

Indian Bahá'ís of Bolivia

By GREGORY C. DAHL

THERE ARE MANY GROUPS in the world which claim to be universal, to champion some cause or idea which has meaning and relevance for all men, and which seek to include all mankind within their ranks. Such are, for instance, the many political movements of the world and the various philosophies and religions. Their claim to universality is generally based, in doctrine or in fact, upon an appeal to uniformity among their membership—some commonly shared trait or view. "If all men would accept our standards and goals," they say, "we would have a peaceful and harmonious world." Peaceful, perhaps, but unexciting as well. More immediately, however, such systems exclude all who do not conform, and they are in opposition to other similar groups likewise striving for world hegemony. Thus we find movements which seek to unify succeeding only in creating further schisms, and we find a growing disillusion, particularly among the uncommitted younger generations, with institutionalized movements in any form.

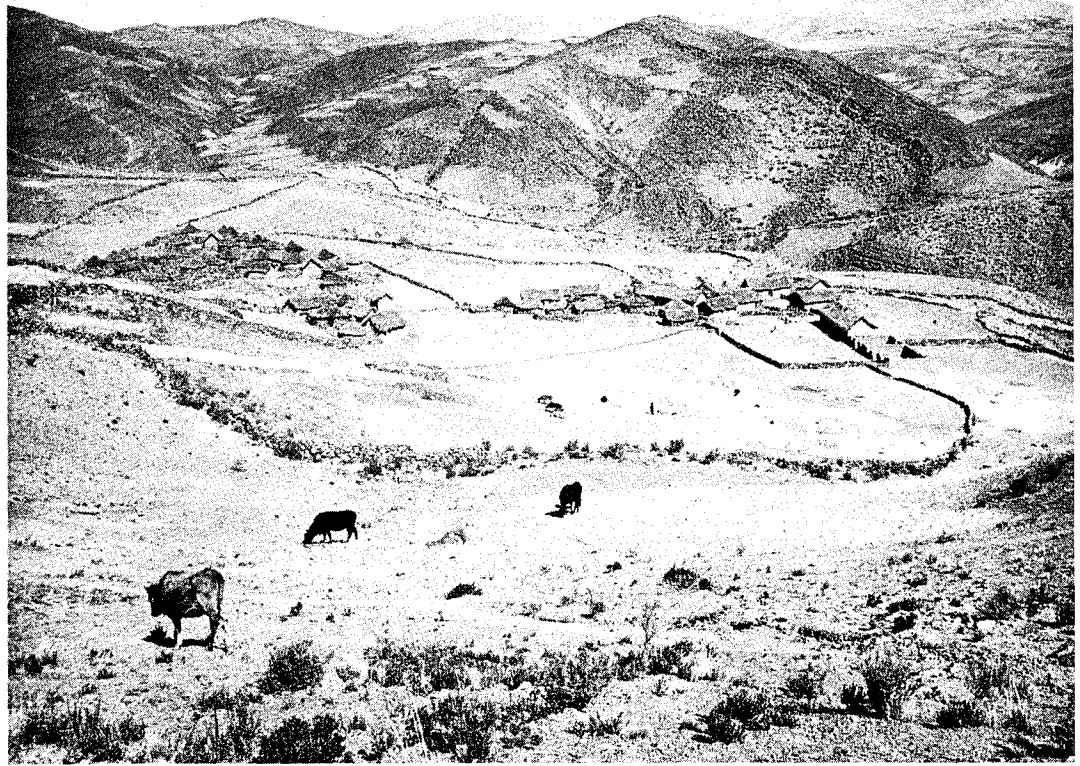
In this environment it is particularly striking to encounter a group—the world-wide followers of the Bahá'í Faith—who believe that unity cannot ultimately rest on uniformity, no matter how compelling or all-inclusive, but that it must rest rather on an appreciation of and love for the diversity in the human race. They assert that by turning individually to God, recognizing the beauty of His creation in all things, and striving personally to become more fulfilled human beings through the application of His Teachings to daily life, men can come together in a unity which transcends yet encourages individuality. The forces of conflict which inevitably arise when diverse kinds of people

come together must be countered, Bahá'ís believe, with stronger forces of personal love and social justice. Religion, especially when young and vital, is uniquely suited to assist in this process, in that it can transform the hearts of individual men while providing standards of justice by which society as a whole may be ordered. Because the essential and motivating spirit of religion can die away, however, it is renewed in every age by God through a new Messenger, so that its unifying force may again bring men together. The Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'ís believe, is the newest statement of Divine Purpose, the newest addition to a progressive revelation, and carries a spiritual dynamic capable of unifying the entire globe.

