



"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens" – Bahá'u'lláh

INSIDE

Newsletter of the Bahá'í
International Community
January-March 2000
Volume 11, Issue 4



4

At the United Nations, women look ahead to June and Beijing Plus Five.



6

In Botswana, a village-level sewing club offers new opportunities for women without jobs.



8

In India, the Bahá'í community helps with relief efforts after a "super-cyclone."



16

Review: *The Saddlebag* – Bahiyyih Nakhjavani produces an evocative first novel set in nineteenth century Iran.

Madame Rúhiyyih Rabbáni, leading Bahá'í dignitary, passes away in Haifa

An author, filmmaker and lecturer who cared deeply for the environment and indigenous peoples, she held a preeminent position as a Bahá'í representative; millions mourn.

HAIFA, Israel — Madame Rúhiyyih Rabbáni, the preeminent international dignitary of the Bahá'í Faith, passed away on 19 January 2000.

An author, poet, filmmaker and lecturer, Madame Rabbáni was a tireless champion for peace, environmental conservation, and respect for the rights of indigenous peoples.

As a Hand of the Cause, the highest position occupied by individuals in the Bahá'í Faith, she also played an important role in promoting the unity and integration of the Bahá'í community over the years. She traveled extensively, visiting some 185 countries and territories to encourage the spiritual and moral development of Bahá'í communities.

In addition, as the widow of Shoghi Effendi, who headed the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957, she was the Bahá'í world's last remaining link to the family of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who headed the Faith from 1892 to 1921 and was the eldest son of the Faith's Founder, Bahá'u'lláh.

Thousands of memorial services have been held by Bahá'í communities around the world, and the Bahá'í International Community received condolences from heads of state and government, including US President William Clinton, French President Jacques Chirac and Canadian Governor General Adrienne Clarkson. Other persons of prominence, including HRH The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, also sent condolences. Her passing was widely reported in the world's news media, including *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, the Associated Press, Agence France Presse, and the British Broadcasting Corporation.

"Down the centuries to come, the followers of Bahá'u'lláh will contemplate with wonder and gratitude the quality of the services — ardent, indomitable, resourceful — that she brought to the protection and promotion of the [Bahá'í] Cause," wrote the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith, in a message to the Bahá'í world that announced Madame Rabbáni's passing.

She represented the Universal House of Justice on numerous occasions, both at Bahá'í community events and in contacts with government officials and other dignitaries. On its behalf, she presented its statement, "The Promise of World Peace," to the Secretary-General of the United Nations in November 1985, and attended the second Bahá'í World Congress held in New York City in November 1992.



Madame Rúhiyyih Rabbáni

Madame Rabbáni, continued on page 10

is published quarterly by the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community, an international non-governmental organization which encompasses and represents the worldwide membership of the Bahá'í Faith.

For more information on the stories in this newsletter, or any aspect of the Bahá'í International Community and its work, please contact:

ONE COUNTRY
Bahá'í International
Community - Suite 120
866 United Nations Plaza
New York, New York 10017
U.S.A.

E-mail: 1country@bic.org
<http://www.onecountry.org>

Executive Editor:
Ann Boyles

Editor:
Brad Pokorny

Associate Editors:
Nancy Ackerman (Moscow)
Christine Samandari-Hakim (Paris)
Kong Siew Huat (Macau)
Guilda Walker (London)

Editorial Assistant:
Veronica Shoffstall

Design:
Mann & Mann

Subscription inquiries should be directed to the above address. All material is copyrighted by the Bahá'í International Community and subject to all applicable international copyright laws. Stories from this newsletter may be republished by any organization provided that they are attributed as follows: "Reprinted from ONE COUNTRY, the newsletter of the Bahá'í International Community."

© 2000 by The Bahá'í
International Community

ISSN 1018-9300

Printed on recycled paper ♻️

Religion and the advancement of women

[Editor's note: The following article first appeared in *The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs*, a booklet published by the Bahá'í International Community in advance of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, under the title: "Religion as an Agent for Promoting the Advancement of Women at all Levels." The author, Janet A. Khan, has a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and taught psychology at the University of Queensland in Australia before moving to Haifa, Israel, where she currently serves in the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre. Given its broad relevance to the upcoming Beijing Plus Five conference at the United Nations, we are reprinting this article now.]

"According to the spirit of this age, women must advance and fulfill their mission in all departments of life, becoming equal to men. They must be on the same level as men and enjoy equal rights. This is my earnest prayer and it is one of the fundamental principles of Bahá'u'lláh." — 'Abdu'l-Bahá

The Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing stresses the importance of safeguarding women's human rights and emphasizes the principle of shared responsibility and partnership between women and men as the basis for achieving equality, development and peace. It sets out an Agenda for Equality which calls for immediate action to create a peaceful, developed, and just world, based on the principle of equality and built on the strength of women's knowledge, energy, creativity and skills, for peoples of all ages and from all walks of life. The Platform for Action thus addresses the issues associated with the advancement of women from the standpoint of moral principle, as distinct from pure pragmatism. Effective implementation of these objectives will, necessarily, require changes in values, behavior, and procedures and modification of the internal dynamics of power and organizational structures.

The great religions of the world have traditionally been important sources of vision and values, and primary agents of socialization. The spiritual principles and values they incul-

cate not only form the basis of a unifying world-view, but also serve to motivate individuals and social institutions both to act on these principles and to use them as a standard against which to weigh practical actions.

Religious values have a dual potential — either to foster human solidarity or to intensify the processes of division and social fragmentation. Indeed, the history of the role of religion in promoting the advancement of women discloses a most uneven record. While, typically, in the early years of their existence, religions tended to encourage the advancement and participation of women, at other times, women have been actively held back and oppressed by religion, especially when the forces of extremism prevail.

