[36] The minutes of the LSA of Singapore for the period under study are not available for research purposes. The reconstruction of some of the activities of the LSA have been pieced together from interviews and correspondences with some early members of the community e.g. Mrs. Shirin Fozdar, Mr. Koh Lian Chin, and Mr. Teo Geok Leng.

[37] Dr John Fozdar was the second son of Dr and Mrs K. M. Fozdar. He arrived in Singapore in June 1951 after completing his medical studies in India.

[38] See *Bahá'í World* Vol. XII, p. 573, for a photograph of the first LSA of the Bahá'ís of Singapore.

[39] Both Kishen Khemani and Shatur Chotrani later became Auxiliary Board Members in India.

response from the audience. Bahá'ís would invite friends and acquaintances to their homes and would teach them about the Faith. If the listener was interested, another invitation was issued and this would go on. The home of the Fozdars, for example, became known as the "Bahá'í Center" and was the first such Center registered with the Singapore authorities. It was from such occasions that the first believers of the Bahá'í Faith were found. The early believers also observed the 19 Day Feast which was an occasion where Bahá'ís would gather to read the scriptures, to discuss the administrative duties of the Faith and to socialise among themselves. This was often held in the believers' homes on a rotational basis. However, by the early sixties, the Singapore community had saved enough to purchase a small flat at Jalan Kechil, for their regular meetings. This became the Bahá'í Center for the next few years. This eventually proved inadequate for the community's growing needs and was later sold in order to purchase a small bungalow, with a little garden, at Hartley Grove, Frankel Estate, in the late sixties.[40]

Visitors

The small group of early believers (approximately 20-40 in number)[41] were sustained by periodic talks given by visiting Bahá'ís. Bahá'í dignitaries such as "Hands of the Cause of God" Dr. R Muhajir,[42] A. Faizi, and Collis Featherstone would often stop in Singapore either before or after visiting the larger Bahá'í community in Malaya. They were such inspiring speakers that after their talks, members of the audience

[40] The subsequent center was not large, but it had a fairly spacious compound unlike the Jurong Kechil flat (*Malaysian Bahá'í News*, Dec 1969-January 1970).

[41] It is unlikely that there would be more than 100 believers in the enrolment list in the period under study. Out of this, only 20% could be considered active, that is. they would attend the 19 Day Feast and were either members of the LSA or its subcommittees. (Interview with Mrs George Lee and Shirin Fozdar, 1986).

[42] Dr Muhajir may be singled out for special attention. He was the Hand assigned by the Guardian in 1957 to guide the growth of the Faith in Southeast Asia. He visited Singapore and Malaya frequently and was often the speaker at summer schools and youth conferences (held in Malaya) to which many Singaporeans would drive up to attend. Members of the *Hands of the Cause*, a Bahá'í institution, are responsible for the propagation and preservation of the unity of the Bahá'í Faith.

would spontaneously volunteer to pioneer to other countries.[43] Other frequent visitors included well-known Bahá'ís such as K. Samimi and K. Payman from Java.[44] As mentioned, the strategic location of Singapore encouraged prominent Bahá'í speakers to break their journey and stop there. Another Hand of the Cause, Shua'u'llah Ala'i, stopped to teach for a week in January 1960, on his way back to Iran after attending the historic conference of the Cause in the Holy Land in November 1959.[45]

The visit of yet another dignitary, Hand of the Cause Amatu'l Bahá Ruhiyyih Khanum, in Malaysia in 1961 and 1964 gave an added boost to the young community. She toured both Malaya and Singapore and in doing so touched the hearts of the believers leaving them with a feeling of awe and inspiration the aura of which was not forgotten for a long time. She was in Singapore at the beginning and end of her tour to Malaya. The Local Spiritual Assembly of Singapore organised a well-publicised talk entitled "All the Races are needed" at the Singapore National Library.[46]

The last "Hand" to inspire the infant community of Singapore was Tarazu'lláh Samandari.[47] In 1966, at the age of 93, he visited Singapore and Malaysia and gave talks at all the places he visited. Thousands of believers gathered at places along the route to hear him speak. Being then the only living link to Bahá'u'lláh, he was looked upon with awe and admiration. He was the guest of honour at the Bahá'í Seminar held in Singapore in December 1966 at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. In that week when he was in attendance, the Singapore community played host to the many Malayans, Vietnamese and Thais who journeyed down especially for the conference. [48]

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[43] *Annual Report of the NSA Malaysia*, 1968

[44] K Payman was a *Counsellor* of the Bahá'í Faith. In 1968, several Counsellors making up the Continental Board of Counsellors, were appointed by the Universal House of Justice for the protection and propagation of the Bahá'í Faith.

