

An Appraisal of the Intellectual Developments in Iran Under the Pahlavi Rule

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ABSTRACT

In the modern Iranian history, the revolutions of 1905 and 1979 have left such a resounding impression on Iranian intellectuals that their preoccupation with them and dramatic emphasis on their events has ensured that everything that happened between the two revolutions is seen either as their impact or a direct cause influencing them. This is one of the many reasons why it is noticed that a detailed study of the Iranian state governed by the Pahlavi dynasty is still in its early years. While the political events such as that of the Coup of 1921, the one of 1953, and the White Revolution have been subject to various scholarly debates, the intellectual developments that took place at the same time have failed to receive the corresponding attention. This certainly does not mean that no scholarly progress took place in these six decades, as the sustainment of a modern state without the empowerment of its citizens, achievable only through their education, is out of question; rather it only demonstrates what the priorities of those who had been tasked with the obligation of writing modern Iranian history in the twentieth century were. As such, this paper, endeavors to present a succinct outline of the intellectual products of the Pahlavi era, what influenced the thought of this period, the battle between those who sought to implement the ideals of Enlightenment and those who fought against it, and its implications in the shaping of modern Iran.

Keywords: Iran, Pahlavi, Intellectual, Modern, Literature.

1.1 Coming to Power

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Iran was trapped in a stern battle against the foreign influence of the Czarist Russia which, among other things, had divided its population with respect to their allegiance to the ruling Qājār dynasty (1789-1925 CE). The situation was further exacerbated by the British invasion in 1918 CE

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replacing Russia as the new colonizers of Iran.¹ This incursion resulted in the Anglo-Persian agreement, the terms of which were far too beneficial for Britain than they were for Iran. The natural outcome of such upgraded exploitation was the instigation of a political conflict. Armies from different parts of Iran marched towards Tehran to seize control and overthrow the Qājār monarchy which had become a sore in their eyes due to its increasing inefficiency. One of these armies was commanded by Colonel Reza Khan who, with his three thousand Cossack soldiers, seized control of the capital city in 1921 and proclaimed martial law, promising to protect the monarchy and to make it stronger. Installing himself as the Prime Minister of Iran, the ambitious colonel started to consolidate his authority by subduing the locals, ousting the British, and allying with the Russians. Finally in 1925 CE, the last Qājār Emperor Ahmad Shah was deposed by Reza Khan who captured the throne and established the Pahlavi Dynasty, introducing himself as Reza Shah Pahlavi.² The formation of an Iranian nation-state which had been seriously obstructed up to this point due to the intervention of the Great Powers had a renewed opportunity now that the power was in the hands of Reza Shah. His efforts in this direction earned him with the credit of not just reviving Iran as a nation but also “creating” it on modern lines.³

1.2 Changing Order

Reza Shah had started the process of consolidation even before the establishment of his dynasty perhaps in anticipation of the outcome that he had so carefully planned for. Given the circumstances in which he rose to power, he had no time to devise a political theory or to concentrate on its philosophy; the only ideology that he professed emphasized order, discipline, and unlimited power. His motto of three words: *Khuda* (God), *Shāh* (Monarch), and *Mehan* (nation) was a clear indication that any form of dissent against him will be tantamount to not just opposing the state but the religion itself thus becoming an act of treason.⁴ Nevertheless, his secular orientation was pretty much obvious from the measures he took which involved the marginalization of the *Shīrī* scholars and the modernization of the legal and educational institutions - represented by the establishment of the Tehran University in 1935 CE. To achieve ‘national unification’, he resorted to repressive measures against all kinds of rebellious parties and leaders. He earned the wrath of the religious scholars by abolishing the veil in 1936 and granting various ‘rights’ to women, something that could never be acceptable to the traditional clergy.⁵

However, it wasn't the clergy or the rebellious locals who led to his fall, rather he was forced to abdicate by the Allied Powers of Great Britain and the Soviet Union in 1941 when they invaded Iran and destroyed the Shah's army after he had refused to take their side in the Second World War and had insisted on maintaining neutrality but was accused of harboring pro-German (Nazi) sympathies mainly on account of their shared ideologies. The throne, on British recommendations, now passed to his 22 year old son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.⁶