While many commentators acknowledge the enduring relevance of the universal spiritual values inculcated by religion, they express the view that the application of these values needs to be re-examined in light of the trend towards globalization as well as the changing social circumstances and their impact on women. As a contribution to this discourse we offer the example of the Bahá'í Faith, which has a system of values that categorically upholds the principle of the equality of women and men in all areas of human endeavour and whose worldwide community is actively working for the emancipation of women, most especially in those parts of the globe where the rights of women are traditionally and persistently denied. We will highlight those moral and spiritual principles, which, in our view, facilitate the shift in values required for the effective implementation of the Agenda for Equality.

Recognition of the basic oneness of humankind is a prerequisite to social evolution and the future well-being of the earth and its peoples. Integral to this concept is the principle of the equality of the sexes. The rights of women are clearly upheld by the Founder, Bahá'u'lláh. He emphatically asserts that, "Women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God." The rational soul has no gender, and the social inequalities that may have been dictated by the survival requirements of the past can no longer be justified in an age when

the members of the human family are becoming daily more interdependent.

The principle of equality has profound implications for the definition of the roles of women and men. It impinges on all aspects of human relations and is an integral element in domestic, economic, and community life. The application of this principle must necessarily entail a change in many traditional habits and practices. It rejects rigid role delineation, patterns of domination and arbitrary decision-making; calls for women to be welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavor; and allows for the evolution of the roles of men and women.

The principle of equality also influences the manner in which the advancement of women is fostered. The Bahá'í Writings contain the image of humanity as a bird in which one wing is woman and the other man. Unless both wings are strong and well-developed, the bird will not be able to fly. The development of women is considered vital to the full development of men and is seen as a prerequisite to peace. Hence, the members of the Bahá'í community, male and female alike, and its democratically elected administrative councils share a strong commitment to the practice of the principle of equality in their personal lives, in their families, and in all aspects of social and civic life. Individuals and social institutions collaborate in encouraging the development and emancipation of women, and in designing and implementing programs to enhance their spiritual, social, and economic development.

Great emphasis is placed on education in the Bahá'í Faith as a means of promoting the advancement of women. The religion not only upholds the principle of universal education, but it accords priority to the education of girls and women when resources are limited, since it is only through educated mothers that the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society. It advocates that girls and boys follow the same curriculum in school, and women are encouraged to study the arts, crafts, sciences, and professions and to enter all fields of work, even those traditionally the exclusive province of men.

Education is considered an important means of empowering women. Apart from the acquisition of knowledge and moral values conducive to social evolution, education provides such benefits as the development of the mind, and training in logical and analytical thinking, organizational, administra-



tive and management skills, as well as enhanced self esteem and improved status within the community.

The type of education envisaged and actively pursued by the Bahá'í community strengthens the role of mothers and encourages the spirit of cooperation in men. It prepares women for participation in all fields of endeavour and provides them with the practical skills to enable them to share power and decision-making. Women serve at all levels of the Bahá'í administrative system, playing a distinguished role on the international level and being elected to membership of Bahá'í national and local governing councils in all parts of the world.

The system of values embodied in the Bahá'í Faith is giving rise to the development of a vibrant worldwide community which is committed to promoting the emancipation and advancement of women. The approach which has been adopted is conscious and evolutionary. This religion is engaged, long term, in implementing systematic plans, plans that are guided and sustained by the vision of the principle of equality of the sexes, developed through consultation and with the full participation of women, implemented in a spirit of cooperation, and fully supported by its governing institutions. Such an approach is conducive to effecting fundamental social reconstruction and to lending significant support toward achieving the objectives of the Agenda of Equality as set out in the Platform for Action. *

In London, the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom held a reception on 21 March 2000 to formally launch the All Party Parliamentary Friends of the Bahá'ís, a group of parliamentarians concerned with the ongoing persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran. Some 100 guests, including at least 14 parliamentarians, attended the reception. Member of Parliament Peter Hain is shown above at left with the Hon. Barnabas Leith, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í community of the United Kingdom. Mr. Hain is Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Women of the world look ahead to Beijing Plus Five in June

This year's Commission on the Status of Women wrestled with difficult issues in assessing world progress for women since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

UNITED NATIONS — For the better part of March, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) worked to assess progress for women around the world since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

The goal was to prepare for a Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly scheduled for June 5-9, which seeks to produce international agreement on the next steps towards implementing the Beijing Platform for Action, the ground-breaking plan for the worldwide advancement of women adopted by the Beijing Conference.

Although the 45 governments that compose the CSW were successful in negotiating many points, agreement was not reached on numerous passages in the draft document that will be adopted at the June Special Session, which is known colloquially as "Beijing Plus Five" and officially as "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the 21st Century."

The key points of debate involved sexual and reproductive rights, human rights, economic issues related to globalization, and the unwillingness of governments to provide the amount of funding for international development that was agreed on at previous UN conferences. In the lingo of the UN diplomacy, passages concerning those points were left with many "brackets" — meaning they will be edited or changed later, in special conferences before June or at the June event itself.

Nevertheless, a number of positive points emerged from the Commission's annual meeting, held from 3-17 March. For one thing, it was decided that new non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can apply for accreditation to the Beijing Plus Five meeting in June. In addition, many speakers highlighted the importance of women's equality in a broad range of international issues.

The president of the UN Security Council, for example, spoke about the essential role of women in the maintenance of peace and security. In an address on 8 March, Interna-

tional Women's Day, Ambassador Anwarul Karim Choudhury said that women must be "empowered politically and economically, and represented adequately at all levels of decision-making" at every stage of the process of establishing and maintaining peace.

Felicity Hill, director of the UN office of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, said she was "thrilled" by Amb. Choudhury's comments. "All the issues that we're very concerned about, including the inclusion of women in peace-building, peace-negotiation and conflict reconstruction work were very clearly articulated by the president of the Security Council and this is a big first," said Ms. Hill.

