

# The Journey...

However, the young man, who took the appellation of 'Malak' (Maulana Malak Saheb), did not disclose or announce the glad tidings of starting the mission in the open until he found a worthy spiritual companion in Badruddin Ghulam Hussain Miya Khan Saheb, who also had received the blessings of the Imam of the time, Maulana Musa Saheb, whom he had met at the banks of a river in Sibi.

Soon after meeting Badruddin Ghulam Hussain Saheb, Maulana Malak Saheb announced the starting of the mission at Bombay (now Mumbai) and began the Period of Light (*Daur-e-Kashf*) by starting the new *Abedi* calendar from the first day of Ramzan in the Hijri year 1308. Soon, several Dawoodi Bohras who were in search of a true divine authority accepted Maulana Malak Saheb and joined the mission.

A short while later, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of Shaban, 1309 Hijri (March 1892), Maulana Malak Saheb and Maulana Badruddin Saheb, along with their followers migrated to the city of Nagpur, the geographical centre of India. After residing with local acquaintances for some time, a small piece of land was purchased in the north-eastern part of the city in the name of Maulana Badruddin Saheb from the sale of his wife's jewellery. This land is where the present 'Mahdi Bagh Colony' is situated.

On this land, the members erected a mosque, residential quarters and other amenities. Land and property at other places in Nagpur and other towns in India were subsequently purchased by the spiritual leaders.

From the year 1892 AD, when the *Dawat* (mission) was established in Nagpur until his demise on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1899 AD (1317 Hijri, 9 Abedi), Maulana Malak Saheb administered all the religious and temporal affairs of the mission. Before passing away, Maulana Malak Saheb appointed and declared Maulana Badruddin Saheb as his spiritual and religious successor of all his ranks and for all temporal and secular matters of the jamat (community) including all properties of Mahdi Bagh Institution and to carry on the mission after him.

Maulana Badruddin Saheb, who was later addressed as '*Hijab-e-Maulana Malak*' (veil of Maulana Malak), was also bestowed with the title of Khan Bahadur for his service to the society outside his community. He carried on the mission with great strength, vigour and foresight, leading his people in matters spiritual and temporal.

Under his leadership, the mission set an example in community living. The plot of land, encircled by a wall, became a commune for prayer and discourse. The followers would sit for hours together listening in rapt attention to Maulana Badruddin as he guided them on a path of life that led towards '*Najat*' (salvation).

Among the first structures to come up on this land was a mosque, built by the spiritual leaders and their followers with their own hands. The mosque, which later came to be known as 'Masjid-e-Ebrahim,' has been thrice renovated since – the first time before 1917, the second in 1987 and the third in 2009. Each time, the members of the mission have contributed not just financially, but

physically in the renovation work. Each time, they have been led from the front by their spiritual leaders. Each time, care has been taken not to touch the essence of the simple and elegant architecture used by the founding fathers. The *Qibla* of the mosque has been preserved as it was, in the original building material, through all the renovation work.

Similarly, Deevan-e-Aam, the community hall where social and cultural gatherings, community dinners and marriage receptions are held, has undergone major facelifts twice. The first was during Maulana Mohammed Ebrahim Riza's period as *Dae* and second under the watch of Maulana Amiruddin Saheb in 2006. In the second instance, it was the community's womenfolk who pitched into the effort of raising money for the renovation and doubling the hall's capacity.

Led by Ayun Aisaheba, the honourable consort of Maulana Amiruddin Saheb, the ladies organised fund raising fairs, fetes and exhibitions. It was an emotional moment for them when at the inaugural ceremony, Maulana Amiruddin himself acknowledged the exceptional devotion and dedication shown by the women who "succeeded in doing what the men could not."

The Deevan-e-Aam Development Fund (DDF) as their effort was named was more than just a fund-raising drive. It marked a watershed development in the history of the *jamat* as, for the first time, the womenfolk were galvanised as a proud unit, set upon achieving the impossible. This self-confidence and motivation has since reflected in all community projects.

A school, a dispensary and a meditation tower were among the other structures erected by the founding fathers by themselves at the start of the mission. A water supply system with three to four wells was installed. Various departments such as Agriculture, Waterworks and Engineering were set up to administer the facilities and manned with appropriate personnel. A litho press was also established wherein news related to the *jamat* and discourses of the religious leaders were printed and published.

