

“I CANNOT FIND THE WORDS TO EXPRESS HOW HAPPY I AM TO BE ABLE TO SAY THAT I AM A BAHÁ’Í”

Hasti Khoshnammanesh

• *By Sara Baptista* •

Almost 16 years after leaving Iran to come to Brazil, Hasti Khoshnammanesh can breathe freely and says: “I cannot find words to express how happy I am to be able to say that I am a bahá’í”. In her home country, where the bahá’ís have been persecuted for over a hundred years, talking about her faith was frightening.

Hasti Khoshnammanesh was born in Tehran in 1980, just one year after the Islamic Revolution and in the same year that the war with Iraq began. When she was little it was quite common to hear bombing and they often had to run to underground shelters when attacks started. “I lived almost all my childhood in the war,” she says.

However, even when the conflict ended after eight years, her life did not get any easier, because Hasti was born into a family that has a religion that is not accepted. This religion was passed down to her father by his family and was chosen by her mother.

Despite denials by the government, who when confronted at international forums claim to respect the rights of all minorities, it is forbidden to be a bahá’í in Iran. The Muslim majority that rules the country have been arresting, torturing and even killing bahá’ís since the religion was created. The Bahá’í faith is the newest independent religion in the world, and since 1863 when its founder, Bahá’u’lláh, began spreading the principles of the belief it has been seen as a threat to prevailing interests. At that time, both Bahá’u’lláh himself and his followers were already being persecuted.

The central theme of the Bahá'í faith is unity. They believe in one god, one humanity and in unity in diversity. However, the followers of this religion still fall victim of prejudiced ideas in the name of other faiths.

When she was a child Hasti was called to the school principal who gave her a blank sheet of paper and asked her to make a list of all the bahá'ís she knew. The objective was to report the names and contacts of the bahá'ís to the government. These people would later be repressed. Hasti could not hold back the tears as she talked about this.

At the same time, she laughs happily when she remembers how daring she was when she signed up for the university entrance exam some years later. In Iran, the bahá'ís are not permitted to go to university, to work in government offices or to speak about their faith, as well as other restrictions. All the same she decided to sign up for the exam and when she was filling in the application form, she came across a field in which she had to state her religion. The options were Islam, Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian. When she saw that there was no option that pertained to her, Hasti added an extra field, in which she wrote "Bahá'í".

When she received a letter confirming her registration, she realised that her religion was stated to be Muslim. Unhappy with this mistake she went to the department where corrections were carried out and told them she was not a Muslim, that she was a bahá'í. However, the result was not what she expected and Hasti was not allowed to take the exam or to follow her dream of becoming a doctor.

"This was harsh for a young woman of 17. I remember that that day I went home and cried all day, saying why? Why is this happening to us?," she recalls. In order to allow for people like her to continue their studies, bahá'í teachers who had been thrown out of the schools



and universities where they had been teaching, secretly created the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), a university for young people who have been prevented from entering other institutions on the grounds of their faith.

Hasti entered the BIHE in 1997 and the time she studied there was marked by huge tension. Classes were held in Tehran, in houses on loan from members of the community. She lived in Karaj at this time, a town on the outskirts of the capital and went into Tehran every day. When she arrived at the place where the classes took place she had to be extremely careful that the

neighbours did not suspect something and hand them over to the authorities. “You were always scared, you know, that at any minute someone could raid the classroom,” she says. Her class was never found out, but many others were discovered and in these cases, teachers could be sentenced to up to five years in prison. Currently, most of the BIHE classes are online which minimises the risk of repression.

While BIHE is recognised by most other countries and its diploma is accepted in large universities in places like, for example, the USA, England and Australia, it is secretly run in Iran.

Education is an important topic for the bahá’ís. One of the principal international campaigns promoted by those who live outside Iran is called “Education is not a Crime” which uses videos and advertising to draw attention to the violations that members of the bahá’í suffer in Iran and to defend the right to access to education.

Education is also very important for Hasti, personally. For seven years she has been a teacher at the Escola das Nações, in Brasília, where children and teenagers of different nationalities and religions study. She started there as an English teacher, but nowadays she works in the department of Moral Education and is in charge of teaching the students about values and virtues. Students are taught the Brazilian and international curriculums at this bahá’í-inspired international school, as well as learning to be of service “because we believe that merely having faith is not enough. You have to put faith into action and this is called service,” Hasti explains.

The story she has built in Brazil, where her two daughters were born - one is 15 and the other is 6 – started in 2002 when Hasti moved to São José dos Campos, in São Paulo, with her husband at that time. They had met and married in Iran, but he was already living in Brazil where he had sought refuge after fleeing Iran in order to avoid serving in the army.

After Hasti left Iran, she lived in Australia for two years, but she put down her roots in Brazil. When talking about life here she says “When I came to Brazil, this freedom of expression was very valuable in my life, extraordinary. In Iran I could never have taught about my faith, nor openly said that I was a bahá’í, because I could have ended up in prison or dead.”

Her parents and siblings do not run any risk either as they live outside Iran, in the United States. Her relatives who have stayed in their home country, however, continue to be in danger. Recently, her cousin, who has a print shop was arrested and although he got out of prison by paying bail he is awaiting trial with trepidation. His crime? Being a bahá’í.

So, what is behind all this? “How can someone be arrested on the grounds of their religion?,” she asks. Hasti believes the persecution of the bahá’ís is driven by personal interests and not by any particular faith. “In the Bahá’í faith we believe that all religions are here to establish peace, love and mutual respect. All this that happens, that the Islamic government does, is in fact a distortion of the message brought by Mohammed. They do this for their own benefit,” she explains. “They do it in the name of religion,

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but I have read the entire Quran and nowhere does it tell people to do this to the bahá'ís or to any human being. This is all about ego and people's ignorance."

Even in the face of this history and the current systematic persecution, the bahá'ís are not involved in party politics and do not stand up to the government, because they follow the precepts of their sacred law. The bahá'í community resist in silence. They carry on their lives and their activities and always respond to legal proceedings they are called for. But even if it means more suffering they will never deny their faith.

Translated by Jane do Carmo

NOTE

1 • In practice, prohibition includes both *being* a bahá'í, and *expressing* this faith publicly. As the Islam-based Constitution of Iran recognises only the Muslim, Zoroastrian, Christian and Jewish religions, a number of civil rights of those who follow the Bahá'í faith are denied. This happens on the one hand because the religion is not recognised and on the other because its declaration is obligatory, therefore preventing the bahá'ís from being seen as Iranian citizens.



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