Bani Dugal-Gujral, director of the Office for the Advancement of Women of the Bahá'í International Community, said this year's meeting was also notable for the degree to which the importance of "partnership" between women and men was highlighted. "I heard governments talking about the importance of the involvement of men, and I heard NGOs talking about it," said Ms. Dugal-Gujral. "This is important because on so many issues of concern to women, progress will not really be possible without the full cooperation of men."

Increased Access for NGOs

Another significant development was the decision to allow newly formed NGOs to participate in Beijing Plus Five. The General Assembly decided on 15 March that any NGOs, even those without previous consultative status to the UN or accreditation to the 1995 Beijing Conference, could apply for accreditation to the Special Session. It was also decided that a limited number of NGOs with consultative status will also be allowed to make statements to the main meeting of the Special Session.

While the Commission stated that these arrangements would not "create a precedent" for General Assembly special sessions, many viewed the decision as another sign that the atmosphere at the United Nations

is increasingly receptive to NGO input.

"I think there's no question but that the NGO community has been really heartened by the decision to expand the possibilities of NGO participation," said Susana Fried, Beijing Plus Five Advisor for the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

Some 1,300 NGOs participated in this year's Commission meeting, the most ever. Many, for the first time this year, were from groups with a strong position against abortion — something that created its own dynamic among NGOs.

An estimated 400 delegates were registered under the accreditation of various North American NGOs — groups such as the International Right to Life Movement, the Franciscan Friars, the Movement of Mothers, United Families, the Couple to Couple League — that stood against abortion and took the plainly stated goal of re-opening discussion on elements of the Platform for Action, a viewpoint that is opposite to the majority of NGOs that have typically attended past Commission meetings.

The result was a number of uncomfortable interactions, especially since many of the newcomers seemed unfamiliar with the procedures and protocols at UN meetings.

"They're mostly young people out on spring break, most of whom have no understanding at all about the UN nor the CSW nor the Platform for Action nor the outcome document — no understanding of why they're here except to push one issue, which is traditional families and pro-life issues," said Shireen Lee, coordinator of the Youth Caucus. "They were present in large numbers and some of the leaders would sit off to the side and refuse to identify themselves, kind of as monitors. It was really intimidating."

Members of the pro-family coalition admitted they did not know much about UN protocol, but nevertheless wanted to make their point. "We did come here in large numbers," said Elizabeth Daub, a member of the World Youth Alliance, a Virginia-based group accredited to the conference under the National Right to Life Committee. "We felt that was one of the ways we'll be heard."

The draft document

Organized into four sections, the draft document that will be presented at Beijing Plus Five reaffirms governments' commitments to the goals stated in the Platform for Action, summarizes the achievements and the obstacles in implementing each of the



12 critical areas, presents current challenges to implementation, and suggests actions and initiatives to overcome obstacles and achieve full implementation.

The 12 critical areas of the Platform, as they relate specifically to women, are: poverty; education and training; health; violence; armed conflict; the economy; power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms for advancement; human rights; the media; the environment; and the girl child.

Among the achievements noted in the draft document was a wider recognition that critical issues such as poverty, health, and armed conflict, among others, affect women in specific ways; an acknowledgment of the need to mainstream a gender perspective; and an overall increase in the participation of women at all levels in addressing these issues.

Specific achievements highlighted include the success of microcredit, progress in education and literacy, more government-initiated policy reforms and services for abused women, international policy support for eradication of female genital mutilation, the recognition of rape as a war crime, and the adoption of policies and mechanisms to protect women's human rights.

Lack of funding and resources topped the list of obstacles in all the areas and discriminatory practices and attitudes continue to obstruct women's advancement worldwide, the document reported. It said that insufficient attention is paid to the link between women's education and labor market dynamics, and poverty is increasing among women. Gender biases continue to hinder educational and employment opportunities, and the weak response of legal officials to violence against women continues to leave them vulnerable to abuse. *

— Reported by Veronica Shoffstall

On Saturday, 4 March, NGOs at the Commission on the Status of Women focused on "Strategies for Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action: 2000 and Beyond." In the afternoon, women met in various areas of the UN to consult about the issues. Shown above are members of the Institutional Mechanisms caucus, meeting in the UN cafeteria, which was one of the designated consultation areas.

In Botswana, a simple sewing club for women makes a big difference

Members of the Oodi Sewing Club. Shown left to right are: Boitumelo, Nooran Mahmoudi, Segametsi, Tinny, Shiela, and Sekgopi.



The Oodi Sewing Club is modest as development projects go. It takes no money from the outside and its membership has numbered a total of 25 women, mostly poor single mothers. Yet more than half have found jobs since joining and virtually all say they have found a new confidence.

OODI, Botswana — As a young unmarried mother in this small village of 2,000 people some 25 kilometers north of Gaborone, Segametsi struggled for many months to find enough money just to feed and clothe her 18-month-old baby.

Now she earns a modest income making clothing in her home, thanks to her membership in a sewing cooperative established as a small-scale economic development project by the local Bahá'í community here.

"Before joining this sewing club, life was difficult because my baby needed food and clothes, but I didn't know how to get them," said Segametsi, who is 20 years old and like other women in this region uses just a single name. "I didn't have money. But I am very happy now, because I am learning and working every day. I have my own money. After buying what my baby needs, I help my parents."

As development projects go, the Oodi Sewing Club, as the cooperative is known, is a modest one. Since its beginning in 1995, about 25 women — the majority of whom are poor single mothers like Segametsi — have cycled through the club's membership. In terms of results, however, the club has been a small-scale success story — and a case study in grassroots community development. As of early 2000, nearly all of its first 15 members had found jobs. One is now working in a clothing factory, at least three are working as tailors, and most of the others have started their own home businesses.

"As the result of this project and other projects for women, the women start working in the village instead of going to town to work," said Chief Semile, the village headman. "The wages are less, but the women are closer to their children and family. In town they get more money, but they had to travel far and be away from their children

and their family all day.”

According to the United Nations, the average per capita income in Botswana is about \$2,500 per year. About 50 percent of the country's population, however, remains below the poverty line. And, as might be expected, single women compose many of those who are among the poorest of the poor.

