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Education and Cultural Change in the Modernisation of Iran: The Role of Shi‘ite Clerics and the Middle Class

Abstract

Iranian society underwent various transformations influenced by Western culture as part of its process of modernisation. This was driven by the state’s, intellectuals’ and the emergent middle class’s efforts to push cultural change. However, despite a century of such modernisation, a populist backlash accelerated the rise of religious leaders and the Shi‘ite tradition before, during and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. For this important reason, the link between cultural change and modernisation need further examination in the Iranian context. This paper posits the preliminary hypothesis that modernisation as a means of cultural change did not transform Iranian culture in large measure due to the lack of nationwide education. A majority of Iranians remained devoted to the Shi‘ite faith and traditions of Islam. This paper examines the importance of education in cultural change in the Qajar and Pahlavi eras, deploying aspects of Riane Eisler’s cultural transformation model to evaluate cultural change influenced by Western culture in Iran.

Keywords: Iran, Persia, cultural change, education, middle class



Introduction

Iranian society was characterised by a predominately traditional patriarchal Islamic system in the 19th century, with Shi'ite clerics dominating society and regulating all major institutions, such as education and justice. Influenced by Western thought and culture some social reforms were adopted by the state, which, along with the promotion of modern educational thinking brought back by Iranian students from European countries, led to an increasing number of intellectuals, mainly Westernised-elites.¹ Inspired by European patterns of thought, in particular the French revolution (1789), intellectuals and wider Iranian society tended to support the political transition from an authoritarian to a parliamentary system through the Persian Constitutional Revolution (the Mashrooteh Revolution) in 1906.

From 1925 to 1979, modernisation in the socio-economic sphere imposed by the Pahlavi governments, led to the formation of a modern middle class in Iran. However, in 1979, the populist revolution accelerated the rise of religious leaders and the establishment of Islamic government in Iran. It seems that Iranian society was still heavily devoted to the Shi'ite faith despite more than a century of Western thought and cultural influence.

The key is to understand why Western influence and the efforts of intellectuals didn't lead to cultural transformation in Iran. One must first understand this is the broad context of an education system able to convey new values, attitudes, expectations and aspirations. In other words, able to transform a society's way of life and of thinking. In Iran although the process of modernisation led to the emergence of an intellectual class and a modern intellectual class, the majority of Iranians were still illiterate and tradition-oriented in 1979. This has not received enough attention by the state and intellectuals in Iran to date. Riane Eisler's "Cultural Transformation" model is useful in exploring this issue.

Theoretical framework: cultural change and education

Culture is the totality of a society's distinctive ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge. Cultural change is a modification or discontinuance of existing 'tried' and 'tested' procedures. These are transmitted to people from past culture and in new forms. Scholars such as David Dressler and Donald E. Carns² note that all cultures have witnessed changes, taking place under their own and global dynamics. However, Eisler talks of two cultures (models or systems) for structuring society: the partnership and the dominator model. Cultures based on partnership systems have the following qualities:

¹ Mohammad Rezaei, 'The Origins of the Early Iranian Enlightenment: The Case of Akhundzade's "Qir'atīkā"', *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 8/1 (2020), pp. 1–10, Viewed 24 June 2021, <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2347798920976274>>.

² David Dressler and Donald. E Carns, *Sociology: the Study of Human Interaction*, New York 1973.

- 1) they are democratic,
- 2) egalitarian structures exist in the family, institutions and politics;
- 3) equal partnership between men and women;
- 4) and valuing peaceful relations, and beliefs about humanity that support emphatic and respectful relations.

The dominator model refers to a model of society that has the following qualities:

- 1) rigid top-down rankings in the family, institutions, and politics;
- 2) ranking of men over women;
- 3) and acceptance of abuse and violence and belief that rankings maintained by violence or the threat of violence are natural and inevitable, as well as moral.³

Eisler noted that most cultures changed due to modernisation and globalisation processes in the 20th century. However, she argues that cultural change is transformative if it occurs at a systemic level and shifts the culture closer to a partnership model. She argues that real system change requires leaving behind traditions of domination and violence in our primary gender and parent-child relations, that is the foundations on which dominator systems renew themselves.⁴

The dominant group in society tends to use education as a way of imposing its cultural values on the entire society.⁵ According to Eisler, in dominator systems, schools are designed to support the core configuration of the dominator model.⁶ In many cases, the dominated group is less likely to make room for other cultures and perceives others' cultures as threats to its cultural hegemony.⁷