[45] *Bahá'í News*, February, 1960.

[46] *Bahá'í News* September 1961.

[47] Mr. Samandari enjoyed the rare honour of meeting Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith when he was eighteen years old.

[48] *Malaysian Bahá'í News* Dec 1966, p. 13

Singapore and Malaya

The LSA of Singapore came under the jurisdiction of the National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) of the Bahá'ís of India in the first five years of its existence (1952-1957) and thereafter under the aegis of the Regional Spiritual Assembly (RSA) of the Bahá'ís of Southeast Asia (1957-1963).[49] As part of the Indian Assembly, it was treated very much like an appendage, India being too far removed physically to respond quickly to local needs and conditions. As a result, many of the administrative decisions had to be decided on the spot by members of the LSA of Singapore. The formation of the RSA in 1957 ensured a more coherent and responsive framework for the administering of the Faith as its nine annually elected members were drawn from people who actually lived in the region, some of whom were born there. Some of the "local-born" RSA members included Yankee Leong, R. Sauragan and Leong Tat Chee of the Malayan Peninsula.[50]

While under the aegis of both the NSA of India and the RSA of Southeast Asia, the Singapore Bahá'í community was not regarded as a distinct national community of Southeast Asia. In fact, Singapore was administered as part of the Malayan Bahá'í community.[51] This was in line with the political situation at that time. Being under the same colonial power as the peninsula of Malaya and separated only by a causeway of less than a mile, it was administratively convenient to treat the tiny island of Singapore as such. In 1963, Singapore also became, politically, a part of Malaysia.[52]

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[49] In April 1955, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith announced to the world that the NSA of India had been given the responsibility of seeing to the formation of the RSA of SEA by Ridvan 1957, with its seat in Jakarta.

[50] However, it had only a six-year mandate in which to strengthen the local assemblies of the various countries of Southeast Asia so that they would eventually be independent enough to elect and run National Assemblies of their own. It was dissolved when the NSAs of Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines came into being in 1964.

[51] It was only in the late sixties, following the political separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965, that there was a clear rationale for Singapore to have its own National Spiritual Assembly

[52] Then, the political map of "Malaysia" included Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Malaya.

Members of the Singapore community had no problems identifying themselves closely with events taking place on the Peninsula.[53] From the very beginning, the LSA of Singapore participated in Bahá'í events across the Causeway, as would the Malaysian Bahá'ís in events organised by the Singapore community. Believers from both countries helped in each other's teaching or administrative goals. In 1957, the first summer school organised by the RSA was held "to give believers the opportunity to fully acquaint themselves more thoroughly with aspects of Bahá'í scripture."[54] This was held in Malacca and attracted believers from as far away as Penang, Singapore and Sarawak. In addition, believers from Singapore were members of the National Teaching Committee (NTC) which came into existence in 1961 when the RSA decided it was necessary to have a specialised body to co-ordinate all the teaching activities in Malaya.[55]

Travel from Singapore to Malaya and vice versa was easily facilitated via train or road. The very first such journey was attempted by Mrs. Shirin Fozdar in December 1953. As Secretary of the LSA of Singapore, Mrs. Fozdar wrote to Yankee Leong, an acquaintance she had met at the 1949 Pacifist Conference which took place in Shantiniketan, in India,[56] to try to organise a one-week lecture tour for her to teach the Bahá'í Faith. Yankee organised a lecture tour which took Mrs. Fozdar to Seremban, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca for three weeks in December 1953. The talk in Malacca was particularly successful with over three hundred presents. It was presided over by the well-known Chinese scholar and politician, Dato Tan Cheng Lock. Yankee himself became so impressed with the principles of the Faith that he declared himself a believer on the day the tour ended. As the first believer of Peninsula Malaya, he was mainly responsible for spreading the Faith in Seremban, Malacca and Kuala Lumpur soon after and for helping the infant believers

[53] Information obtained from interview with Mr Mahesh Dayal.