In an effort to address such social and economic conditions, the Bahá'í community of Oodi began some years ago to consult about possible development projects. Composed of roughly 30 members, and inspired by Bahá'í teachings that emphasize the equality of women and men, the community felt there was a great need to help women, especially for teenage mothers, to develop a greater sense of self-worth by learning a skill that could provide steady income and independence. The idea for a sewing club and training project emerged from these consultations.

Nooran Mahmoudi, a Bahá'í of Iranian background who came to Oodi in 1995, had expertise in establishing sewing cooperatives, and she undertook to organize the club. With the assistance of Chief Semile, the Club received permission from the Village Development Committee to use the community hall one day a week.

“Many of the women were complaining that it was hard to find jobs and feed their families, especially their children,” said Ms. Mahmoudi. “I felt I could be of service by giving free sewing classes and establishing a sewing cooperative to channel the skill and efforts of the ladies in a productive way.”

The club has received no outside funds and is entirely self-supporting. Ms. Mahmoudi provided the initial materials. In the course of their instruction, members made cushions and clothing and sold them. Part of those earnings was then used to purchase more material.

Those who joined the club soon found that sewing was not difficult. This discovery brought hope, which in turn motivated participants to work harder and produce more and better quality items.

“My children are happy now, because I am working and able to buy what they need for school, such as shoes, clothes and food,” said Sekgopi, a 31-year-old single mother with three children. “I want in the future to buy my own sewing machine and work at home as a dressmaker. I always wanted to learn to sew.”

The Oodi project is modeled after a simi-

lar project near Mutare, Zimbabwe, which Ms. Mahmoudi started in 1992. Located in an outlying village, at one point it had some 45 members and was an inspiration to women in neighboring villages, where at least two similar clubs were launched. All three Zimbabwe clubs are still functioning, and at least 9 members have bought their own sewing machines and established their own businesses.

Although trained as a mechanical engineer, Mrs. Mahmoudi now sees herself as a community development worker. “In Zimbabwe, when we asked people what they wanted to learn, they all said ‘sewing,’ so I just taught people what I knew,” said Mrs. Mahmoudi. “I’ve tried to use the same experience in Botswana.”

In mid-1996, the Oodi project was moved to a new location, a small hut which is open to members every day. Classes are held one afternoon per week. The club has received several sewing machines, and with their arrival members developed a new marketing idea. They decided to make several samples of school uniforms and take them to the local schools for sale, as there is no uniform shop or a tailor in the village to provide this service. For some club members, making school uniforms has now become a regular source of income.

“This club is very good for our village,” said Diana Meswele, a member of the Village Development Committee. “The girls and women are learning. They did not have hope, but now they are able to work and feel good about themselves.” *

— Reported by Ladan Doorandish-Vance

“Many of the women were complaining that it was hard to find jobs and feed their families, especially their children. I felt I could be of service by giving free sewing classes and establishing a sewing cooperative to channel the skill and efforts of the ladies in a productive way.”

— Nooran Mahmoudi

Boitumelo sews while Nooran Mahmoudi, who provides the training in sewing, looks on. At right is Segametsi.



Bahá'ís pitch in after “super-cyclone”

The State Bahá'í Council of Orissa used this truck to distribute food after the 29 October 1999 cyclone that hit India's east coast. More than 10,400 kilograms of rice and other staples were distributed by the Bahá'í community of Orissa by early December.



ORISSA, India — It has been roughly six months since the one of the worst cyclones ever to hit India took 10,000 lives and left upwards of a million people homeless. Yet much remains to be done.

Although immediate need for food has been generally satisfied, many individuals and families remain without proper shelter, warm clothes, or electricity. An estimated 11,000 schools were destroyed by the storm. Many farmers in the region lost a significant portion of their livestock.

Through its network of grassroots communities along India's eastern coast, the Bahá'í community of India has played a significant role in humanitarian relief operations following the 29 October 1999 cyclone, acting to provide help immediately after the storm and then in the continuing process of rebuilding.

“Conditions in many places are still far from normal,” said Riaz Motallebi, secretary of the State Bahá'í Council of Orissa, which coordinated the Bahá'í response to the disaster. “It may take another six months to bring some kind of relief to many families. So far electric connections have not been restored in many places and therefore it has a great impact on the preparation of fodder for cattle.

“But now communities have learned not merely to sit and wait, but rather to consult, plan and then act upon their plan in cooperation with each other,” Mr. Motallebi said in a recent interview. “This is the main theme that the Bahá'í community has urged and demonstrated — and we see the community at large responding to it.”

Local councils provide a network

Located on the east coast of India, Orissa state is considered one of poorest regions of the country. Some 90 percent of its population of 32 million people live in rural villages, and the state's literacy rate is about 35 percent.

There are some 65,000 Bahá'ís in Orissa, spread throughout the state's 30 districts. In at least 88 villages, Bahá'ís have established local Spiritual Assemblies, freely elected local governing councils that are the basic unit of Bahá'í administration.

These local councils provided a network through which the Bahá'í community of India was able to assist both its co-religionists and the population at large.

The 29 October “super-cyclone” brought winds of up to 260 kilometers per hour, battering the Orissa coast for some 36 hours. Among the 10 million people in the 14 hard-

Local Bahá'í councils provided a network through which the Bahá'í community of India was able to assist both its co-religionists and the population at large after a “super-cyclone” struck India's east coast last November.

est-hit districts were about 25,000 Bahá'ís, organized into 40 local Spiritual Assemblies.

On 31 October, immediately after the weather had cleared, the State Bahá'í Council met to decide how best to mobilize to assist in relief efforts. "Everyone was in the state of shock, so great was the devastation," said Mr. Motallebi. "But we found that our strength was in our local Assemblies. Compared to many NGOs and their resources, our level of activity may not be much. But we discovered our real manpower was in the field, in the grassroots resources which our Assemblies had."