Iranian society, Shi'ite dominated culture and education

In 1501, seven hundred years after Arabs conquered Iran, the country was finally reunified as an independent state by the Safavid dynasty (1501 to 1736). The Safavid dynasty made Shi'ite Islam the official state religion – the only country with a Shi'ite state among all Islamic countries. Until that time Twelver Shi'ism had been a minority faith, though also powerful in Iran. Safavid's shahs (kings) needed the Shi'ite clergy as a social and political force of support. With the support of Shi'ite clergy including Iranian and Lebanese, the Safavid shahs claimed to be the representative of Mahdi, the twelfth Shi'ite Imam (the Hidden Imam). Thus, religion functioned as a legitimising tool for the actions of the rulers.

³ Riane Eisler, *The Power of Partnership: Seven Relationships that Will Change Your Life*, Novato 2003, p. xv.

⁴ Cecilia Gingerich, 'Talking with Riane Eisler on Changing the Whole System', *The Next System Project* (March 2016), Viewed 20 July 2020, <<https://thenextsystem.org/riane-eisler-on-changing-the-whole-system>>.

⁵ Uswatun Qoyyimah, 'Transforming Culture Through Education', p. 1, Viewed 24 December 2021, <<https://eudl.eu/pdf/10.4108/eai.8-9-2020.2301324>>.

⁶ Riane Eisler, 'Partnership Education in the 21st Century', *Encounter Journal* 15/3 (2000), pp. 5.

⁷ Qoyyimah, 'Transforming Culture', p. 1.

Shi'ite circles propounded new norms depending on the shah's power and their willingness to act. Although some of Safavid shah's orders were based on Sharia, the new values were influenced by the power of the shah, hence not all the norms and values had roots in Islam and Shi'ite.⁸ They appeared in the form of superstitions and strange customs. For instance, the Safavids supported the mourning rituals of *Ashura*. The state encouraged believers to invest deep personal feelings in re-enacting the 680 Battle of Kerbala, when Imam Hossein, the third Imam of Shi'ite, was killed. Following state orders, many *imamzadehs*, shrines to the relatives of Imams, were built. The clerics especially developed shrines in Mashhad and Qom as pilgrimage areas. The linkage between customs and the religious beliefs of the government and the people led to their consolidation and acceptance into the society's culture.⁹ This led to a transformation of cultural values and norms in society.

Gradually Sharia became the dominant law and Shi'ite clerics dominated power in the court. Society was in effect ruled by Sharia or religious law, which was controlled by the Shi'ite clerics. The 'urf', or customary law, which had to be administered by the state was also influenced by Sharia. The Shi'ite clerics also increased their control over the traditional education system of the country. The traditional system of education became Islamic in character. It was prescribed into two forms: Maktab and Madraseh (School). Maktab was dedicated to children's earliest education or elementary school and was the place that children learnt the Persian alphabet and some arithmetic and Quranic literacy, while Madrasehes were designed to teach religion and sciences with old methods and mainly based on Islamic thought for students at a higher level.¹⁰ Based on Maktab's rules, everybody had to learn to read, but only a few students also learned to write. In addition, there were differences between what girls and boys learned in Maktab. It was mostly clergyman who were the managing class of the Maktab in mosques, though they gradually stopped teaching at mosques and moved to other places called Makhtab khaneh. Controlled by clerics, the traditional education system passed down the Shi'ite tradition to the next generation.

After three centuries of Safavid shahs and Shi'ite clerics' efforts, by the 19th century Iranian society had developed a traditional patriarchal Islamic system. The Shi'ite tradition was the dominated culture and the Shi'ite clerics dominated power.

⁸ Mehdi Sotoudefar, Naser Jadidi, Azar A. Gholizadeh, 'Sociological Analysis Of Religious Superstition in the Safavid Morshed's Kingdom', *Journal of Applied Sociology* 29/3 (2018), p. 140.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Reza Yousefvand, Jila Rostami Hormoz and Mohsen Bigdeli, 'Investigation of Iran's Educational Structure during Qajar Era', *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 7/2 (2018), p. 751.