It is interesting to note that the first electric supply to the walled settlement of Mahdi Bagh came in June 1954. In those days, a private company with a small generation unit provided electricity to Nagpur and it took a long time for the distribution network to extend up to Mahdi Bagh's location away from the main city. Such was their devotion to the spiritual mission that the members, who were earlier accustomed to many luxuries and moderate climates of the cities they came from, made do with oil lamps and hand-held fans for nearly 63 years in Nagpur's scorching weather.

The '*Kothar*' or civic administration office was established in an independent building, 'Dar-ul-Imarat', some three to four years after the establishment of the mission in Nagpur. Since that time, this office has been maintained by an officer designated 'Kothari' from among the members. All records of the mission, including birth and death, marriage, estate, etc. are maintained here.

The school, set up in Maulana Badruddin's period, also had hostel facilities. At any given time, it would have around 50 students – 30 to 40 per cent of them girls. The students were taught languages – English, Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu – and subjects such as Mathematics, Science and Social Sciences. There was also a strong component of religious and spiritual learning. Teachers from outside the mission were employed at the school. With subsequent changes in the outside world, the community's school was wound up. The hostel too was run until around 1935-36.

But the library remained. It housed books on a wide range of subjects, in different languages. Spiritual and religious texts were also available to readers in the library. In very recent times, the library building has been renovated and expanded to add new Information and Communication Technology learning resources and tools such as computers and the Internet.

Right from the second year of the mission's setting up in Nagpur, a well-equipped dispensary was run by Dr. Abbas Ali, a qualified physician and a saintly figure who, bearing the title 'Liva-e-Haque' went on to occupy the exalted position of the mission's first *Dae*. Maulana Dr Liva-e-Haque continued to serve the people at his dispensary free of charge until his death.

At the same time, the mission set up commercial establishments in Itwari, Sadar and Sitabuldi, the three major business localities of the city. Similarly, establishments were set up in Chhindwara and Umrer townships, not very far from Nagpur, as well as in Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh.

In the initial days of the Mahdi Bagh settlement in Nagpur, the system of a commonwealth was followed, with members boarding and living together. The men were engaged at the commercial establishments and agricultural lands or occupied with jobs within the settlement. Each family would receive an honourarium for its needs other than food and shelter which were taken care of by the commonwealth. This system worked for nearly 17 years after which individual members were gifted shops, establishments, properties or cash to set up their personal sources of income.

The first branch of the Institution was established in the city of Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh around 1915 – some 25 years after the two Holy men first set up the mission. Much later, some members moved to the south Indian port city of Vizag (Visakhapatnam) in Andhra Pradesh for business purposes. As their families grew and as more members joined them, a second branch was set up in Vizag. As in Ujjain, the members in Vizag, through residing disparately, bought a common piece of land to set up a mosque, community hall and recreational facilities. The Vizag mosque was opened in 1994, during the period of Maulana Amiruddin Malak Saheb as *Dae*. It was under his leadership, as well, that branches of the community were installed in Hyderabad, India, California, USA, and Sharjah, UAE (Persian Gulf).

Maulana Amiruddin, a keen golfer, cricketer and tennis player himself, initiated the setting up of various sports facilities and through his own example encouraged his followers to remain physically fit. Traditionally, the number one sport of the members had been volleyball. Since the early days, the community had a volleyball court and the men, after work and on weekends, would engage in keenly-contested volleyball matches. Many of them went on to represent their work organisations, schools and colleges at the state and national level and won prestigious awards in this sport. The Institution has also produced volleyball, golf and cricket players who have performed at the international level.

It was Maulana Amiruddin who introduced other sporting and fitness facilities. A swimming pool was opened in 1988, a tennis court in 1993, a lush golf course in 2000 and a fully-equipped gymnasium in 2006. This is in addition to the existing volleyball/ throw ball court and the cricket/ football ground. Badminton courts and table tennis tables are available for enthusiasts in the community hall. Besides, at the instance of Maulana Amiruddin, meditation and yoga camps and classes have been regularly held in Mahdi Bagh for the benefit of those who wish to avail of the facility.

A picturesque lake was landscaped in 1989 and greenery created around it to give the residents an 'in-house' picnic spot. It is not unusual to see children having a day out at the 'pond' or men with a passion for angling spending the weekend lazing on one of the benches along the lake's periphery.

Visiting dignitaries and all those who have basked in its spiritual radiance have variously described the community as "Heaven on Earth", "Patch of Paradise", "Ideal in Community Living," "Model of Peace and Brotherhood," "Example of Collective Faith and Self-discipline," etc.

In its 125<sup>th</sup> (Abedi) year now, the institution is looking forward to touching new heights of glory and its members have re-dedicated themselves with fresh fervour to the attainment of their spiritual and worldly goals.