Mr. Motallebi said, for example, that although many outside relief agencies came in with food and other resources, they had no way to distribute it quickly. On the other hand, even the poorest of Bahá'í Assemblies was able to mobilize itself rapidly. "One local Spiritual Assembly, even in its utmost poverty and humility, arranged all on its own for food and distributed it to more than 600 people," he said.

Mohand Abul Kalam, Project Officer for water supply and sanitation in the Orissa State UNICEF Office, agreed that a major strength of the Bahá'í effort was its network of community councils.

"Since the cyclone, the Bahá'ís have come to the UNICEF office for regular coordination meetings with other NGOs," said Mr. Abul Kalam. "They did contribute their ideas and they did participate in the relief work. I must say they have some good, grassroots level workers, dedicated workers, who have direct contact with the community."

No donations from outside

By December, Bahá'ís had gathered and distributed more than 10,400 kilograms of rice, 4000 kilograms of rice flour, and 4000 kilograms of potatoes. This food was either purchased, donated or bought on credit by the community itself — none of it came from outside sources. Through the Bahá'í network, this food was distributed to some 12,000 families in Orissa. Later, warm clothes were distributed to roughly the same number of families.

Local Bahá'í Assemblies also sought to assist in other ways immediately after the storm. In some areas, they worked to set up makeshift schools for children. Others distributed pamphlets and information on sanitation and hygiene.

More recently, Bahá'í communities have followed up by distributing clothing, work-

ing with local governments and other non-governmental organizations to do long-term planning, and assisting in the rebuilding of homes and buildings.

In collaboration with the Indo German Social Service Society (IGSSS) and the New Era Development Institute, the Bahá'í community of Orissa is currently working to set up a vocational course that will provide training in house wiring and electric motor re-winding — two skills in demand after the cyclone. As well, courses are being established to teach village health and hygiene, reforestation, and water sanitation. The first course started in January and will graduate 16 students at the end of April. In all, six courses are scheduled, running until December 2002.

Some local Spiritual Assemblies are helping in the reconstruction work by purchasing bricks, bamboo and other building materials and then giving those materials directly to needy families. "It works better than simply giving money directly, because this method ensures the funds will be used for rebuilding houses," said Tooraj Moghbelpoor, treasurer of the State Bahá'í Council.

Mr. Motallebi said Bahá'ís were inspired to help because of their belief in the oneness of humanity. "When there is a pain in any part of the body, the whole body will be disturbed and so it was with Bahá'í community all over India and the world," said Mr. Motallebi. "Many Bahá'í communities assisted in cash and kind, helping their fellow Bahá'ís in Orissa." *

"One local Spiritual Assembly, even in its utmost poverty and humility, arranged all on its own for food and distributed it to more than 600 people."

— Riaz Motallebi



Bahá'ís talk with a couple whose dwelling was destroyed by the cyclone.

Madame Rúhíyyih Rabbáni, leading Bahá'í dignitary, passes away in Haifa

In 1967, Madame Rabbáni visited with participants in a literacy campaign in Sucre, Bolivia.



Madame Rabbáni, continued from page one

"To an extraordinary extent, Madame Rabbáni's own work exemplified the priority the Bahá'í Faith gives to the unification of humankind."

— Statement of the Bahá'í International Community

In the course of her travels, Madame Rabbáni was received by many heads of state and government and other prominent figures as diverse as: Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia; Malietoa Tanumafili II of Western Samoa; President Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire; President Carlos Menem of Argentina; Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India; Prime Minister Edward Seaga of Jamaica; and Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuellar.

"To an extraordinary extent, Madame Rabbáni's own work exemplified the priority the Bahá'í Faith gives to the unification of humankind," said a statement issued by the Office of Public Information of the Bahá'í International Community following her passing. "The greater part of the last 35 years of her life were devoted to travels that took her to 185 countries and dependent territories, and that served as a major factor in in-

tegrating the world's several million Bahá'ís into a unified global community."

Born as Mary Sutherland Maxwell

The only child of William Sutherland Maxwell, a premier architect of Montreal, Canada, and his wife May Bolles, Madame Rabbáni's given name was Mary Sutherland Maxwell. She was born in New York on 8 August 1910.

Both parents were prominent Bahá'ís of their day. Mr. Maxwell designed the superstructure of one of the Faith's most holy sites, the Shrine of the Báb, which adorns the slope of Mt. Carmel in Haifa, where the Faith has its world headquarters. He himself received the designation of Hand of the Cause. Madame Rabbáni's mother was the first Bahá'í in Europe and another important Bahá'í personage of her day.

In her youth, Madame Rabbáni was active in Bahá'í activities in and around Montreal, where she was raised. At the age

of 15, she became a member of the Executive Committee of the Fellowship of Canadian Youth for Peace. At 21, she was elected to the local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Montreal, the local Bahá'í governing council there.

Madame Rabbáni's education was wide-ranging. She attended a Montessori school as a young girl, then studied with tutors and for a time attended McGill University in Montreal. She also began to write at an early age, working on various books, plays and poetry.

On 25 March 1937, the young Miss Maxwell married Shoghi Effendi Rabbáni, who was then head of the Bahá'í Faith, and took the name Rúhíyyih Rabbáni. Known as the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi was the great-grandson of the Faith's Founder, Bahá'u'lláh.

For some sixteen years, she served as Shoghi Effendi's chief secretary, helping him with the voluminous correspondence that his position required, and traveling to represent him.

Yet, Madame Rabbáni's reputation as the preeminent member of the worldwide Bahá'í community derived from more than her relationship by marriage to Bahá'u'lláh's family.

In 1951 Shoghi Effendi appointed her to the Bahá'í International Council, a nine-member body that served as a precursor to the Universal House of Justice. In 1952, she was elevated to the rank of Hand of the Cause.