Modernisation and the rise of Westernised-elites in Iran

The 19th century was a period of economic development, social change and political reform in Europe. The industrial revolution simultaneously increased European demand for raw materials and new markets. The Europeans saw Iran as a valuable market that could be attractive to investors and became interested in maintaining a strong influence. As the nineteenth century progressed, more and more Europeans travelled to Iran,¹¹ some transmitting European cultural practices to the Iranian royal family and upper classes. This motivated the shahs of Qajar (1789–1925), especially the 4th shah of the Qajar Dynasty, Naser al-Din Shah (1848–1896), and members of the royal families and upper classes to visit and spend time in European countries.

Influenced by European thought and culture, attempts at reform were undertaken. Naser al-Din Shah in particular was an advocate of reform. Under his rule, various plans for restructuring the state were undertaken by his ministers. Mirza Taghi Khan Farahani (1807–1852), Amir Kabir, the chief minister of Naser al-Din Shah, pursued major reforms particularly in the state administration. Amir Kabir was also the founder of the only modern school in Iran, known as Dar al-Fonun. Later, the reforms led to the establishment of the Ministry of Science. The *Wezarat-e Ulum* (the Ministry of Science) was organised by Ali-qoli Mirza (E'tezad al-Saltaneh) during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah. The Ministry of Science was responsible for overseeing the activities of all institutions of learning in the country.

The influence of Western culture and limited social reforms led to the emergence of an intellectual class, mainly Westernised, who visited the outside world, translating Western literature, and learning about Western scientific and technological advancements.¹² Some of them were aristocrats and royal princes, while others were from middle class families.¹³ The impact of modern ideas especially from the Enlightenment and 'modern European philosophy' on these intellectuals changed their views, beliefs, norms and notions.

Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh or Akhundov (1812–1878) and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1853–1896) are among them. Akhundzadeh's ideas were influenced by Western philosophy and literature.¹⁴ Atheism was one of the building blocks of Akhundzadeh's thought, especially in his critique of religion in general and Shi'ite Islam in particular. He sought to create fundamental cultural change through the subjectivities of ordinary people. He insisted on changing the Islamic script, as it restricted public education from reaching illiterate people in the Muslim world.¹⁵

¹¹ H. Esfandiari Chehabi, *Culture Wars and Dual Society In Iran*, Amsterdam 2018, p. 22.

¹² Allana C. Lindgren and Stephen Ross, *The Modernist World*, London 2015, p. 440.

¹³ Chehabi, *Culture Wars*, p. 42.

¹⁴ Iran lost all of its territories in the Caucasus comprising Transcaucasia and parts of the North Caucasus (Dagestan) to Russia.

¹⁵ Rezaei, 'The Origins of the Early Iranian Enlightenment'.

Kermani (1853–1896) as a follower of Akhundzadeh focused openly denounced Muslim institutions, the political regime, and the educational system as the real causes of national stagnation. He put forward constitutionalist and nationalist ideas for the first time in contemporary Iranian history. Thus, the 19th century intellectuals tended to agree that religious fundamentalism was the cause of Iran's backwardness and sought reform.

Western culture and modern schools

In the early the 19th century, European Missionaries, educators and physicians were among the travellers to Iran. Positive effects of their stay were attempts to establish modern schools for non-Muslims Iranians. Mohammad Shah Qajar (1808–1848) was supportive towards foreign schools. The first school was built for boys by American priest Justin Perkins (1805–1869) in Urmia in 1834. In 1838, another school was built for girls, each with more than 2,000 students. In addition to new knowledge, carpet weaving and forging was also taught. One more school was founded by Ojen Bora, a French priest, in Tabriz in 1839.¹⁶ Although Iranian Muslims were not allowed to registered in such schools at the beginning on the shah's order, gradually Muslim students, including a member of the royal family, registered. Later Bora established more schools including one school in Julfa, Isfahan.

Influenced by the foreign schools and their education system, Dar al-Fonun (Polytechnic) was established to train bureaucrats acquainted with Western techniques in 1851. Amir Kabir relied on foreign instructors in his new school. Austrian instructors were hired to teach a variety of subjects from Languages to Medicine, Law to Geography, History to Economics and Engineering. These teachers did not know much about religious teachings; so there were differences between the students of the school and those of Islamic schools.¹⁷ Dar al-Fonun was a school for only higher education. In fact, it was Roshdiyeh who established the first Iranian modern elementary school.

