

**The Babi and early Baha'i
Movements:
A Resource Mobilization
Perspective**

**Peter Smith
January 2019**

Sections

- 1. The 'Resource Mobilization Perspective' (RMP).
- 2. Its application to the study of the Babi and early Baha'I movements:
 - Recruitment.
 - Cohesion and leadership.
 - The interactive relationship with the environing society.

Religion

- Religion is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon.
- Sociologists of Religion study religion as a social reality.

The 'Resource Mobilization Perspective' (RMP)

- A particular sociological approach to the study of social movements.

Social movements

- A social movement is any organized group of people who are pursuing some collective goal or goals.
- i.e. Not a long-established social institutions such as a political party or church.

Collective Behaviour Theory

- It saw social movements as expressions of social malfunctioning.
- SMs arose because regular social institutions didn't meet the social needs of those who became members.

The emergence of the RMP

- The Resource Mobilization Perspective developed in response to the great increase in organized social protest in the 1960s, particularly in the USA.
- Existing explanatory models seemed inadequate to explain the new movements.

The expansion of the RMP

- Broadened to include both
 - historical studies and
 - contemporary religious movements.

Different foci

- The Collective Behaviour approach asked *why* people would join social movements.
- RMP focused on practical issues such as
 - Membership recruitment and motivation,
 - The effectiveness of different kinds of organization,

The RMP & the study of the Babi and early Baha'i movements

3 topics discussed here:

- 1. Recruitment.
- 2. Cohesion and leadership.
- 3. The interactive relationship with the environing society.

Baha'i developments after the 1890s are not considered here

- The Baha'i Faith underwent a major 'geo-cultural' shift from the 1890s onwards in.
- This raised new issues of recruitment, cohesion, and interaction.

1. Recruitment

- The Resource Mobilization Perspective asks what are the factors involved in recruitment, i.e. a *how* rather than *why* question.
- All social movements need to attract members to survive.

Babi recruitment [1]

- 1. Most early Babis were Shaykhis & the initial transmission of the movement largely followed existing Shaykhi social networks.
- 2. Major non-Shaykhi Shi'i converts came later (notably Vahid and Hujjat).

Babi recruitment [2]

- 3. There was also a wider circle of people who were more loosely linked to the Babi movement
 - (>> Gradations of Babi membership)
- 4. There were some very active Babi women (e.g. Tahereh, the Babi women of Zanzan), but the early expansion of the movement seems to have occurred mostly through the social networks of men.

Peasants & nomads

- 5. *Comparatively* few Babis were converted from the peasantry and the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes.
- This does not mean that Babism necessarily served particular class interests.

Motivation

- The focus on the means by which the early Babis were recruited into the movement does not preclude questions of motivation.
- We can attribute possible motivations but, as with any movement, without sufficient evidence, we can not know for certain.

Possible motivations in Babi recruitment

- The Shaykhi succession crisis.
- Turning to the Bab became an alternative for some of the Shaykhis, especially if they had millennial expectations.

Intellectual salience

- People are more likely to join a social movement if it 'makes sense' to them in some way, commonly resonating with their existing beliefs.
- For the early Babi Shaykhis, the Bab was the fulfillment and continuation of their existing Shaykhi suppositions.
- But the Bab's message was wide enough that the Babis were also able to reach the general Shi'i population.

Recruitment patterns amongst the early Baha'is [1]

- 1. Most of the Babi remnant chose to become Baha'is. Few chose to become Azalis.

Recruitment patterns amongst the early Baha'is [2]

- 2. Women began to play a more observable role, and we may assume that a process of '*familialization*' occurred in which religious identity was both conveyed and reinforced through family ties >>
- Mothers became major contributors to the religious socialization of Baha'i children.

Recruitment patterns amongst the early Baha'is [3]

- 3. The Baha'is made good use of the developing opportunities to use printing to produce their literature, including material which was used to spread their ideas amongst non-Baha'is.

Recruitment patterns amongst the early Baha'is [4]

- 4. The Baha'is successfully developed a conceptual language to present their message to Iran's Jewish and Zoroastrian minorities, some of whom converted.

2. Cohesion and leadership

- To remain as a single movement, continuing cohesion of some sort is required.
- Decentralized movements can be very successful, but they are localized and diverse.
- In the Babi and Baha'i cases, this was not seen as an option: the focus was on a single leader.