In these positions, she played a crucial role in effecting a successful transition in the leadership of the Faith after the passing of Shoghi Effendi in 1957. With eight other Hands of the Cause, she managed the affairs of the Faith from 1957 until 1963, when the Universal House of Justice was established and its first nine members elected, in accordance with the Bahá'í scriptures.

Globe-girdling travels

After 1963, Madame Rabbáni undertook a series of continental and oceanic tours, visiting many thousands of Bahá'í communities around the world.

In 1964, she visited India, Sri Lanka, Sikkim and Nepal, traveling more than 55,000 miles. In 1967-68, she visited every country in South America, after laying the cornerstone for the first Bahá'í temple in the region, which is located in Panama.

From 1969 to 1973, Madame Rabbáni undertook a grand tour of Africa, driving with a companion in a Land Rover for some

36,000 miles, visiting 34 countries. During the tour, she was received by 17 heads of state, including Emperor Selassie of Ethiopia, President Senghor of Senegal, President Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast, and King Soubhuza of Swaziland.

On another occasion, she visited nearly 30 countries in Asia and the Pacific within a span of some seven months. And during a 1975 trip to Latin America, she produced a full-length film, called "The Greenlight Expedition," which documented her visits to the native peoples of South America, focusing on her travels in the jungle areas of Suriname, Guyana, and up the Amazon River in Brazil.

Rapport with indigenous peoples

Throughout her travels, she took a special interest in the plight of illiterate villagers and indigenous populations. In her speeches and writing, she repeatedly expressed the view that the fundamental decency, spirituality, intelligence and uprightness which distinguishes the core of human nature is more often to be found among people in remote areas than in the materialistic civilizations of the West.

"Probably the greatest crime of the white man is that in his folly and conceit in the great power of his money-civilization, he has made other men feel inferior," she wrote in 1961. "How deep this acid has bitten into the souls of other men I suppose we white people can never know."

Her rapport with indigenous peoples won great friendship among them. She was given the name "Natu Ocsist" (Blessed Mother) by the Blackfoot Indians of Canada, she was adopted into the Eagle Tribe of the



Madame Rabbáni, née Mary Maxwell, at age 16.

Madame Rabbáni, on a visit to Gbendembou village, Sierra Leone, in March 1971.



"To read of Rúbáyyih Rabbáni's wide-ranging interests in literature, the environment, the arts, and of her pursuits is to understand in small part what her loss means not only to your community, but also to the world."
— US President William Clinton

Tlingit Indians of Alaska, and she was adopted by the grandson of the famous Sioux Indian Chief, Sitting Bull, and given the name "Princess Pretty Feather."

A person of prodigious interests and capabilities, Madame Rabbáni, in addition to being an administrator and world traveler, was an author, poet, lecturer, and film producer. Her several books include *The Priceless Pearl*, a full-length biography of Shoghi Effendi, and *Prescription for Living*, which deals with the application of spiritual principles to practical life.

Fluent in English, French, German and Persian, she lectured widely, including occasions on which she shared a platform with HRH Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. Out of her concern for the environment, she supported the activities of the World Wide Fund for Nature, addressing a fund-raising banquet at Syon House in London in 1988 that launched its influential "Arts for Nature" initiative. She was also present at the 1994 World Forestry Charter Gathering, held at St. James's Palace. Her love for the arts involved her in the planning and direction of the restoration of a number of historic buildings associated with the Bahá'í Faith.

In 1996, Madame Rabbáni was honored by Brazil's highest legislative body, the Chamber of Deputies. In a two-hour solemn session commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Bahá'í Faith in Brazil, Madame Rabbáni was honored in speeches by 14 representatives of all major political parties as a defender of the environment, a promoter of world peace and unity, and a protector of

the rights of indigenous peoples.

Worldwide commemorations

Upon learning of her passing, Bahá'í communities around the world organized memorial services and sent messages of condolence.

"Our Community prays that this extraordinary soul wing its flight with the same intrepidity that characterized her life on earth and we are consoled with the certainty that, after nearly half a century..., Amatu'l-Bahá finally reunites with her Guardian," wrote the local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Maringá, Parana, in Brazil.

On the worldwide web, sites were established where individuals could post remembrances. Verity Adib Bidenjeri posted a story about a time when Madame Rabbáni visited a village outside Bangalore, India.

"Indian villagers are very hospitable people, especially if you show kindness and respect towards their culture," Verity Bidenjeri wrote. "They offer you to eat of their bizarre dishes as a courtesy to their visitors. [Madame Rabbáni] sat on the floor with her legs crossed Indian style, then wet the banana leaf that was spread before her (Indian villagers use them as plates for their food), and started eating with her hands as they all did, not showing the slightest discomfort when consuming the hot and spicy curries.

"The friends were baffled and could not believe their eyes. Later when asked, she said that it was her love for Bahá'u'lláh, that made it the tastiest dish she had ever eaten."

U.S. President William Clinton sent his condolences to the Bahá'ís of the United

In 1985, Madame Rabbáni presented a statement, *The Promise of World Peace*, written by the Universal House of Justice, to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Javier Perez De Cuellar.



States, saying: "To read of Rúhíyyih Rabbání's wide-ranging interests in literature, the environment, the arts, and of her pursuits is to understand in small part what her loss means not only to your community, but also to the world. Please know that our thoughts are with you and the entire Bahá'í community."

Madame Rabbání was laid to rest in Haifa on 23 January 2000. About 1,000 people attended the funeral, including Mr. Chris Greenshields, Minister-Counsellor of the Canadian Embassy; Mrs. Marsha Von Duerckheim, Consul-General of the U.S. Embassy; Mr. Ariel Kenet of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Dr. Roman Bronfman, Member of the Knesset; Mr. Amram Mitzna, the Mayor of Haifa; and Mr. Shmaryahu Biran, the Mayor of Acre. Dr. Nissim Dana of the Ministry of Religious Affairs represented the Israeli Government.