[54] Summer schools were basically stay-in affairs held within the space of a few days. Speakers would be invited and social and religious activities planned. Ideally, everyone would return from the school refreshed, deepened and stimulated.

[55] In the early years, the National Teaching Committee (NTC) activities were centralised in Malacca where most of the active believers resided.

[56] The Shantiniketan Conference was initiated by a group of pacifists who wanted to bring together Mahatma Gandhi and his followers in India, and the pacifist of Western countries, into a world-wide movement on non-violence (See Ong, *Uncle Yankee*)

form their respective Local Spiritual Assemblies in 1955. Like the early Chinese believers of Singapore, many of the early believers of Malaya were English-speaking and came from the Theosophical Society. In 1954 and 1955, the LSA of Singapore took the responsibility to help Yankee set up the infant communities of Malaya by periodically sending some of its members on teaching trips on a temporary basis to Seremban, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca.[57]

Singapore on its own

The LSA of Singapore came into prominence for the first time in the wider Bahá'í world when it played host to the Intercontinental Conference of 1958. This was part of five such conferences organised by the World Center of the Bahá'í Faith held throughout the world in that year: Kampala, Uganda in January; Sydney, Australia in March; Wilmette, Illinois in May; Frankfurt, Germany in July and Singapore in September. They were held to commemorate the midpoint of the 10-Year Crusade (1953-1963), a Crusade which the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith had initiated as a means to engage the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in a global missionary enterprise.[58]

The Conference was actually supposed to be held in Jakarta, which was the seat of the RSA but the permit for that conference was cancelled at the last minute by the Indonesian authorities.[59] To save the situation, the LSA of Singapore successfully applied for a permit from the British authorities and the conference was held in Singapore at the Victoria Memorial Hall in September, 1958. Many Bahá'ís from Singapore and Malaysia were therefore exposed to what an "international" Bahá'í conference was like. They had the rare opportunity to meet in one place, the more well known teachers and believers of the Faith, who had journeyed from many regions to come to the conference.[60] The community became so enthused after the conference that a number of

[57] Information obtained from an interview with Yankee Leong and Shirin Fozdar.

[58] See Hassall, *Bahá'í History in the Formative Age.*

[59] *See* Mobine-Kesheh, *"Guided Religion"*

[60] See *Bahá'í World*, 1954-1963

them left to pioneer to other countries. A few years later, in 1963, a handful of them saved a quite substantial sum of money to help charter a plane to take them to the Bahá'í World Congress in London in May 1963.[61]

From its inception, the Singapore Bahá'í community enjoyed good relations with the Singapore government. The Chief Minister of Singapore had attended the first World Religion Day in Singapore on the third Sunday of 1956[62] at the Victoria Memorial Hall and had given a piece of burial land *gratis* to the community. This relationship with government leaders stood them in good stead in 1964 when the Selangor State Assembly attempted to pass legislation which refused to recognise the independent status of the Quadyani, Taslim, as well as the Bahá'í Faith.[63] This prompted the NSA of Malaysia (of which Singapore was a part) to appoint a committee to look into the matter and to employ a lawyer to represent the Bahá'í case to the Selangor state government. Members of this committee included members from Singapore such as Mrs. George Lee and Mrs. Shirin Fozdar,[64] who met privately with the Prime Minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman and the Mentri Besar of Selangor, Datuk Harun, to seek their personal assistance on the matter. This meeting was effective for by the second parliamentary reading of the Bill, the word "Bahá'í " was dropped from the proposed legislation.[65]

Mrs. George Lee of Singapore, for some time the Chairperson of the LSA of Singapore, was elected to the NSA of Malaysia in the first

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[61] No mean feat in those days, plane journeys being highly expensive affairs. Information obtained from an interview with Mrs Shantha Sundram.

[62] From an unpublished report by Mrs Shirin Fozdar (n.d.). This event has yet to be substantiated by other eyewitness or published accounts.