In the late years of Naser al-Din Shah's reign, Mirza Hassan Tabrizi (1851–1944), famously known as Hassan Roshdiyeh – an Iranian cleric from a middle class family – visited Istanbul, Egypt and Lebanon and became interested in studying modern education systems based on the European education system in Lebanon. Roshdiyeh, influenced by European schools, established a modern school – or Madreseh – in Yerevan, Armenia's capital, and three years later in Tabriz, known as Madreseh Roshdiyeh. In these schools, education was based on new approaches following phonetic principles and modern teaching methods, especially in teaching the alphabet. In his

¹⁶ Ehsan Soltani Nezhad, 'The Madrasa at Iran, Role of Tradition and Religious Education', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3/2 (2018), pp. 43–52.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 49.

new method of teaching, Roshdīyeh used the concept of sounds instead of alphabetic letters to teach the Persian and Azeri languages, which use the Arabic script.¹⁸

Roshdīyeh tried to establish more modern schools in Iran. However, his modern schools and method of teaching were rejected by traditional clerics and conservatives. They accused the new schools and tutors of spreading anti-Islamic and anti-monarchical sentiments. Ultimately, conservatives attacked the school in Tabriz and destroyed it. There was an, unsuccessful, assassination attempt using guns against Roshdīyeh, and also later a *fatwa* against the modern school. Roshdīyeh left Tabriz and established a new modern school in Tehran. This time he received support from the new shah, Mozzafar al-Din Shah. More new schools were established in several cities by Roshdīyeh.¹⁹

There were a few attempts by other intellectuals to establish modern schools in some cities. However, the majority of intellectuals chose political transition as the solution instead of cultural transformation through modern education. The constitutionalists sought an alliance with Shi'ite clerics who were in conflict with the shahs and monarchy. Roshdīyeh joined the Constitutional-Revolutionary (Mashrooteh) anti-shah group. They reached their goal in 1906 by forcing Mozzafar al-Din Shah Qajar (1853–1907) into declaring constitutional rule and convening the Majlis (Parliament).

The challenge for the modernisation of education

After the Constitutional Revolution, Majlis approved the Supplementary Fundamental Laws of October 7, 1907. The supplementary made education compulsory for all Iranians. Based on the article 19 of the supplementary “The institution of schools at the expense of the state and the nation and compulsory education shall take place according to the law relating to the Ministry of Education. All higher and primary schools are placed under the supreme direction and supervision of the Ministry of Education.”²⁰ In addition, based on article 25, public schools should primarily serve the poor. Articles 22–24 made wealthy families from towns responsible for the upkeep of urban schools, rural landlords for village schools. Thus, based on the supplementary, the modern education system should have to be available for all children.

Despite constitutionally guaranteed free and compulsory education at all levels to all Iranians, it gave rights to Shi'ite clerics to interfere with the law. As a result, the clerics took a decision to allow only 4 to 6-year-old girls to go to school.²¹ Some Shi'ite clerics adopted a more moderate approach toward modernisation, but

¹⁸ Mahmood Hakimi, ‘Mirza Hassan Khan Roshdīyeh’ (in Persian), Viewed 10 July 2020, <<https://psri.ir/?id=e9bqdgq2>>.

¹⁹ Hakimi, ‘Mirza Hassan’.

²⁰ *The Iranian Constitution with Amendments*, Tehran 1961.

²¹ Ali Akbar Mahdi ‘The Iranian Women’s Movement, A Century Long Struggle’, *The Muslim World* 94/4 (2004), p. 428.

the majority did not. The majority of Shi'ite clerics were against Westernisation and modernisation. They supported the constitutional revolution because the shah's power could be restricted. Moreover, they believed that Islamic territory could be protected against the infidels. From the very beginning resisting to any changes in Sharia law was the clerics' priority. As the results most of the attempts at reform at the systematic level in parliament faced the clerics' resistance.

Along with the Shi'ite clerics' resistance to modern education, there were no proper institutional arrangements to facilitate reforms because the country was suffering from poor infrastructure and high poverty. Thus limited reforms occurred mainly in Tehran and some other cities until the early 20th century. According to some data, in 1918/1919 – more than a century after the first contacts with Western education – there were no more than several dozen new elementary schools (with a total of 24,033 pupils) and a few secondary schools (with 2,392 students), and most of them were private.²² In addition, higher education was provided to the public in a limited number of schools or colleges where the students engaged in science and jurisprudence and medicine. Therefore, while the nobles and aristocrats appointed tutors or studied in private schools, most clever students were deprived of education because of the lack of an adequate number of schools in their regions.²³ There is no reliable information about the literacy rate of the total population in the Qajar era, but according to some scholars it was about 5% in 1921.²⁴ The literacy rate in Tehran was 17%. That means 83% of the population of the capital were illiterate even after the reforms.²⁵

In 1925, Reza Khan, the prime minister, had the last Qajar (Ahmad Shah) deposed and at the end of the year made himself shah. While the 19th century Liberal intellectuals were supporters of democratic government, this time many of them believed in a politically strong state and linguistic and cultural nationalism.