Many of the Bahá'í Faith's senior officers attended, including members of the Universal House of Justice, international Counse-



lors, and members of some 80 national Bahá'í governing councils from as far away as Mongolia and Samoa. The simple ceremony consisted of readings from the Bahá'í sacred scriptures. *

While approaching the village of Kurwita on a visit to Sri Lanka in 1964, Madame Rabbání crossed a small bridge followed by villagers.

IN MEMORIAM

Adib Taherzadeh, member of the Universal House of Justice, passes away

HAIFA, Israel — Mr. Adib Taherzadeh, member of the Universal House of Justice, passed away on 26 January 2000 after some months of illness. He was 78.

Born in Yazd, Iran, Mr. Taherzadeh studied electrical engineering at Teheran University and then pursued advanced studies in the United Kingdom. During the 1960s and 1970s, he served on various national governing councils for the Bahá'í communities of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1976, he was appointed to the Continental Board of Counsellors for Europe, a high level Bahá'í advisory body.

An accomplished author, Mr. Taherzadeh published a number of books on Bahá'í history, including a four-volume series on the life and writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, entitled *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*.

In 1988, he was elected to the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, which is headquartered in Haifa, Israel.

"We recall with admiration his devoted

and unremitting services to the Cause of God for over half a century," wrote the Universal House of Justice in a message about his passing. "[A]s a member of the National Spiritual Assemblies of the British Isles and of the Republic of Ireland, as a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Europe, and as a member of the Universal House of Justice, he evinced complete consecration, unshakeable faith, and unyielding resolve."

Members of Mr. Taherzadeh's immediate family, who had been able to spend time with him in the days prior to his passing, attended the funeral, which was held in the central hall of the International Teaching Centre on the morning of Sunday, 30 January.

Some 700 people, including the staff at the Bahá'í World Centre, were present at his funeral. He is survived by his wife, four children and six grandchildren. Memorial services have been held in Bahá'í Houses of Worship and communities throughout the world. *



Adib Taherzadeh

Earth Charter final draft issued

PARIS — After eight years of deliberations, involving more than 100,000 people in at least 50 countries, the Earth Charter Commission issued a final version of the Earth Charter after a meeting here 12–14 March 2000.

The Charter is designed to be a universal statement of ethical and environmental principles that will guide the conduct of people and nations towards a peaceful, just and sustainable future.

The Commission, which is composed of some 25 leaders in business, politics, religion, education and the environment, hopes the Charter will be adopted by the United Nations and regarded as a primary document on a par with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The preamble offers both a stirring vision and a grave warning.

"We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future," the Charter begins. "As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace."

The Charter also emphasizes humanity's "universal responsibility" to and for everyone and all life, stating "we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities."

"We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked," the Charter says. "Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world. The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature."

Fewer than 2500 words in length, the fi-

nal version of the Charter spells out a broad code aimed at promoting "respect and care for the community of life," restoring "the integrity of Earth's ecological systems," encouraging "social and economic justice," and upholding "democracy, nonviolence and peace."

It states, for example, "that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings."

It urges an "open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired" and "support [for] international scientific and technical cooperation on sustainability, with special attention to the needs of developing nations."

According to a statement from the Earth Council, which has managed the process of drafting the Charter, the "focus will now move to using the Earth Charter as an education tool in formal and non-formal education, and as the basis for business and professional codes of conduct and national development plans."

"The Earth Charter is a declaration of interdependence and responsibility and an urgent call to build a global partnership for sustainable development," said the Council. "The principles of the Earth Charter are closely interrelated. Together, they provide a conception of sustainable development and set forth fundamental guidelines for achieving it."

Throughout the decade-long initiative, the Bahá'í International Community has been an active international partner in the drafting process, giving input, hosting and participating in meetings to solicit comments, and serving on various Earth Charter committees.

"The Earth Charter has become the definitive earth ethics declaration," said Peter Adriance, who has followed the Charter process for the Bahá'í International Community since its inception. "The drafting exercise has been going on for nearly a decade and it has reached thousands of people in virtually every sector of society. The document was born out of a consultative, consensus-based process that gives it a legitimacy around the world." *

"To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny."

— The Earth Charter, final draft

To read the full text of the final draft of the Earth Charter, visit <http://www.onecountry.org>

Review: *The Saddlebag*

Review, continued from back page

found the traces of their will in rocks and desert valleys.”

While the theft destroys his fragile existence, it also leads him, in dying, towards a mystical transcendence that endows him with the literacy, wealth, and belief denied to him in life: “It was clear now. He heard the words of the merchant as he began to read them spread across the blue scroll of the sky. He read the prayer as he heard it, spanning the heavens like a bridge of light. Clear-sighted and wide open he died then, as rich as a prince of the realm, with eyes the colour of angels’ wings.”

The Saddlebag is an impressive first novel from author Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, who was born in Iran, grew up in east Africa, attended boarding school in Wales, and studied at universities in England and the United States. Born in to a Bahá’í family and the author of several nonfiction works on matters relating to the Faith, Ms. Nakhjavani has taken the core incident of this work’s plot from a Bahá’í historical narrative titled “The Dawn-breakers” which mentions

briefly that a saddlebag belonging to the Báb – the prophet-herald of the Bahá’í Faith – was stolen during His pilgrimage to Mecca.

The characters and incidents are fictional, however, and the author has commented that one motive for writing the book was “to see how it was possible to weave the different threads so that the paths of a group of people from different races, cultures and backgrounds could cross and re-cross by perfect accident while making perfect sense. It seemed that if one could achieve this in a narrative form there was no reason why it could not be recognized as a valid metaphor at other levels: political, religious, economic.”

The result of this amalgam of fact and fiction, of cultural juxtapositions and disparate character types, is a lyrical prose narrative that is as richly textured, as colorful, and as intricate as a Persian carpet.