1.3 The falling graph

The replacement of the stubborn autocrat with his inexperienced son reduced the atrocities and political repression to some extent but the persisting foreign control over Iran's oil resources provided an opportunity for various leftist classes and groups to launch movements against the monarchy. Coups were attempted, united Fronts were formed, and various measures were taken to destabilize the government but somehow Mohammad Reza was able to survive all these threats. Amid growing calls for reform, the Shah came up with a programme known as the 'White Revolution' in the 1960s which consisted of agrarian reforms, nationalization of forest resources, and enfranchising women, among other things.⁷ It was the clergy class again who were opposed to these reforms calling for more protests and further demonstrations. Being unable to reconcile the discontenting voices, the Shah, now titled as *Shahanshah/Aryamehr*, abolished the parliament and concentrated all the power in his own hands. The most unfortunate result of such a political and economic Diaspora was intellectual bankruptcy which saw many people turning to socialist, communist and Marxist type ideologies while some even tried to use them to reinterpret Islam itself.⁸ By 1979, a broad coalition, formed under the leadership of Ayatullah Ruhullah Khomeini, had created a 'revolutionary' situation which, apart from bringing an end to the Pahlavi dynasty and terminating the Iranian monarchy, established the Republic of Iran.⁹

1.4 The Intellectual Tradition

If one tries to outline the underlying factors of the intellectual contributions in the Pahlavi era, it would come to fore that the major emphasis was laid on disparaging the autocratic rulership, its authoritarianism and political intrigues, and the incessant endeavors of the learned elite to attempt fusion between modernity and traditionalism with a compromise on both ends. One major drawback of the Pahlavi

dictatorship was the severe suppression of such writers and authors which was responsible for preventing any major positive development in academic areas. Despite this, Reza Shah's grand scheme of a revolution was not restricted to political and military ambitions only. His dream was the creation of a modern nation-state of which educational reform had to form the integral component.¹⁰ This is evident from the inauguration of the Tehran University in 1934 CE which ultimately became the beacon of modern education in Iran. The university was in essence an amalgam or merger of the existing six colleges, that of Law, Literature, Political Science, Agriculture, Medicine, and Teacher Training. After a few years of its foundation, six new colleges were added – Dentistry, Pharmacology, Veterinary sciences, Theology, Fine arts, and Science & Technology.¹¹ Mohammad Taqī Malik al-Shu'arā Bahār (1886-1951), who taught at the university in its early years, came up with his three-volume work entitled *Sabk-Shenāsi* (1942) which became a basic text of Persian literature in the academic fields. The contribution of this work which is a comprehensive history of Iranian languages and prose literature has been acclaimed to a great extent owing to the fact that Reza Shah's conception of a nation-state required homogeneity and unification of diverse cultures in which literary history formed the basic ingredient and this was achieved by Bahār's book.¹² For this purpose, and to make the most important works accessible to a greater audience, translation work had also been initiated with special focus on translating literary and historical works from French and Arabic to the Persian language. The Qājārs during their rule had started to send the students abroad for higher education which was another cause for Iran's dependence on external powers. With the establishment of this university, there was now no need for such measures. The education that they received here was intended to increase their nationalistic character and to build Iran's self-esteem. The renaissance of such a national pride turned out to be a catalyst in uniting academicians, intellectuals, and politicians who started to collaborate with the Shah, even though there was serious disagreement when it came to the issues of democracy and liberalism.¹³

Another key agenda of the modernists was the improvement of the Iranian race and formation of a healthy life style. This was the major impulse behind the active interest that was taken in physical education for which the National Physical Education Association was founded in 1934 mainly due to the sustained efforts of Mir Mehdi Verzandeh (1882-1982) known as the "Father of modern sports" in

Iran.¹⁴ Modernization of music also took place which started from the exertions of the middle class before the government officially formulated policies for its progression. One early example of these local efforts is the school of music *Madrasah-ye 'Ali-ye Musīqi* (1886-1979) under the musician 'Alinaqi Vaziri, being the first institution to teach both European and Iranian classical music. Vaziri also established a musical club *Klup-e Muzikal* which was joined by many intellectuals and academics of his time. Music was added to the curriculum of all schools under the directions of Mehdiqoli Hedayat, Prime Minister of Reza Shah from 1927-1933 CE. Hedayat had himself contributed to this field through his work *Majma' al-Advār* (a review of ancient Iranian and Arab musicologists). In 1938, through an express command of Reza Shah another musical institution was formed and named as State Department for Music (*Idārah-ye Musīqi-ye Keshvar*). This department was in turn responsible for the publication of the magazine *Muzik-e Iran*.¹⁵

