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State, society and labour in Iran, 1906-1941 : a social history of Iranian industrialization and labour with reference to the textile industry
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Chapter Six: Conclusion

This study ends with the end of Reza Shah's reign in 1941, whose departure from the country to spend the last few years of his life in exile closed a crucial epoch in Iranian history. He had left behind a relatively stable political structure, a series of secular reforms and the consequences of a rapid industrialization process lasting more than a decade. Following the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909 during nearly the first four decades of the twentieth century, Iran hovered between foreign domination and internal repression. On the one hand, foreign powers mainly exerted economic influence on Iran, as on the neighbouring Ottoman Empire. Particularly from the mid-19th century onwards Iran was viewed by industrialized powers, especially Britain and Russia, as an open market for their ready-made products. Consequently from the 19th century onwards 'the foreigner' had been established in popular opinion as an 'enemy' against the interests of Iranians. On the other, popular opposition against internal repression became more pronounced with increased economic deterioration, and gradually became consolidated into political opposition which culminated in the Constitutional Revolution in 1905. The constitutional experiment which lasted until 1911 was especially effective in the creation of a political community in the country, but in economic terms its achievements were negligible. For the first time in Iran's history had the political arena become so multifaceted and multivocal, with local politics becoming far more important than before. However neither the insufficient infrastructure in the country nor the binding economic treaties which had been signed throughout the 19th century with European powers, mainly Britain and Russia, allowed for notable economic development. The international developments proved to be no less unfavourable.

Although labour organizations and collective labour actions were observed from the early 1900's onwards, generally speaking, workers' voices were lost in political debates. At the turn of the 20th century politics and economics were sufficiently intertwined to bring diverse, and at times conflicting, parties together. Thus, the great part of the early labour movement had agendas which were not necessarily directly labour-related. The experiences of such movements and organizations tell us a lot about the history of the period and they deserve close scrutiny. Nonetheless, many of the labouring people who chose to stay out of the early labour organizations or fell outside the predefined scope of such organizations were busy earning their bread and livelihood. For the most part these people remained peripheral to the

scholarship on early twentieth century Iranian history. Their experiences constituted one of the major concerns of this study.

From the late 19th century onwards the low customs-duties put by economic treaties on goods imported into Iran by European merchants and companies and the damages which these imports brought over the craft industries in the country have disillusioned many Iranian craftsmen, traders as well as other people from the political establishment. The chronic trade deficit and the declining craft industries have, thus, been a matter of debate from the nineteenth century onwards. Throughout the 1920's major steps were taken to establish security in the country and to minimize foreign economic domination. This way, the groundwork had been laid down for the economic leap-forward of the 1930's. Political and economic developments were discussed in chapters two and three, respectively, and I will not reproduce those accounts here. It should be noted, however, that the resolution of many previous problems gradually served to crystallize the differences of previously allied social groups, such as the clergy, merchants, tradesmen, and workers, etc., and contributed to a class-based representation of Iranian society. For instance, although some of the big merchants, craftsmen and workers had jointly struggled against foreign imports less than a decade earlier, the workers and craftsmen found themselves in a disadvantaged position in the context of the industrialization policies during the 1930's. Secondly, from the early 1920's onwards, workers had to negotiate with a strong central power with its increasing penetration into the provinces.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had also added to labour radicalism and to the formation of nationwide labour activism which was also facilitated by improved transportation and communications. While the main concern of many of the Communist Party of Iran and the leftist organizations was to struggle against the ever-increasing power of the state and its macroeconomic policies, the mass of workers tried to accommodate and cope with the new conditions.

With increased factory-based industrialization, the manufacturing scene in Iran, especially at the textile industry and hence of the workforce involved in it, changed as well. It appears that throughout the nearly four decades investigated in this study a great variety and number of manufacturing activities existed in Iran, both in urban settings and the countryside, and they fell outside the purview of guilds. In other words, for the period under investigation guilds ceased to be the major manufacturing units for the textile industry, and probably for many

others too. Nonetheless as Quataert observed for nineteenth and twentieth century Ottoman guilds, in Iran too it is not clear at all what these surviving guilds had become.¹ This point requires further investigation. Having been stripped throughout the 1910's and 1920's of their economic and political significance many of them retained their existence due to their social functions. We know that many of the former craftsmen have gradually and increasingly been integrated into the proletariat. The relationship between these guilds, factories and the rise of unregulated, extra-guild production in terms of the workforce involved in them can significantly contribute to our knowledge of the diversified nature of Iranian labour. Also, the relationship between the guilds and the newly emerging small-scale manufacturing needs to be studied. It appears that lack of any proper documentation of their activities renders a comprehensive study of the labour involved in artisanal industries nearly impossible. Nonetheless, any work devoted to the study of Iranian labour during this period must at least attempt to accommodate the experiences and struggles of labour involved in such diverse manufacturing activities.