Cohesion in the Baha'i movement

- Cohesion and unity were much easier to maintain in the Baha'i movement than in Babism.
- -Later gaining strong support through the notion of the Baha'i Covenant.
- From early on, there were organizational mechanisms in place to enhance and strengthen effective movement coordination and cohesion.

Basic logistics [1]

- Baha'u'llah was physically distant from the mass of his followers in Iran.
 - >> Logistical challenges >>
- 1. A network of couriers & transcribers to convey his writings to the Baha'is.

Basic logistics [2]

- 2. The couriers would bring back messages from the followers.
- 3. Baha'i 'agents' in various cities along the way to oversee the journeys of those who wanted to visit Baha'u'llah in person.

Use of modern technologies

- 1. The Baha'is **printed their literature outside of Iran** to be distributed to both believers and possible inquirers.
- >> It was thus much easier to maintain a 'unity of message' than it had been for the Babis.
- 2. The Baha'is were also quick to use the new **telegraph system**, networks of **steamer services and railways**.

Local coordination

- 1. At a local level, the Baha'is also quickly developed an effective network of loyal **missionary-teachers** who could act as Baha'u'llah's 'lieutenants' in Iran (Mostly converted Shi'i clerics).
- 2. Baha'u'llah also outlined a system of **elected local Baha'i councils** to manage community affairs, but these only became fully operational from the 1890s onwards.

Logistical challenges for the Babis

- The Babi movement never achieved the level of cohesion and coordination attained by the Baha'is.
- A major factor: a short-lived movement which experienced violent conflicts and eventual bloody suppression by the state.
- Logistical factors:
 - Iran was a vast country,
 - and in the mid-19th century, the Babis had no access to the technologies of printing, telegraph, steamship and railways, later so expertly employed by the Baha'is.

A less unified 'message' than that of the Baha'is?

- The Babis had varying understandings of the actual status of the Bab and of the implications of his proclamation and teachings.

Growing factionalism after the Bab's execution

- A plethora of rival individuals advancing claims to leadership and/or theophanic status.
- The very orderly successions to Baha'i leadership after 1892 stand in marked contrast to the divisions which beset the Babis.

3. The external environment

- Until the accession of Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1920s, Iran remained a **decentralized state**.

The Babis and a varied socio-political landscape

- The Babis initially had a freedom of action which they might not have enjoyed in a more centralized state.

Political and local factors

- Initially, it seemed as if there was the real possibility of support for the Babis amongst elements of the government.
- Local factors played a massive role in the origins and development of the conflicts of Tabarsi, Nayriz and Zanjan.

The Baha'is in Iran, 1860s-

- Unlike the Babis, the Baha'is followed a non-confrontational approach to the Iranian authorities – a fact noted by some Iranian leaders, and overall, the level of persecution of the new movement diminished.
- Major outbreaks of persecution were clearly localized and reflected local factors.

The Baha'is in Asiatic Russia [1]

- In the late 19th C, Baha'is settled in the Russian town of Ashgabat (Ashkhabad) in what is now Turkmenistan.
- They found themselves protected by the Russian government authorities.
- A large, well-organized Baha'i community developed, with its own schools and other social institutions.

The Baha'is in Asiatic Russia [2]

- These developments showed clearly what Iranian Baha'is were capable of achieving when they lived in a benign rather than hostile environment:
 - a very clear contrast case to underline the importance of the socio-political environment in assessing the effectiveness of any social movement.

The value of the RMP

- The motivation for joining any social movement is important, but not always easy to study.
- Thus the Resource Mobilization approach has obvious value.

'Abdu'l-Baha on Lutheranism

- Baha'is will remember an essentially proto-sociological comment by 'Abdu'l-Baha in his *Secret of Divine Civilization* where he refers to the success of the Lutheran movement as being due to a combination of
 - Luther's teachings being 'demonstrably correct' and
 - 'the proper means' being adopted for the promulgation of his views. [p.42]

Some references

- Peter Smith. *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Peter Smith. 'Babi–Baha'i Expansion and “Geo-Cultural Breakthroughs”'. *Journal of Religious History*. Volume 40, Issue 2, pp. 225–236. June 2016.
- Peter Smith and Moojan Momen. 'The Babi Movement: A resource mobilization perspective'. In *In Iran: Studies in Babi and Baha'i History, Vol. 3*, ed. P. Smith, pp. 33-92. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1986.