The effect of nationalization was seen in historiography as well. Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1946), one of the most influential historians of his time, promoted nationalistic ideas in his works and would usually support the Shah's projects. His major work was the History of Iranian Constitutionalism which he compiled a few years before his death. This trend was also seen in other historians like Abbas Iqbal and Mohammad Ali Forughī who were mainly concerned with drafting state-sponsored textbooks for schools.¹⁶ A notable literary figure during the reign of Reza Shah was the latter, his first Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Forughī (1877-1942 CE). Besides presiding over editing, translation projects, and historical publication, Forughī came up with the general history of Western Philosophy in Persian language, the first of its nature. In 1937, he translated some of Ibn Sīnā's work on philosophy of natural sciences from Arabic to Persian, also editing the works of the thirteenth century poet Sa'di of Shiraz. His efforts of editing and translating works of such nature came to be seen as one of his methods to promote a blueprint for an Iranian national identity. Overshadowing their contributions is Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1950) who is considered as the greatest literary figure of the twentieth-century Persian literature. His masterpiece was *Būf-e Kūr*, a novel based on fiction though depicting his own struggles with the growing modernity in which he was unable to find a place for himself.¹⁷

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the intellectual literature started to adopt a socialist tone mainly owing to the influence of pro-Soviet parties especially the

Tudeh Party and also due to the fall of Reza Shah with the main topics of discussion being Modernism, Nationalism, and criticism of religion, patriarchy, nepotism, and the political establishment of the country.¹⁸ Iran presented an image of pessimism and frustration and there was no real social or economic reform that could take place. This also had an effect on the intellectual elite as well whose ideas seem to have been crumbling under the repressive regime as a result of which their prose and poetry reflected a dark and gloomy theme. Due to most of the country's poets, writers and other intellectuals being in prison, the fissure between them and the Pahlavi regime was further widened.¹⁹

1.5 Persian Nationalism

In the early years of Mohammed Reza, more steps were taken to establish Persian language as an inseparable ingredient of Iran's composite national identity, a process that had started two decades earlier. In this regard, a notable contribution was made by the lexicographer 'Ali Akbar Dekhoda who compiled a multivolume encyclopedic dictionary of Persian language which was named as *Loghat Nāmah*. Based on citations from classical sources, his efforts to preserve a literary tradition were acknowledged even by the parliament who sponsored its completion and publication in 1946. Previously, Dekhoda had already authored *Amthāl wa Hikam*, a four-volume dictionary of Persian proverbs and maxims.²⁰ Most of Iran's cultural elite of the Pahlavi era were generally seen as a fusion between traditional education and modern Western scholarship. One famous candidate of this category was Mohammad Qazvini (1877-1949), a literary expert with special expertise in editing classical texts. With a colleague he edited the famous *Dīwān* of the poet Ḥafiz which helped in re-establishing the latter's place in Iranian literary history. His work had been supplemented earlier by Hasan Pirnya whose 'history of ancient Iran' published in 1933, is said to have turned out to be a boost for the Pahlavis to legitimize their rule by justifying their claim to the ancient Persian past. A year later, in 1934, a millennial celebration of Firdausi's *Shāh Nāmah* was organized which saw Iran hosting scholars from all around the world, thus further paving the way for Persianization of the local population. Another key scholar who helped promote the movement of Persian nationalism was Ibrahim Purdavud (1885-1968), a professor of ancient Iranian languages. He was responsible for training multiple generations of students in Tehran University and imparting in them the nationalist discourse of the Pahlavis.²¹

1.6 Seeking Refuge in Poetry

During this time, a poet Nima Yushij (1896-1960) earned fame on account of his rejection of the conventional rhyme and meter used by Persian poets for centuries and also for trying to reflect the uncomplicated nature of the agricultural life and to give voice to those who were suffering. He achieved this through his famous ode *Māhtāb* in 1948. Similar thoughts were portrayed by another poet Mahdi Akhavan Sales (1928-1990), also known as “Omid” who despised the Pahlavi dictatorship and mourned the loss of the National Movement. These themes are evident in his two famous works: *Kāveh ya Eskandar* composed in 1956 when he was in prison and *Ākher-e Shāh Nāmāh* in 1957.²² Religious conventions, patriarchal tyranny, a desire for rebirth, and self-discovery became the main themes of the poetical works of Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967), the most famous of her collections being *Tavallodi Dīgar*. Her mystical tendencies were reflected in *Bandegi* composed in 1956 which was a long poem in the form of a discourse with the Creator. Her other poems, some of which were published after her death include *Ey Marz-e Pur-Johar*, *Kasi Keh Mesl-e Hichkas nist*, and others. Poetic imagery and symbolic language received a new direction under the poet Ahmad Shamlu (1925-2000) who used them to continue the discourses started by his predecessors. His *Lawh* was heavily influenced by the narratives of the Bible and its message resembled that of *Mahtab*'s, being addressed to the inattentive public filled with words of compassion.²³

