

The Overall Structure of Iranian Society in the Late Qajar Period

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Abstract: To depict a clear picture of living and work environment, struggle of workers and condition of first labor unions, we should consider general characteristics of Iranian society in the late 19th century and draw the trend of its changes. "Natural geography of Iran is like a social mosaic, the lack of lakes and shippable rivers, extreme lack of rain in the central widened desert which bounded by four mountains of Zagros, Alborz, Makran and Highlands left the population in isolated villages, dispersed towns and nomad tribes." This natural variety of social structure has made Iran as varied and in changing state. As stated above, we tend to observe general conditions of Iranian society in this research in the late 19th century related to the intervention of foreigners and Qajar government, such contexts in which industries and consequently the new working class formed in Iran and furthermore investigate activities and efforts have been done in the term of labor unions to improve their situation.

Key words: Iranian society, qajar period, struggle, social, villages

INTRODUCTION

Investigating on cultural structure in late qajar period

Ethnic composition: Iran has various ethnic groups due to the certain circumstances which prevent the wide connection between its inhabitants, consequently has different cultures, rituals and religions. That's why this land experienced many ethnic conflicts and tribal struggles which deepened with religious provocations. Although, these attitudes happened in the context of society and appeared to have cultural nature but basically had economic-political roots. These struggles happened for "government positions" or to takeover of fertile lands, water of aqueduct or pastures and sometimes originated from collisions between the groups interests or simply, the cost and profit of one group stood against the other group's. The conflicts between the groups became the characteristic of Iranian society in late 19th century which sometimes lasted for decades. Especially, foreign countries such as England and Russia heavily fueled these conflicts for their good in this period of time. For instance, conflicts between Bakhtiari nomads to reach tribal chief position or Heidari-Nemati conflicts in cities and conflicts between sunni and shia'a. One thing is clear and that is the group of conflicts, increased group solidarity but weakened class consciousness and identity.

The context of Iranian society in Qajar era: If we want to distinguish between urban and rural communities depending on the type of occupation and living style, a

Table 1: Main features of merchants and guilds in Tehran in 1345 Ah (Hijri)/1924 AD

Variables	Occupations	Number of			Footboy
		employees	Master	Apprentice	
Merchants	14	822	734	876	134
Shopkeepers	89	9589	7498	6197	1538
Artisans	99	4988	5034	7128	2631
Overall	202	15399	13266	14201	4303

limited number of urban communities are recognizable. In addition to villagers and nomads, a part of the urban population also work in agriculture and animal husbandry and related activities. At the beginning of 20th century, nearly 90% of the active population of the country were dependent on the ground and the rest were active in the retail, public and private services. Anyway, those who were working in craft industry and trade contained urban manufacturing mode.

Urban manufacturing mode means those producing modes which are related to industries and market. In other words, the artisans, the shopkeepers and traders did not involve in ground works although, around most cities of Iran were infields that did not fit into nor rural economic nor urban economic despite the rural livelihoods nature. This type of land lording were for compensating the losses more than traditional and hand-made industries. Therefore, the urban economy solely refer to the market and its social forms of artisans, shopkeepers and traders (Table 1).

The working class: The late 19th century were the start of collapse in traditional and handicraft industries in Iran. Due to the entry of foreign goods on large scale along

with the political domination of foreign countries especially Russia and Great Britain, Iran turned into the producers of raw materials needed in global market, consequently, the number of traditional manufacturing centers decreased and certain agricultures products increased. This event made profound changes in Iranian society including many workers who left ruined due to the changes in production patterns and migrated to big cities. Urban crafters lose their jobs and to prevent life difficulties, migrate to other cities or even neighboring countries.

Quantitative and qualitative composition of workers: Late Qajar Iranian workers can be found in two categories. One group includes handicraft industry workers which were employed in traditional activities and the other one includes new machine industry workers or industrial workers which were active in new activities such as railways, road construction, fisheries, cutting trees and small or large workstations with production machines. Total urban labor force estimated to be approximately 126 thousand people which 17 thousand of these (13.5 %) were active in new industries and 109 thousands (86.5%) were active in traditional industries. The context of Iranian Society in Qajar Era.

Traditional industry workers: Principally, the factory and machine manufacturing is the distinguished aspect between the traditional worker and new worker. We call those workers who was active in the traditional, handicraft and foundry industry sector, "traditional worker". Some of these workers were working in the shops of artisans as apprentices or footboys and some were active in manufacturing workstations such as carpet weaving and textile. According to Abdullayev, 98,000 people were active in traditional industries and 11,000 people in other traditional activities. The majority of workers were carpet weaving workers which their major sites located in Arak, Hamedan, Tabriz, Kerman and Isfahan.