[63] In March of that year, an amendment to the section on Muslim administration the Selangor State Assembly was tabled and read "whosoever under any circumstances teaches or expounds the doctrines of Quadyani, Taslim or Bahá'í or any doctrine or performs any ceremony relating to Muslim religion contrary to Muslim law is liable to six months jail a fine of $500 or both."

[64] Mrs Shirin Fozdar was then residing in Thailand.

[65] Interview with Mrs. George Lee and Mrs. Shirin Fozdar

two years of its existence (1964 and 1965).[66] Monthly meetings were held in Kuala Lumpur and members from all over Malaysia, including Singapore and Sarawak, would meet there to consult on the administrative matters of the Faith. As part of the political union of Malaysia, Singapore believers helped implement the Malaysian NSA's Nine Year Plan, whose twin objectives were "the widespread expansion the Cause" and "Universal Participation".[67] This meant helping in the establishment of a further 179 assemblies and the opening up of another 351 localities where Bahá'ís resided.[68] Funds were also collected from Singapore members to build the Bahá'í Center of Kuala Lumpur. [69] In return, the Singapore community received periodic visits from Malaysian Counsellor Yankee Leong and from Auxiliary Board Members Leong Tat Chee and Betty Monteiro, who would inspire the members by their talks and presence.[70]

This went on even after 1965 when Singapore separated itself from the political union of Malaysia and became an independent republic. It began to take on a separate political, social and economic identity of its own. Singaporeans were nevertheless still considered a part of the Bahá'ís of Malaysia and indeed Bahá'í activities in Singapore were regularly reported in the Malaysian Nineteen-Day Newsletter. It was however only a matter of time before the administrative situation was rectified so as to enable it to synchronise more closely with the political

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[66] No records of the LSA of Singapore exist to confirm the exact dates of her Chairmanship. The information was obtained from Interviews with Mr. Mahesh Dayal, Mrs George Lee and Mrs. Shirin Fozdar. Suffice to say, no other Singaporean held a seat on the NSA Malaysia after she left.

[67] *Malaysian Bahá'í News*. Sept. 1966. Information obtained from an interview with Mr Kumara Das and Mr Anthony Louis.

[68] *Malaysian Bahá'í News*, Sept 1966

[69] Mrs. George Lee had given a piece of land to the LSA of Singapore in the early 1960's. This land was later sold and the money used to buy properties in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong.

[70] Yankee Leong was appointed Counsellor in 1968. *Auxiliary Board Members* are assistants to the Counsellors. Their work involves periodic visits to Bahá'í centres, groups and assemblies - stimulating, encouraging and increasing their awareness of the spiritual challenge and responsibility resting on them. Leong Tat Chee became an Auxiliary Board Member in 1965 and his duties saw him travelling to various parts of Malaysia.

reality. By the late sixties, the supreme body of the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice, deemed it pertinent that Singapore should have its own NSA by 1972.

To prepare for this eventuality, the NSA of Malaysia began to take steps to strengthen the Singapore Bahá'í community. This it did by organising some of its more important annual programs in Singapore. The first Southeast Asian Youth Conference was held in Singapore in December 1969 and the Malaysian Winter School, a highly popular activity with Malaysians, was held in Singapore in 1971.[71] The Oceanic Conference of the South China Seas, which attracted a few hundred believers from various countries and nationalists was also held in Singapore in 1971. Navanita Sundram, from the island of Penang, then an undergraduate at the University of Singapore, also helped inaugurate a Bahá'í Society at the University of Singapore.[72] The NSA of Malaysia also encouraged Malaysians to pioneer to Singapore so as to strengthen the Singapore community both qualitatively and numerically. There was also a formal request to each Malaysian Bahá'í to make at least one teaching trip to Singapore.[73] A relationship with the Singapore press was cultivated resulting in the latter's publicising of some of its activities.[74] These attempts reaped some fruits: in 1968, there was only one LSA in Singapore but by 1970, there were five LSA's in Singapore.[75] By 1972, there was a total of 586 names on the believers list, an increase of 500 names since 1968.[76]