1.7 The War of Ideologies and the Philosophical Epilogue

In his *Taskhūr-e Tammadon-e Farangi*, Seyyed Fakhr-ud-din Shadman (1907-1967) discussed how language plays a role in the development of thought and how it can be used to interpret modernization. He also proposed a policy through which Greek and Latin books were to be translated into Persian to make them available to the younger generation. He was followed by Jalal Āl-Ahmad (1923-1970), regarded as one of the most famous critic of Westernization. Jalal is credited with describing *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxification) in his booklet with the same title. For him, the supreme cause of all the social and cultural evils was the discarding of traditional values and unrestricted albeit phony imitation of Western ways of living.²⁴ Perhaps the most radical treatment of the subject of “Westernization v. Traditionalism” was carried out by the sociologist Ali Shariati. ‘Ali Shariati (1933-1977) was an advocate of Shīī revivalism but with a combination of not just non-Shīī but also non-Iranian

ideas. Perceiving logical reasoning as universally valid, he attempted to acquire scientific validation for Shī'ism and lectured on many topics including history and sociology of religion, politics, philosophy, etc.

The post-1953 period saw the emergence of periodicals and journals as a major channel through which the intellectual class could circulate their ideas. Journals like *Sokhan*, *Rahnama-ye Ketab*, and *Nigen* became popular due to their scholarly orientation and usually deliberated on topics like politics, art, and literature. These would mostly include anthologies, famously known as *Jong* which would turn out to play a key role in the development of modern Iranian poetry.²⁵ In the field of philosophy and religious sciences, active contribution was made by both traditionally trained scholars as well as scholars with modern education. Those belonging to the first category include:

- i. Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'i (1903-1981), author of *al-Mīzān* (Qur'anic commentary in 27 volumes), *Uṣūl-i Falsafah*, and *'Ali wa al-ḥikmat al-ilāhiyyah*.
- ii. Sayyid Abu al-Ḥasan Rafī'i Qazvini (1897-1975), author of some commentaries on Shī'i philosophical treatises including *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, and *al-Manzūmah*.
- iii. Sayyid Muḥammad Kāzīm 'Aṣṣār (1884-1975), famous for his book *Thalāth Rasā'il fi al-Ḥikmat al-Islāmiyyah*.
- iv. Murtaḍā Muṭahhari (1919-1979), who edited *Uṣūl-i Falsafah* and *Kitāb al-Taḥṣīl*.
- v. Jalāl Humā'i (1900-1980), known for his *Ghazzālī Nāmah*.

The second category comprises of intellectuals like Yahyā Mahdawi, Ghulām Ḥusayn Ṣādiqi, Sayyid Ja'far Sajjādi, Aḥmad Fardīd, Ibrahim Dībāji, and Ḥasan Malikshāhi, all of whom were the alumni of Tehran University.²⁶

1.8 Conclusion

Towards the end of Pahlavi dynasty, rift between the state and its subjects, especially the intellectual class, had widened to such an extent that almost all those associated with the latter class were considered to be a part of the opposition. Most of the intellectual activity was aimed at eradicating the 'poverty of thought' as has been discussed above. The journey of Iranian intellectuals began in the twentieth century by searching for techniques to remedy autocracy and to integrate modernity; the Pahlavis were eliminated but the promises and commitments remained unfulfilled. Based on the information available from the contemporary

sources, one can conclude that the intellectual life in the twentieth-century Iran was a tormented one deriving influences either from the Western modern perspective with its multiple shades or from the traditional *Shīʿī* version. Most of the intellectuals who contributed in the later part of this era played an important role in the 1979 revolution. The most noticeable, yet expected, phenomenon of these intellectual elites was their transition from supporting the Shah in the beginning to becoming one of the most powerful weapons of his overthrow in the end.

References and Endnotes

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