New industries workers: According to Abdollahyev (1981)'s statistics in the late Qajar period in Iran, 12,000 industrial Iranian workers and 5,000 Russian workers were active. These workers were working in factories or institutions which established at the end of the last century and the early 20th century by efforts of local traders and Iranian investors or factories and institutions related to Russian, English, Belgian and German investors. The new industries workers in 1910 included:

- Big Foreign factories workers including 7 thousand workers of oil company of Iran-England, 4 thousand workers of fisheries in north which owned by Lyanazev and 3 thousand workers active in cutting the trees facilities in north jungles
- Workers working at road construction and transportation contains 3 thousand workers in Tabriz-Jolfa Railway and 300 workers in road construction of North, 200 permanent workers in Iran railway
- Workers of small to medium machine industries which included 60 worksites and factories with 1700 workers of which 524 people were active in Iranian investors factories and 1152 people in four foreign-owned factories that mainly were Russian investors

Only 235 workers of new industries were active in Tehran in foundries that did not have >6 people capacity. For instance, the brewery and ammunition factories in Tehran had 10 workers each and just two factories of matches and paper manufacturing had 60 and 50 workers, respectively. The context of Iranian Society in Qajar Era.

In 1910, the labor force involved in new industries was only almost 6700 people of which 45% were railway workers, 37% oil workers and only 12% in the factories. The context of Iranian Society in Qajar Era (Naser, 2002).

It can be observed that in addition to limited number of Iranian workers, the number of factories which had more than 2000 people were only 56 cases. Carpet weaving workers which were 65 people included all of carpet weavers whether in work sites or at home. Therefore, this is not clear that how many weavers gathered in one site. Moreover, carpet weavers belong to traditional industries which were active for long in Iran.

Constitutional revolution and the working class: Jnet Afari stated about the roles of Iranian workers in the revolution that "Iranian migrant workers who worked in caucasus oil industry had revolutionary ideas in 1906. Many of these workers have returned to Iran and involved in Mojahedin associations.

Status of women and child labor: Generally, the working class created long before laboring rules established in Iran, even before formation of the new working class, i.e., from the past, worker was active in different shapes and has been always exploited, this exploitation was applied far more intense and more complex in capitalist system but this added to awakening of the working class to get back their lost rights (Abebi *et al.*, 2011).

Soltanzade about the conditions of workers especially in private institutions says: “exploitation and utilization in these workstations and institutions are really terrible. Almost, there is no rule about daily work, so every employer can behave whatever he like against the workers. Especially, small worksites owners rage. 11-12 h daily work is a common practice in these workstations. Exploitation at carpet weaving is terrible in which employers literally make women and children to sweat. In these workstations, daily hours are around 10-12 h and children work as much as adults and acceptance or dismiss of workers directly depend on foundry manager’s decision. It can be found from the manuscript of approved regulations by government about work rules in Kerman workstations that not only daily long work hours are common and primary health cares do not exist but also exploitation of children of age 6 and mandatory work were also usual, it means that workers were like slaves to their masters. This situation wasn’t happening only in Kerman but other carpet weaving sites such as Kashan, Khorasan, Fars, Azerbaijan, Arak and etc., had more or less the same work conditions.

Kerzen about the conditions of carpet weaving worksites in Kerman claims that: “the worksites are located in dirty and black holes where there is no light or air flow and workers contains of men and children working together”. He adds in some other notes that “workers forced to work underground to avoid the drieness of out so fibers softness would be maintained this way” (Wilhelm, 1992).

The situation for Iranian workers living in Caucasus was even worse. Ibrahimev depicted the deplorable conditions of workers life in Baku according to Mir Bashir Ghasemev who worked between 1890-1920 in different industrial institutions. “3-4 families, 40-50 workers were living altogether in a transient wooden house; there was poverty and contagious diseases were always widespread, food was scares, there was no bath, no right and they punished us with wood; there were no place to handle our complaint. Police were always stood by the employer. In the midst of all this oppression and torture and misery that Iranian workers endured, only one support were present for them: Russian proletariat and its political party which taught them how to combat.