Reza Shah Pahlavi and modernisation

The process of modernisation took place alongside a deepening sense of secularisation and Westernisation under the Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944). Reza Shah applied the secularisation process through reforms of the constitution and law, closing religious schools and isolating clerics in the major cities.²⁶

²² David Menashri, *Education and the Making of Modern Iran*, New York 1992, p. 60.

²³ Yousefvand, Rostami Hormoz and Begdeli, 'Investigation of Iran's Educational Structure during Qajar Era', *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 7/2 (2018), p. 750.

²⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, 'The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 10/3 (1979), pp. 381–414.

²⁵ 'Interview with Ahmad Masjed-Jamei'.

²⁶ Houchang Esfandiari Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini*, London 1990.

One of his aims in the reform of the judicial and educational system was to focus on removing the clerics from the central position of power that they had continuously occupied until 1925. Therefore, the old Ministry of Justice was dissolved and in 1927, new personnel, many of whom had received European education, took over the administration of the new Ministry of Justice from the former clerical officials.

Following that a commission within the newly formed Ministry of Justice headed by Ali-Akbar Davar (1885–1937), presented to the Majlis the first volume of the Civil Code; as well as a judicial reorganisation bill establishing a hierarchy of courts. One objective of the Civil Code was a secularisation of the Sharia.²⁷ The clerics lost a particularly vital source of revenue when a law reassigned the registration of legal documents concerning property from the Sharia courts to the secular courts.²⁸

Reza Shah's reform plan for women was another anti-Shi'ite move, for example, opening up schools for girls, encouraging higher education for women, female employment in the state bureaucracy, opening some public arenas to women's participation, and requiring the discarding of the veil.²⁹

In response to these reforms, some clerics adapted to the new situation by abandoning their turbans, shaving their beards, putting on ties and taking a few courses at state schools to learn the new procedures.³⁰ But there was resistance from the majority of clerics to change. The conservative part of society still supported the clerics. In particular the *bazaaries* (merchants) were interested in modern life, but their approaches and activities remained Islamic-tradition orientated. However, intellectuals supported Reza Shah and his modernisation plan.

Modernisation of education: a challenge for the state

Reza Shah's government started modernising the education system with the establishment of the Department of Public Education in 1925 as a branch of the Ministry of Education headed by Ali-Akbar Davar (1885–1937) and later Ali-Asghar Hekmat (1893–1980). State-controlled education began by divesting *Makhtabs*. The government replaced these with elementary, secondary and teacher-training schools, which emphasised a Western-modelled curriculum instead of the curriculum based on religious subjects. Along with this private schools became accountable to the Ministry

²⁷ François Ameli, 'The Role of the Judiciary in implementing Western Law in Iran under the Pahlavi Dynasty, in: *The Asian Side of the World-II*, ed. Jean-François Sabouret, Paris 2015, pp. 141–145.

²⁸ Mahmoud Reza Gods, 'Government and Society in Iran, 1926–34', *Middle Eastern Studies* 27/2 (1991), p. 225.

²⁹ Taghi Jafari and Ghaffar Zarei, 'Reflections on different aspects of Reza Shah's absolute/modern state; a Durkheimian structural perspective', *International Journal of Political Science* 8/1 (2018), pp. 34–35.