The novel, which was Britain’s *Good Book Guide* “Fiction Book of the Month” for February, is also being translated into Spanish, Germany, Dutch, and French. The U.S. edition will be published in September by Beacon Press. *

The result of this amalgam of fact and fiction, of cultural juxtapositions and disparate character types, is a lyrical prose narrative that is as richly textured, as colorful, and as intricate as a Persian carpet.

IN MEMORIAM

Mildred Mottahedeh, first Bahá’í International Community representative to the United Nations, passes away

NEW YORK — Mildred Mottahedeh, the first Bahá’í International Community representative to the United Nations, passed away on 17 February 2000. She was 91.

A world-renowned producer and collector of fine porcelain, a promoter of social and economic development, and an early supporter of the United Nations, Ms. Mottahedeh had been a Bahá’í since 1929 and had served at many levels on Bahá’í administrative councils.

“Her more than half a century of tireless endeavor in [Bahá’í] service involved her in teaching and administrative activities at the local, national, continental and international levels,” wrote the Universal House of Justice, the international Bahá’í governing council, in a message announcing her passing. “At the same time, she maintained a rigorous schedule as a business woman, a contributor to the arts, and a promoter of humanitarian works. To these manifold tasks, she brought the combined resources of a

selfless spirit, a compassionate heart, a creative mind, a practical sense, and a leonine will tempered by humility, candor and wit.”

Born in Seabright, New Jersey, on 7 August 1908, she met and married Rafi Y. Mottahedeh, an Iranian-born importer, in 1929. The couple founded Mottahedeh & Company, which became world renowned for its reproductions of fine porcelain.

An early advocate of the United Nations, Ms. Mottahedeh was present in San Francisco at the signing of the Charter and in 1948 she became the Bahá’í International Community’s first representative to the UN, a position she held until October 1967.

Ms. Mottahedeh was also active in promoting social and economic development. In 1958, she and her husband established a foundation to support projects in the developing world. Ms. Mottahedeh was also instrumental in providing early support for the New Era High School and the New Era Development Institute in India. *



Mildred Mottahedeh

A first novel weaves “an intricate Persian carpet” about a thief, a priest, a spy and a saddlebag

The Saddlebag

**By Bahiyyih
Nakhjavani**

Bloomsbury

London

Among the new cultural expressions that have arisen in our contracting world, with its shifting and blurring of national boundaries, are “world music” and “world literature.” In the latter category, one thinks of writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Vikram Seth, and Salman Rushdie, whose works are informed by the authors’ cultural backgrounds but framed by a modern, cosmopolitan sensibility. The result is a literature with broad appeal that draws readers compellingly into what would once have been considered “foreign” worlds. The combination is appealingly exotic and even educational, but also familiar and accessible.

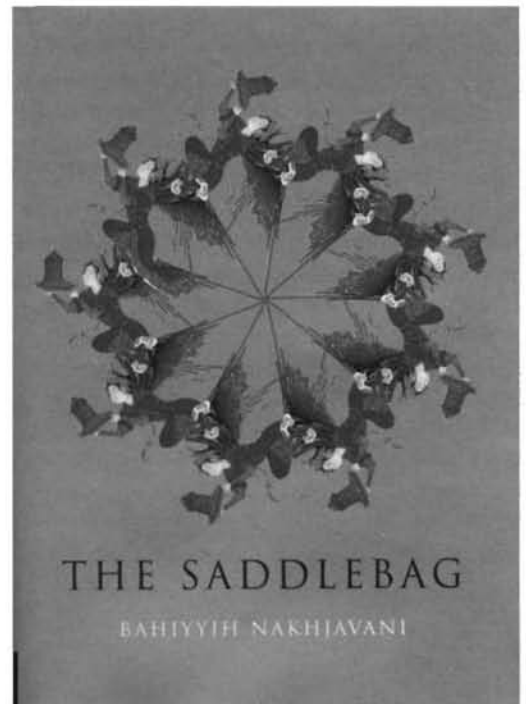
The Saddlebag by Bahiyyih Nakhjavani is a fine recent contribution to this genre of literature. With its exotic setting — primarily the route between Mecca and Medina in the mid-nineteenth century — a plot that circles tantalizingly around the enigmatic saddlebag of the title, its lyrical prose style, the disparate perspectives that comprise the narrative, and a fascinating collection of characters, the novel skillfully weaves together nine tales so immediate and compelling that the reader can taste the desert dust on her tongue. Yet at the same time the novel transcends the limitations of the specific setting, in the best tradition of literature, in its big-hearted portrayal of human quirks and foibles.

The Saddlebag possesses a fable-like quality, beginning with its first sentence: “There was once a Thief who made his living by stealing from pilgrims along the road between Mecca and Medina.” The characters are a panoply of cultural and religious types: the Bedouin thief (a pagan), the Arab chieftain (an atheist), the Zoroastrian bride, the Indian moneychanger (who morphs from Hindu to Moslem to whatever else the occasion demands), the Felasha slave woman, the pilgrim who has amalgamated Confucian, Buddhist and Moslem beliefs, the Persian Shi’ah Moslem priest, the English spy (a lukewarm Anglican Christian), and the corpse of a rich Persian merchant.

The stage for the interweaving dramas

that follow is set by the story of the illiterate Bedouin, who gambles his freedom and his life on the theft of a saddlebag from a pilgrim praying at the side of the road. From this act flows all that follows. The saddlebag’s mysterious contents — bundles of written documents that the Thief, ironically, cannot read — cast their shadow on all the characters, challenging them to the depths of their being and granting redemption to some unlikely characters.

The Thief’s story is perhaps the most exquisitely realized of the collection, in terms of the lyrical quality of the prose as well as the evocation of character and set-



ting, as seen in the following passage: “Despite his illiteracy, the desert made a scholar of him too. He discovered whole treatises hidden in sandstorms; he read a thousand poems inscribed across the wide horizon. When his soul was unsullied, at the hour of sunrise, he could understand the language of the sand.... The wind was his religion and the planet Venus was his love and he had

Review, continued on page 15