Women and children usually worked in industries and some industries totally depended on their work. According to Nikki Keddie’s writings, women and children were used in different disciplines such as facilities, textile and knitting industry and other industrial field especially in carpet weaving worksites. “Carpet weaving workers usually chosen among women and children that usually took cheap wages and worked in unhealthy conditions”. According to Abdullayev, “the silk factory in Rasht had 150 workers which were all women. Additionally, textile industry and especially

Table 2: Based on one Tabrizian “man” [equal to 2.949 kg]

Bread	One Tabrizian “Man”	2 gheran
Lamb meat	"	"4
Cow oil	"	"14

carpet weaving had major force from women, and in North industries owned by Lyanazev 300 women were active”. The use of child labor was common especially in carpet weaving and textile worksites. For example, carpet weaving of Muhammadev in Tabriz had 500 child workers between ages 6-12 or most of the cotton mill workers of Qazvini in Tabriz included of children. Shawl waving worksites in Kerman also used boys between 7-14 years old especially because their little fingers are more suitable for weaving shawls.

If the average wage of Iranian workers counted on 2 “Gheran”, it should be noted that this amount was not enough even to buy the simplest things. The following table provides some essential food items prices in the early 20th century according to Abdullahyev. It can be observed that a 4-person household needs a daily wage of 2 gheran is not enough at all. Minimum daily needs of a 4-person household of the working class family included: 2 kg of bread, half a kilo of lamb meat, 100 g oil, half a kilo of rice, 200 g of sugar that altogether cost 3.5 gheran. We did not consider other expenses such as clothing, shoes, fuel, lightning and home rent. Moreover, other additional costs for the medical care, social and religious donations should have been considered (Table 2).

Kerzen had a trip in 1890 to Mashhad and about the workers wage and its comparison to essential foods items prices such as wheat and meat says: “daily wage of a carpenter is 3 gheran, blacksmith 1.5 gheran and a normal worker 1 gheran. While the price of bread per pound (453 g) were half-gheran and lamb meat 2 gheran.”

The sad picture depicted by Abdullayev and Kerzen about the amount of wages and living costs are in accordance with statistics which Flour presents. Flour represented the sample of a 4-person household living costs in Khuzistan around 1931 according to which wages cannot in anyway meet the total amount of living costs. He stated that the solution that workers found was to avoid marriage or if they already had family, leave them in the village or if the woman and children came to the city, they should work too.

The average wage of carpet weaving workers were 15 “shahi” for 10 h of daily work. According to Charls Isavai, the worker’s daily wage in Rasht was 8 to 10 shahi in 1873 which this wage increased to 1 gheran in 1893. He claims that this wage was almost the same for all of the areas in Iran.

With a look at quantitative and qualitative structure of workers in this period, we can find why labor unions was not successful in achieving their goals since in addition to their guild nature, it cannot organize with certainty more than 12 thousand people that should have the potential of organization. For example, one of the main sources of the working class were urban poor masses who constitute the vast majority of citizens. Isavi quoted from observations that in every corner of Iranian cities markets especially large trade centers were full of poor and jobless people who were ready to do anything for a piece of bread.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to investigate the contexts in which labor unions created, and answer this central question that whether the natural, objective and historical conditions were existent for emergence of labor unions in Iran. Iranian labor movement faced many problems on its way. Part of these problems originated from the movement and a big part of it included by the forces which their profit were against the interests of the working class. Weakness within the labor movement which mentioned in the study returns to the Iranian society conditions. Iranian society both economically and politically was still a traditional one. Every places that had progressed to some extent retained their links with the past. Most of the Iranian industries included traditional and small worksites, economically. The number of emerging institutes that were set up, had begun to decline due to the competing effect of foreign investments. Hence, they couldn't meet the huge flood of unemployed who have abandoned their homes and came to the cities. Therefore, many of them emigrated to Caucasian to work in oil industry. Although, they faced with difficulties but

they became as carriers of new idea to serve the working class. After a while, with the experience gained in the Soviet working class gradually returned to their hometown and Iranians became familiar with socialism practically.

Meanwhile, Iranian constitutional revolution and Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 determined them to rise up for defending the rights of the working class in Iran. So they formed the labor unions. Although, labor activities in Iran were influenced by the region conditions especially Caucasus but they could reach to parts of their goals, though limited. More importantly, it created the context for labor movement to be nurtured. In terms of economic, Iran was a country with an agricultural economy at the time. So, it was natural that the peasant and territorial issues were a priority in every combat. Although, social democratic extremists organizations which were active in Iran did not forget this point, but the fledgling labor movement in Iran in addition to improve the living conditions of workers in Iran, introduced their ideal as the most radical and forerunner for freedom and social justice.

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