The stage was thus set for the inauguration of the NSA of Singapore on 22nd April, 1972. Accordingly, a National Convention was held which elected nine members for the first NSA of the Bahá'ís of Singapore. They were (in alphabetical order): Mrs. George Lee, Mr. G. Machambo, Mr. Kenneth Mak, Mrs. Rose Ong, Mr. Henry Ong, Miss

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[71] *Bahá'í World,* 1968-1973, p. 158

[72] It inauguration was reported in the *Eusoff College* magazine, the *Straits Times*, the *Eastern Sun* and the *Singapore Herald* (See *Malaysian Bahá'í News*. Sept-Oct, 1970)

[73] See Chew, *The First Forty Years*, p. 94.

[74] See *Straits Times*,26.11.1971; 21.10.1971; 19.3.1973 and *New Nation,* 24.3.1972.

[75] They were centred in the districts of City, Katong, Serangoon, Jurong and Pasir Panjang.

[76] Minutes of the NSA of Singapore, 15.7.1972.

Navanita Sundram, Mrs. Lena Tan, Mr. Edward Teo and Mr. Teo Geok Leng. The Representative from the World Centre of the Bahá'í Faith, Hand of the Cause Jalal Khazeh, at the inaugural ceremony, proclaimed Singapore's potential as "one of the few seats of predominantly Chinese culture", and called on the new Assembly to "become a beacon of guidance to the great Chinese race."[77]

Conclusion

In the first twenty years of its existence (1952-1972), the LSA of the Bahá'ís of Singapore was successful in establishing a small but viable community. It met little resistance from the governments of Singapore, that is, the British colonial authorities, and later, the Peoples' Action Party. The LSA's aims were peaceful and its outlook progressive and universal. It articulated religious values and advocated social and political mechanisms conducive to the rehabilitation of the fortunes of what Bahá'ís called the "lamentably defective" world order. In fact, it enjoyed a good relationship with the government and sought successfully the Cupertino of the governing authorities in most of its activities. It also had prominent Bahá'í teachers, including members of the Fozdar family. While many Bahá'í pioneers in other countries made no attempt to gain publicity or newspaper coverage, to contact public officials or political leaders; this was not the case in Singapore.[78] Mrs. Shirin Fozdar together with Mrs. George Lee deliberately courted publicity by being the foremost advocates of the women's movement in Singapore. In this sense, the early Singapore Bahá'í community was closely associated with the women's movement and rose from obscurity on its wings. Due to such efforts, the Bahá'í Faith became a household word in Singapore in the 1950's.

However, while many Singaporeans were acquainted, in a superficial sense, with the social principles of the Faith, few were interested in becoming members. In the period under scrutiny, the Singapore community could not have had more than a hundred members

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[77] *Malaysian Bahá'í News*, April 1972.

[78] International Teaching Center 7.12.53. (Quoted in Hassall, *Pacific Bahá'í Communities*, p. 80).

at any one time. It was also a community which was largely transient in nature, with a significant portion of its members resettling in different localities in the republic or in some other country. Although the community remained small, it was nevertheless, a steadfast one, with a significant proportion of its early believers having pioneered to other lands,[79] and contributing their expertise in the organisation of the many international Bahá'í conferences held in Singapore.

The history of the Singapore community is also closely linked to that of Malaysia. In 1953, Mrs. Fozdar taught the Faith in Malacca, and together with Yankee Leong, was the chief instrument for the formation of the first few LSAs in the Malay Peninsula. Together with a few other members of the Singapore LSA, she was to make many more teaching trips across the causeway, sometimes residing there semi-permanently. Malaysians came down in sizeable numbers for the 1958 Intercontinental Conference held in Singapore while Singaporeans attended the summer schools of Malaysia, were members of various subcommittees of the NSA of Malaysia and were featured periodically in their newsletter. In the few years before the formation of its own NSA, Singapore received help in the form of pioneering families and travelling teachers from Malaysia. The early history of the Bahá'ís of Singapore is thus a history of two cities, its fate intertwined in so many ways, different yet similar, together yet apart.

[79] For example, Pishu and Vashi pioneered to West Africa.

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The above are some of the early Bahá'ís of Singapore and Malaysia. The interviews were conducted between October 1985 and August 1986.

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