³⁰ Houchang Esfandiari. Chehabi, 'The Rise of Modern Middle Class in Iran before the Second World War', in: *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of Middle Classes in the Age of Empire*, eds. Jürgen Osterhammel, David Motadel and Christof Dejung, Princeton 2019, p. 56.

of Education and were obliged to follow its programmes. Foreign schools were also subjugated under the authority of the ministry.³¹ The government for the first time put a regular and increasing share of taxes into education, so that educational expenses rose from \$100,000 in 1925 to \$12–13 million in 1940.³²

According to Isa Sedigh (1894–1978), a known educationist and minister, in 1922–23 there were 612 schools in the whole of Persia (Iran), while by 1928–29 the number of schools had reached 3,283.³³ In addition, the government established three secondary schools to educate teachers, including one for women. Beginning in 1928, about 100 students annually were sent abroad on government scholarships for their education; 35% were designated as future teachers. By 1934, more than 200 foreign-educated students had become secondary and college teachers. In that year, existing colleges in Tehran were combined and expanded into the new University of Tehran.³⁴

Women were encouraged to attend school and were admitted to the University of Tehran. A law said all women should shed the veil and Western-style dress was introduced for both men and women. The modern education system generally covered urban areas and particularly the capital city.

The reforms had already led to the formation of an educated urban modern middle class, with modern ideas and skills, opposed to the traditional religious-based education, and free of rigid religious dogmatism and the blind worship of history. The basic objective of the modern middle class was various reformist dispositions to prevent disorder and to create a modern society made up of sane, healthy, orderly, educated, disciplined and useful individuals.³⁵

In 1941, more than 300 modern schools were founded in Tehran and provincial towns, and enrolment reached about 27,000 students.³⁶ The number of students at all levels of secular schools in primary education alone had reached 138,947, and another 9,661 were enrolled in high schools. By 1940 there were 670 elementary schools for boys, with 114,116 pupils; 117 for girls, with 21,790 pupils; and 1,524 mixed, with 60,169 girls and 70,830 boys.³⁷

There were also over 150,000 adults in evening programmes alone. Moreover, inspired by the Turkish experience, Reza Shah initiated literacy and education campaigns for Iranian adults via adult classes. According to available statistics, between 1936 and 1940 more than 467,000 adults learned to read and write in these literacy classes. Most were urban craftsmen and other members of traditional

³¹ Mehrdad Kia, 'Persian Nationalism and the Campaign for Language Purification,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 34/2 (1998), pp. 20–21.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 47.

³³ Isa Sedigh, *Modern Persia and Her Educational System*, New York 1931, p. 28.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

³⁵ Cyrus Schayegh, 'Sport, Health, and the Iranian Middle Class in the 1920s and 1930s', *Iranian Studies* 35/4 (2002), pp. 342–343.

³⁶ Mohd Altaf Bhat, G. N. Khaki, 'Pahlavi's the Pioneers of Education in Iran: A study of Reza Shah', *International Journal of Education* 3/3 (2015), p. 46.

³⁷ Wezarat-e Farhang, *Sal-namaeh wa Amar 1315–1316 wa 1316–1317*, Tehran 1940.

occupations, state-factory workers, low ranking government employees, policemen and construction workers.

Although Reza Shah's policies developed the economy, the education system drove the formation of a modern educated middle class, which could theoretically have played a major role in Iran's modernisation. It was too weak to play a role in Iran's government or gain power. Gradually Reza Shah dismissed those intellectual constitutionalists who took office as ministers, including Ali-Akbar Davar, the founder of the modern judicial system of Iran.

This affected his modernisation plan, including of education, and its primary emphasis became technology, industrialisation, army and administration, with moderate attention paid to social institutions. For example, the budget allocated to education in this period became only 4% of the total national budget, compared to the military allocation, which consumed a whopping 30% of the entire annual budget of the country.³⁸

As a result, there was lack of financial support for opening schools in rural areas. In general, the focus on the rural area was less than the cities, but in 1935 more than a third of the Iran's population lived in rural areas. The total population was about 15 million.³⁹ Illiteracy and poverty in the rural areas and among the peasants was high. In some upper class and landlord families, children were taught to read and write, but in peasant families it was not a custom to send children and especially girls to school or maktab or even to mosque. In addition, the number of adult classes in rural areas and among women, who constituted the majority of the illiterate population, was far smaller than in the towns and among men.⁴⁰

It should be noted that education policies were not rigorously enforced. In 1940, only 10% of all elementary-age children were enrolled in school, and less than 1% of youths between the ages of 12 and 20 were in secondary school. Consequently, despite all attempts, Iran still had an illiteracy rate of over 90% when Reza Shah abdicated in 1941 (Reza Shah was forced to abdicate by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran on 16 September 1941).