A claim of this magnitude naturally elicits a highly critical response. What makes Bahá'ís think that their Faith, more than other world movements, represents something beyond the mere imposition of one set of class- and culture-bound standards on other peoples, successful as those standards might be in one particular social or economic context? True, Bahá'ís can quote impressive statistics of international growth,¹ but this does not in itself prove their assertion. Is their religion really succeeding in encompassing in some meaningful way the incredible cultural and social diversity—even autonomy—which exists in our fragmented world, without eliminating ethnic differences and qualities after the pattern of the onward march of "Western Civilization"?

To resolve this question for myself, I went to Bolivia for a summer to visit and live with the Indian Bahá'ís there, who number many thousands, and to experience personally what the Bahá'í Faith means to some of the economically most impoverished people of this hemisphere. I should like to share with

1. The Bahá'í Faith has adherents in over 312 countries and territories of the globe, and in over 30,000 localities.



View of the village of Yankobuyo, where most of the people are Bahá'ís. Building on the right, in enclosure, is the Bahá'í School.

the reader here a few of my observations.

Life in Bolivia

BEFORE ATTEMPTING TO DESCRIBE the Bahá'ís of Bolivia and their role in a world Bahá'í community, some general discussion of the condition of the country as a whole, and especially its Indian population, is in order. Bolivia is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.² Large, sparsely populated, and economically backward, it is over eight times the size of New York State, but has less than one quarter the population—about three and three-quarters million. About two-thirds of these people live on the arid, high *altiplano* (elevation 11,000 feet and above), which covers less than half the country, and lies to the west and south. To the north and east lie vast expanses of low and very fertile land, ranging from savanna to rain forest, which are almost entirely unsettled. Some 60 or 70 percent of the population are indigenous Quechua- or

2. Based on per capita GNP.

Aymara-speaking Indians, descendants of the Incas, who continue to exist on a subsistence level in the most primitive manner as farmers and herders, scattered throughout the hills and mountains of the *altiplano*. The remaining 30 or 40 percent of the population is mestizo, except for perhaps 10 percent white, and most of these are to be found in the few cities of the country, where Spanish is generally spoken. (Ten percent of the population of Bolivia lives in La Paz.)

Perhaps the most striking thing about Bolivia for a North American is the extreme poverty, not just of one class of society but of the country itself. The La Paz airport—the highest commercial airport in the world, at more than 12,000 feet elevation—is a mere stretch of dirt; and the traveller's later experiences in the country serve only to reinforce this first impression. In one city where I stayed—Oruro—the city water supply was turned on only a few hours a day, in the early morning; and in another—Potosí—the electricity was cut off each evening. But these are minor inconveniences relative to the hard-



Teacher with pupils in front of Babá's school in the village of Jankarachi.

ship of life or travel in a country with only two major paved roads (and these hardly deserving of the name), in which medical facilities for the common people are practically nonexistent, and in which communication and mail service are inefficient and unreliable. With a nearly complete lack of social overhead capital—the marvelous systems of transportation, sanitation, and communication which we take so much for granted in this country—Bolivia has not yet begun the long climb toward becoming a modern industrial state.

The Campesinos

AND YET IT IS NOT about the cities of Bolivia, or the economic tasks which it faces, that I wish to write. It is rather about the country people or *campesinos*—the rural-dwelling Indians who live in myriads of tiny villages scattered throughout the mighty Andes. For these are the real treasure of Bolivia; and it is among these simple but pure-hearted people that thousands have declared their belief in Bahá'u'lláh.

Living in almost total isolation, the *campesino* ekes a subsistence living out of the high and rugged mountains. His environment is one of spectacular grandeur: great peaks cut by steep river canyons, thousands of feet below; or vast ranges separated by hilly valleys, miles wide. It is an environment of space, in which distances are great, men are few, and transportation is entirely by foot. (Even foot travel ceases in the rainy season in some areas, when the rivers become raging torrents and cannot be forded.) Here man is dwarfed into insignificance in the face of the natural forces about him; and these forces have been none too kind. The land is barren, the climate dry and cold. There are no trees as far as the eye can see—only rocks and clumps of dry grass. Nature has provided little upon which to subsist.

So the *campesino* tills the dry soil with a wooden plow—one of his most precious possessions—drawn by oxen. His staple food is the potato, itself indigenous to this region; this is supplemented with some wheat and corn, an occasional egg from one of his

skinny chickens, and perhaps a little dried meat. But there is nothing green in his diet, and you will frequently find him chewing coca leaves (rich in cocaine), which he has purchased in the nearest town, to ward off hunger.