By focusing on petitions this study dealt with industrialization and labour issues in Iran from 1906 to 1941. It offered a new dimension in reconceptualizing Iranian labour history. In the main, the study tried to trace the discursive formation of the Iranian working class and explained how workers came to identify themselves as such. For this it discussed how a genuine class identity emerged from a general subaltern discourse. The study also called into question the traditional distinction made between organized and non-organized labour and problematized the teleological role attributed to factory workers. The relationship between the working people and the ruling classes constituted another concern of this study. Nonetheless, I encountered two main problems while conducting my research. First of all, due to the disproportionate number of petitions from the first to the twelfth parliaments investigated in this study, it was not possible to reach an equally comprehensive discussion of each period. Thus, although we have comparatively fewer petitions from 1906 to 1925 the number of petitions for the years between 1925 and 1941, particularly during the 1930's, is substantially higher. This difference may have two main causes. First, we can assume that with the increased bureaucratization from the mid-1920's onwards, petitions were more effectively administered and preserved. Second, workers used petitioning especially "in the situation where workers' organizations were not yet formed or recognized" or "where other forms of

¹ Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8.

resistance were explicitly forbidden”.² Until the late 1920’s workers enjoyed such direct means of expressing and demonstrating their grievances as trade unions and collective action. Yet, with such organized activity having been explicitly forbidden, workers used petitions for this purpose. This does not mean that petitioning was absent in freer political settings. Quite the contrary, what Swarnalatha observed for colonial Andhra applies to the Iranian workers, too. That is to say, workers “resorted to other methods only in the event of the failure of petitioning to yield results”.³ However, during the 1930’s, petitioning served as the only viable means of expressing their demands and grievances, which significantly added to the number of petitions from this period.

The second problem in this study is the absence of a predefined geographical focus. This might have resulted in understating regional differences which were significant in Iran especially for the period under study. For example, while in some regions craft industries related to textiles suffered an almost steady decline from the nineteenth century onwards, in some others where European goods could not reach, or reached in comparatively insignificant amounts, craft industries remained intact for a longer period of time. Similar observations can be made for industrialization too. It would be wrong to assume that industrialization developed at the same speed and scale all over Iran. Regional studies can better illustrate such differences. For the lack of a geographical focus, too, I have two basic explanations. First, for the main concerns of this study I chose to focus more generally on petitioning practices of workers by referring to the textile labour which was among the largest sectors in the country and remained so throughout the period thus analysed. While doing so, I wanted to refer to crafts industries as well as to factories. An interregional approach served my purposes better, for while craft industries continued in some regions to be the dominant type of manufacturing, in some others large-scale industrial establishments became the principle production centres. Thus by referring to various regions throughout the work I discussed the experiences of textile workers who were employed at different manufacturing sites. Second, as the number of petitions for each period was disproportionate so was their geographical scope. For instance, while I was able during my archival research in Tehran to find many petitions from Isfahan, this was not the case for every city.

² Lex Heerma Van Voss, “Introduction”, *International Review of Social History* 46, Supplement 9 Petitions in Social History (2001): 1-10. Here P. 5.

³ Potukuchi Swarnalatha, “Revolt, Testimony, Petition: Artisanal Protests in Colonial Andhra”, *International Review of Social History* 46, 107-130. Here 113.

Throughout the period investigated in this study Iranian workers had to deal with distressing living and working conditions. From the start, I agreed with Barrington Moor's following remarks:

"For all students of human society sympathy with the victims of historical processes and skepticism about the victors' claims provide essential safeguards against being taken in by the dominant mythology. A scholar who tries to be objective needs these feelings as part of his working equipment."⁴

My purpose here is not to portray Iranian workers as victims which, I believe, would be just as unfounded as seeing them as a revolutionary force. Nonetheless, theirs was a life full of challenges as they were caught between a rock and a hard place. There was, on the one hand, the challenge posed by foreign imports which deprived many craftsmen of their livelihood. True, Iranian craft industries did not decline overnight in the face of increasing imports and developed various survival strategies which enabled them to gradually reclaim some of their lost territory. Yet, working conditions and workers' wages were among the first to be compromised. The more manufacturing moved to the less monitored areas, such as cottage and putting-out industries, the lesser workers were able to obtain favourable working conditions. The foreign import was not only dominant but also attractive and was preferred by many, who could afford it, to home manufactures. On the other, there was the increasing factorization, particularly during the 1930's, which paid little, if any, attention to labour issues. The Iranian working class was made amidst these conditions. Their petitions are proofs of a sophisticated engagement with the ruling classes as well as their superiors.

There is no doubt that there is a growing literature on Iranian labour history. The working people who constitute the majority of Iranian society, like any other society, have already been historical subjects. What we need to do is to challenge our previous opinions about the working people and to focus on diverse aspect of Iranian labour history. to this ends, and for others, petitions which provided the main source material of this study deserve further attention. Petition-writing was a familiar and effective practice for most Iranians who had diverse objectives. It was not unaffordable for most but it was not without risks either. People used petitioning when they needed it. By using petitions we can gain insight not only into the experiences and perceptions of Iranian workers but also of the public at large. Also, I think we need more monographs on workers who were employed in various industries from tanning to carpet-making, and from match-making to the services sector. Although there were some

⁴ Barrington Moor, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Middlesex: Penguin University Books, 1974), 523.

common characteristics shared by industries in general, there were at the same time sector-based developments which can only be revealed by focusing on various industries. Our apprehension of the past will remain incomplete without due attention paid in our historical inquiry to the experiences and perception of the working people. As far as labour history is concerned this apprehension needs, first and foremost, to overcome the erroneous tendencies which either equate labour history with that of the formal communist and socialist organizations or else label any class-based labour claims as foreign imports and harmful. This can only be achieved via a concerted effort and only through such an effort can we gain further insight into the understudied aspects of Iranian labour history.