Mohammad Reza Shah's reforms and education

The plan of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–1980) for Iran was modernisation without political development. Thus his government focused on economic development, land reform, agricultural reform and educational advances and avoided any basic political changes. He called this the White Revolution, the plan being to creating a modern rural middle class and reduce the power of landowners and religious influence in the rural areas.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Statista. *Iran's Population*, Viewed 15 May 2020, <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1066934/population-iran-historical/>>.

⁴⁰ Wezarat-e Farhang, *Sal-namaeh*.

The Land Reform changed the landlord-peasant relationship, but it was not able to change the traditional system to a modern one. To do so, the state had to deal with many social and economic issues such as extreme poverty and illiteracy. Thus, the plan focused on the deployment of a literate corps of young educated people to address the problem of illiteracy in rural areas.⁴¹

In 1943–51, the fundamental-education programme was launched in 731 villages. In 1962 the Sepah-e Danesh (Literacy Corps) was launched. By the beginning of May 1963 the first corpsmen, numbering 2,460, were being sent to provincial centres to teach in villages without schools.⁴² The corpsmen, in addition to teaching pupils between ages six and twelve years, were required to teach adults in the evenings or other suitable times. Despite all the efforts, in 1966, only 1,723,000 people over age 10 of the rural population of 10,253,000, were literate.⁴³

The plan was undermined when the rise of oil income moved Mohammad Reza Shah's plan more towards urban industrialisation and militarisation in the early 1970s. Mohammad Reza Shah's government invested more in urban areas and the young generation with the hope of raising a new educated urban modern middle class.

The increased availability of educational resources contributed to increasing literacy rates in general. In 1976 about 85% of urban residents between the ages of six and 30 were literate.⁴⁴ In addition 75% of all elementary-age children were enrolled in primary schools, and nearly 50% of all teenagers were attending secondary schools. In comparison with 1940, when Iran's adult literacy rate was 10%, this was a significant improvement.⁴⁵

Iranian census data indicate that the middle class doubled in size between 1956 and 1976, leaping from 6% to 13% of the total employed population (when merchants and businessmen were brought into the calculations, the middle classes in Iran comprised over 25% of the population, a large middle sector for any developing society.)⁴⁶ Therefore, for millions of Iranians, the shah's development programme generated tangible improvements in their quality of life and expectations of upward mobility for their children.⁴⁷

However, despite increasing high oil income and economic growth in comparison with other countries in the region such as Turkey, Iran was still suffering from a high illiteracy rate. Based on statistics in 1976, about 12,877,000 people over age 15 of the total population of 33,708,744, were literate. That means the illiteracy rate was

⁴¹ Yahya Armajani, *Iran. Englewood Cliffs*, New Jersey 1972, pp. 171–172.

⁴² Daneshgah-e Tarbiat-e Moallem, *Negahi be kesvarha 'i ke enqelab kardand*, Tehran 1980/1359, p. 13.

⁴³ Iran Data Portal, *Population*, Viewed 15 May 2020, <<https://irandataportal.syr.edu/population>>.

⁴⁴ Akbar Aghajanian, 'Population Change in Iran, 1966–86: A Stalled Demographic Transition?', *Population and Development Review* 17/4 (1991), p. 710.

⁴⁵ *Plan and Budget Organization of Iran. Employment rate*, Viewed 15 May 2020, <<https://mpb.mporg.ir/home>>.

⁴⁶ James A. Bill, 'Modernization and Reform From Above: The Case of Iran', *The Journal of Politics* 32/1 (1970), pp. 19–40.

⁴⁷ Suzanne Maloney, '1979: Iran and America', *Brookings*, Viewed 24 January 2019, <<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/1979-iran-and-america/>>.

still 63%.⁴⁸ In Turkey, with a 40.19 million population, about 61% of people over 15 were literate, while Iran had a much more stable economic growth rate than Turkey between 1966 and 1976.⁴⁹

It seems that the industrialisation and militarisation plan affected the modernisation of education as they were government priorities.⁵⁰ This affected the economic and social development of the rural areas. In the urban areas with a total population of 12,877,000, about 8,628,000 were literate in 1976. However, only 4,249,000 people over the age of 10 of the rural population of 11,575,000, were literate.⁵¹

The industrialisation policy of Mohammad Reza Shah also led to rural immigration to the cities. These migrants were a major segment of the urban lower class. They lived in the poor suburban areas. Poverty pushed them towards the clergy for financial and moral support. These migrants also faced incredible changes with urban life and thus began to turn to religion for a foundation of familiarity and identity. Ultimately during the revolution of 1978–1979 these large numbers of rural migrants played a significant role by joining anti-regime groups.⁵²

Mohammad Reza Shah and Shi'ite tradition

Mohammad Reza Shah claimed to believe in Shi'ite Islam and dreamt of a man with a halo – the twelfth Imam of Shi'ite Islam – who gave him inspiration and direction for the future of his country.⁵³ Thus, he hoped to show that he was not anti-religious. However, he was against Shi'ite clerics' interference in politics. The majority of Shi'ite clerics accepted this and avoided conflict with the shah.