His house is usually a tiny, rectangular or circular hut of adobe (clay cast into bricks), with a thatch roof supported by crooked pieces of wood strapped together. There is only one opening—a small door—which is the only source of light for the interior. For cooking, and to ward off the cold, brush and sheep dung are burned, producing a thick smoke which in time coats the interior of the house with a dense soot. Little attempt is made at cleanliness; water is so scarce in most areas that many people have never bathed in their lives. There are no furnishings in the houses, and all activities take place on the dirt floor, which is covered here and there with sheep or llama skins, the home of enormous numbers of fleas. Disease, of course, is always threatening here, and the life expectancy is probably not much over thirty years—for those who survive birth.

For his clothing, the *campesino* maintains a herd of sheep or llamas—as many as the terrain will support—from which the wool is taken to be hand spun and woven into garments, such as the typical dress and *manta*, or cloak, of the women, and the pants, shirt, *poncho* and *chulo* (woolen headpiece) of the men. In addition, adults usually have sandals made from rubber tires, like the *huaraches* of Mexico, though children generally go barefoot. Hats, which are made on the coast, are also a great favorite. But, to withstand the often sub-freezing temperatures at this altitude, such scant clothing hardly seems adequate.

Contact with the outside world is limited to an occasional trip into the nearest provincial center, generally a few days' or weeks' walk away. Here some produce can be sold or traded for *chicha* (an alcoholic drink made from corn), coca leaves, or perhaps a new hat or cooking utensil, or a safety pin. The provincial center is generally dominated

by the secretary of the *sindicato*, the local political organization. The *secretario* makes and enforces justice as he sees fit, by means of his personal police force. Since much of the activity of the town revolves around the selling of *chicha* and coca leaves and the activities of the *sindicato* (often involving semi-religious, drunken *fiestas*), there are constant pressures on the *campesino* to cooperate and conform. Should he choose not to, he is scorned and often severely persecuted; and being meek and inward by nature, he is not well equipped to withstand this treatment. Murder, rape, and pillage have, in the past, been common means of bringing him into line with the wishes of the local boss.

The national government has seemingly done little more for the *campesino*—although not, perhaps, for lack of will, but for lack of resources. In those more fortunate areas where there is a government school, two years of education are typically offered. However, by government regulation instruction must be in Spanish, which the Indian children do not understand; and often the school teacher is less interested in teaching the children than in political activities and *fiestas*, since his job is a politically appointed one. So illiteracy in rural areas remains at over 90 percent.

Thus life continues, as it has always continued, and change itself is unknown and resisted. In one village I visited, a Bahá'í school teacher had built himself a much superior dwelling, with flagstone floor, a chimney, a window, and even a beautiful garden in front, all constructed from materials available in the natural environment. For five years he had lived in this house; and yet, when I asked the people why they did not institute the same easy improvements in their own homes, they seemed surprised at the suggestion. This is probably one of the greatest American misconceptions about extreme poverty in other countries. There *are* still areas of the world where the desire for progress has not yet reached, where the "demonstration effect" economists talk about has not yet made its mark. In these areas men

are *not* discontented, because their basic view of life lacks the very concept of change. Hope, and therefore initiative, having long since been lost, are hard to regain.

The Role of the Bahá'í Faith

IN SUCH A STATIC SOCIETY, what is the role of the Bahá'í Faith? How does it change the *campesino's* expectations within his own society, and his relations with outsiders?

First, belief in Bahá'u'lláh and membership in the Bahá'í Faith changes the *campesino's* conception of himself. Ever since the Spanish conquest, his race has been exploited and looked down upon. He has consistently been told by those better off than himself that he is inferior. Even the missionaries, who preach brotherly love and unity in the Church, often betray their feelings of disgust at his primitive way of life or lack of hygiene. The Indians, being meek and humble by nature, do not fight or argue in return; they blandly accept their fate. In the few instances when they have organized themselves for resistance or self-assertion, they have been forcefully put down. Long-suffering in this state has sapped their self-esteem.

