

# Book Review

*The Forgotten Schools: The Baha'is and Modern Education in Iran, 1899–1934.*  
By Soli Shahvar. London: I.B.Tauris (International Library of Iranian Studies, Volume 11) 265 pp. + index, appendices

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Perhaps my repository of memories and recollections can add a dimension to Professor Soli Shahvar's excellent book about the rise, flourishing, and ultimate suppression of modern Bahá'í schools in Iran—for those schools are not forgotten by me!

I have vivid memories of the morning of 23 September 1934 (1 Mehr of the Persian solar year 1313), my first day at the Tarbíyat School for Boys in Tehran. I had attended the co-ed Bahá'í kindergarten off Amíríyyih Avenue behind the Tarbíyat School for Girls the previous year, and this was my year of coming of age and experiencing the serious world of school for boys. The atmosphere on that first day of the new academic year was festive and there was a buzz of new things in the air. In the office of the principal of the school, the baton was being passed from the venerable old Mr. Azizu'llah Mesbah to the young and energetic Ali-Akbar Furutan, a native of Sabzivár, but grown up in 'Ishqábád and a recent graduate of Moscow University in educational psychology. In many ways this change promised many novel turns in the applied educational philosophy at the Tarbíyat School.

As members of each class from the first to the twelfth lined up on the courtyard and in the alcoves of the school to hear the chanting of the opening prayer, the buzz of excitement that was palpable on that morning was about the first proclamation of the new principal ending the practice of corporal punishment at the school. There was the dramatic call for A. Husayn, the keeper and administrator of the *chúb-u-falak* (the bastinado for flogging the feet) to break up his contraption. This was, of course, in compliance with explicit teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá against corporal

punishment and, as such, a significant move away from the norm of other schools. It further fixed the distinctive identity of the Tarbíyat School for Boys. It might be added that the Tarbíyat School for Girls under the principalship of American Bahá'í women like Dr. Susan Moody and Adelaide Sharp from the early 1920s on had already ruled out corporal punishment. Although the most immediate beneficiaries of the new policy were the rowdy students who were the most likely victims of the bastinado, the announcement was a great and general morale booster on that morning.

The short few months that I attended the Tarbíyat School for Boys left a lifetime of impressions and influence on me. Most important among them was a devotion to excellence in school work. When the Tarbíyat School was abruptly closed in December 1934, we all expected the ban to be lifted shortly. Eventually, as described by Professor Shahvar, most of us engaged some of the Tarbíyat teachers as home tutors for the remainder of the year, and finally entered other schools the following year. I and a number of my Tarbíyat School friends were put in the Zoroastrian school.

The official reason for the shutting, first, of the Tarbíyat schools in Tehran, and eventually all of the Bahá'í schools in the country, was that the schools had closed without official permission on a Bahá'í Holy Day (the Martyrdom of the Báb). Professor Shahvar relates the various accounts of the events and sources of pressure leading up to Reza Shah's order to close the Bahá'í schools permanently. Much has been plausibly guessed as the reasons for shutting down what was undoubtedly the best school system in the country, attended not only by Bahá'í boys and girls but also by the sons and daughters of the elite of the country including some of the shah's own children.

The capricious treatment of the Bahá'ís by Reza Shah must be noted. He chose Bahá'ís for every position of personal safety and security, from chef to barber to chauffeur, as well as trustees of his personal and armed forces finance. But he also took steps against them when it suited him. In 1934 as he was preparing for the campaign of unveiling of women, striking against the Bahá'ís may have helped him in diffusing clerical opposition. But I do not think that was the only reason for the permanent closing of the Bahá'í schools.

The shah's known mounting avarice for acquisition of property as well as his animus against the person and the family of 'Abdu'l-Husayn Mírzá Farmánfarmá—a prince of the Qajar dynasty and a former commander of Reza Khan in his early military career—may have had much to do with the end of the Bahá'í schools. The Tarbíyat School for Boys was situated at the southwestern end of *Kakh* Avenue directly across the street from the shah's primary residence, the Marmar Palace, on the southeastern side. The land for the Tarbíyat school had been sold to the Bahá'ís by Farmánfarmá, whose own family compound was attached to the west of the school. By 1936 the Farmánfarmás were forced to give up their compound, move to their property in Shimrán, and in place of the Tarbíyat school and the Farmánfarmá compound were rising two palaces for the crown prince and the royal princesses.

As Professor Shahvar has thoroughly and convincingly presented the case for the major Bahá'í schools in Tehran and other urban centers, in addition the Bahá'í schools represented a vast pattern of private and public educational enterprises in many rural areas of the country such as Ardistán, Ábádih, Ná'ín, Sidih, Qamşar, Sabzivár, Sangsar, Sisán, Buyir-Ahmad, Karand, and so on. My own great-grandmother, Maryam Bánú, known as "Bíbíján," was an educated woman who turned her home into a school for Bahá'í girls from Tehran and surrounding villages. She even provided boarding at her home for some of the students. She kept up this informal school from the early years of the twentieth century until her death in the influenza pandemic of 1919. My own mother was sent from Ardistán to be taught by Bíbíján before entering the Tarbíyat School three years later. One of the boarding students was Qudsíyyih Ashraf from the village of Kan on the slopes of the Alburz Mountains to the northwest of Tehran. She was able to pursue her education by traveling to the United States in 1911 and becoming the first Iranian woman to obtain a college degree in public health.

Unlike the motivations of the secular reformers of the day, as Professor Shahvar notes, for Bahá'ís "it was their belief in education, and the very high importance attached to it by Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha—and later also by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice . . . that caused

Bahá'ís to view this matter as a religious duty, i.e., to put words into action" (17) by founding the schools.

As he observes, the schools had an influence beyond merely educating the children of one minority religious community. The Bahá'í schools, which were open to all, were attended by students from all religious backgrounds and social classes. The teaching done by Bahá'ís, and the spread of Bahá'í writings with their "reformist ideas and progressive social principles" in Iranian society "played a definite part in preparing the Iranian people for modern social reforms. . . ." "Indeed, by attacking bigotry and superstition while emphasizing science and technology over the supernatural element, the Bábí-Bahá'í movement contributed to Iranians becoming more receptive to the scientific spirit of the West" (21).

The book includes an extensive appendix including several tables comprising a database on the Bahá'í schools and kindergartens, which provides much information in compressed form about each of the educational institutions such as its founding, the number of students, its facilities, staff, curriculum, daily routine, and so on, and a list of prominent non-Bahá'í Iranians who studied at the Tarbíyat schools.

Professor Shahvar is a meticulous and thorough researcher, and in *The Forgotten Schools* he has produced a restoration of an important, suppressed chapter on the role of the Bahá'ís in the introduction of modern scientific and secular education in Iran.