The first one who opposed the shah's "White Revolution" and in particular "Land Reforms" was Ayatollah Burujirdi (1875–1961). From the beginning, he opposed this because clerics controlled a large amount of land through religious institutions such as *waqfs* (*waqf* a religious endowment). The rent income of these lands were used for the expenses of the the senior clerics, students, and religious institutions.⁵⁴ Mohammad Reza Shah suspended the Land Reforms until after the death of Ayatollah Burujirdi. However, in the absence of Ayatollah Burujird, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989) announced his opposition to the White Revolution in 1963. He argued that land reform was contrary to Islam, which guaranteed the sanctity of private property.

⁴⁸ Indexmundi. *Iran Literacy*, Viewed 24 January 2019, <<https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/iran/literacy-rate#SE.ADT.LITR.FE.ZS>>.

⁴⁹ The World Bank, *Turkey*, Viewed 15 May 2016, <<https://data.worldbank.org/country/turkey>>.

⁵⁰ Iran Data Portal. *Population*, Viewed 15 May 2020, <<https://irandataportal.syr.edu/population>>.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Ali Ansari, 'The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, 'Modernization' and the Consolidation of Power', *Middle Eastern Studies* 37/3 (2001), pp. 1–24.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Fatih Varol, 'The Politics of Ulama: Understanding the Influential Role of Ulama in Iran', *Milel ve Nihal* 13/2 (2016), p. 138.

Ayatollah Khomeini led the opposition to the White Revolution and women's emancipation, generally, to the modernisation programme perceived as political, cultural, and economic subordination to the West, mainly the United States. Ayatollah Khomeini was arrested during the emotional period of *Muharram* on 4 June 1963. This led to demonstrations on June 5 (15 *Khordad*) in Qom and Tehran and several other major cities.⁵⁵ Ayatollah Khomeini was imprisoned for his criticism and exiled to France in 1964.⁵⁶ Although he was in exile, he maintained his leadership in opposition among the *bazaar* and clerics to Mohammad Reza Shah until the Iranian revolution 1979. At this time the rural immigrants to the cities joined the revolution.

Although the reforms led to the rise of a modern middle class, the secular intellectuals - its representative were marginalised from politics. Gradually the secular intellectuals turned against the state in alliance with the Shi'ite clerics and leftists. The secular intellectuals lacked tolerance in pursuing long term cultural reforms. They considered political transition as the way for change and reforms. They were aware of the influence of Shi'ite clerics on society, but they needed Shi'ite clerics power for mass mobilisation. Therefore, in achieving their aims in the political transition, they compromised over democratic values when they collaborated with Shi'ite clerics.

Although the urban middle class enjoyed the economic conditions of the 1970s, many joined the revolutionary environment, which was growing into a perceived source of threat to supporters of the system. In 1979, the majority of Iranians voted for the establishment of an Islamic government under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Shi'ite tradition became the dominated culture and Shi'ite clerics dominated power.

Conclusion

The high level of illiteracy 63% demonstrates that after more than a century of efforts by the state to Westernise, cultural transformation had not happened. The modernisation plan failed as education as an element to transform a society's way of life and thinking did not reach many of Iranians. In particular the 76% female illiteracy rate kept the Shi'ite tradition as the dominated culture in the family. Consequently, the societal tendency towards religious and superstitious belief was intense.

Therefore, while modernisation changed the appearance of Iranian society, it was not transformative in changing the culture. In 1979 the majority of Iranians were still wedded to Shi'ite tradition, the dominant culture. As Eisler notes, real system change requires leaving behind traditions of domination. This was the reason that in 1979, the Shi'ite tradition was able to rebuild itself as the dominant culture.

⁵⁵ Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*, New York 2013, p. 243.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

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