As Bahá'ís, however, they come to consider themselves members of a dynamic world family, in which they have an important part to play. They are no longer in any sense "second class citizens", at least as far as the Bahá'ís are concerned; rather, we believe (and they understand that their fellow-Bahá'ís around the world believe) that they have much to contribute. In a world community in which human values are prized more than material wealth, the deep humanity and selflessness of the *campesino* are treasured qualities. Young Indian Bahá'ís (see picture) who have received education in the cities, and who by the same token have become accustomed to greater comforts and a more exciting environment than their rural counterparts, unhesitatingly give up all they have to become teachers, in many cases without pay, in Bahá'í village schools, or to travel on foot month after month visiting

more isolated centers. Through such service they achieve a self-esteem which no amount of prejudice encountered in the Bolivian cities can rob from them; and they earn the respect and admiration of their coreligionists around the globe. They become citizens of the world even before they are fully accepted as citizens of their own country.

Linked with this process of reaffirmation of themselves and their culture, however, is a simultaneous process of profound change. The Bahá'í Faith, while valuing detachment from worldly possessions, does not teach the Indian that his poverty and social position are good for him and must therefore remain unchanged; rather, a concerted campaign is launched to help him begin the long process of self-development. Bahá'ís believe that all men must be educated, so that they can make individual spiritual progress (reason and religion are seen as interdependent) and can contribute to an ever-advancing civilization. Thus the building of schools takes on great importance, and Bahá'í schools will be found in isolated places around the globe—the mountains of Bolivia being no exception (see photographs). Through these first steps toward change, the Bahá'í Indians are beginning to see ahead of them a new horizon of progress for their people and service to mankind which did not exist before.

As to their relations with foreigners, here, too, great changes have taken place. And this brings me back to the subject I introduced and the question I posed at the beginning of this article. I had heard, before my departure for South America, that it was actually dangerous to travel in rural Bolivia. Two North American technicians had supposedly been killed there recently. Certainly the Indians, with their history of being mistreated and exploited, had no particular reason to be friendly to unknown outsiders. I also expected difficulties in communication, since my knowledge of Spanish was only nominal. From anthropology I had learned of the gulf between cultures, and I was prepared to undergo "cultural shock".

Upon arrival, however, I found the prob-

lems of communication and the cultural barriers many times more difficult than I had expected. The Indians, I soon discovered, did not speak Spanish, except for a few, so an Indian translator was always necessary; and generally both he and I had trouble with our common language (Spanish). But far more difficult than the physical language barrier was the personality barrier. The *campesinos* are generally shy and uncommunicative even in the best of circumstances. When confronted with a foreigner dressed in attire they have never seen before (jacket and boots) and sporting a camera, they behave somewhat as we might in the presence of a combination king and man from Mars. Unfortunately, this shyness characterized the translators, too, reducing verbal interchanges to a minimum.

But I soon discovered that verbal communication was not necessary, nor was any effort to prove myself a "friend". And there was certainly no danger—at least among the Bahá'ís. Upon arrival in a village, on foot, with the translator-guide, the word "Bahá'í" was sufficient to send the people scurrying to prepare something for us to eat and to spread the news of our arrival. People would start appearing, greeting us with their customary touch on the shoulder and a quiet, heartfelt "*hermano Bahá'í*" ("Bahá'í brother"). Nothing more would be said, but their love and appreciation would be expressed in boundless hospitality and great warmth. One of our hosts, a man recently widowed, when innocently asked by us for some tea or hot water (it had been a cold, dry, six-mile hike to this village), immediately fetched one of his most highly prized possessions—a bundle of

sugar—and used its contents to sweeten our beverage. Again and again it was brought home to me how, working from a basic sense of trust which was only the most fundamental expression of the fact that we were all Bahá'ís, these *campesinos* and I could feel a deep sense of sharing, of communication, and of working together, even though there was no verbal interchange by which to communicate these feelings. Although I stayed in each place only a short time, and it was not possible to get to know deeply any of my hosts as individuals, nevertheless I felt, upon leaving each place, that I was leaving close lifelong friends. Such was the strength of immediate identification and the depth of mutual appreciation established instantly between these Indian Bahá'ís and myself (and a greater contrast in backgrounds, personalities, and expectations would be hard to find, I think, on this planet).

This, then, is the type of unity Bahá'ís value and promote throughout the world, a unity based upon the common allegiance of Bahá'ís everywhere to the teachings and administrative institutions of Bahá'u'lláh, and yet predicated on and encouraging diversity. It is a highly dynamic unity, not a static uniformity, and as such it is constantly presenting challenges to Bahá'ís and expanding their world vision. Each cultural, national, class, or religious group included within its sphere makes its contribution. To the American Indian, perhaps, falls the task of showing the rest of the world how best to follow Bahá'u'lláh's injunction:

O Son of Dust!

Verily I say unto thee: Of all men the most negligent is he that disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother. Say, O brethren! Let deeds, not words, be your adorning.³

3. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1954), p. 23.