



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Afacan, S.

Citation

Afacan, S. (2015, June 23). *State, society and labour in Iran, 1906-1941 : a social history of Iranian industrialization and labour with reference to the textile industry*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/33227>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/33227>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/33227> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Afacan, Serhan

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

Issue Date: 2015-06-23

Summary

This study deals with the social history of industrialization and labour in Iran from the inception of the constitutional system in 1906 until the end of Reza Shah's reign in 1941. In the main, I seek to discuss the Iranian industries before and after the large scale industrial leap-forward of 1930s in order to examine the conditions of the working people. The study consists of six chapters. In the introductory Chapter One I explain the main three concerns and the theoretical framework of the research. The first of these concerns is that I try to answer how Iranian workers came to see themselves primarily as workers since 'workerness' was one of the several identities and affiliations that people had. For doing this, workers' petitions are analysed in order to gain insight into their self-perception. This point is of utmost significance for an ample study of Iranian labour history since Iranian workers, as those in any part of the world for that matter, developed a peculiar working class identity through a gradual and complex process. By tracing the making of this process I call into question a purely objective and structural understanding of class formation in Iran. The second main concern which preoccupies me in this study is to go beyond the traditional concerns of labour history. For a long time, formal labour organizations and collective labour actions constituted the main areas of investigation in labour history writing. Although this started to change from 1960s due especially, if not exclusively, to E. P. Thompson's seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class* the Iranian labour history writing continued to be dominated by rather traditional themes. Thompson's work was particularly influential in convincingly drawing attention to examining not only factory workers by also artisans. In this study, I try to restore the agency of those workers too who were employed at craft industries. Besides, attention was also paid throughout the study to the diverse aspects of workers' lives other than their worksite experiences. My third concern is the establishment of a proper link between the workers' agenda and political processes. I needed to relate workers' experiences to the state, and vice versa, without necessarily suggesting a tug-of-war between the two. My engagement with Iranian workers' history showed me that the risk of a total decline of the state power was perceived by the majority of workers to be at least as precarious as the uncompromisingly repressive state authority. Throughout the period under investigation Iranian workers struggled, in one way or the other, to prevent any of these two possibilities from happening. Instead, they tried to draw the state to their side when they needed it and kept aloof from it otherwise. Yet, if the state was roughly from 1906 until early 1920s hardly able to pay much

attention to workers' plight, from early 1920s to the end of the period discussed in this study it proved ambitiously determined to extend its power in almost every imaginable way. This equation required workers to develop careful strategies and a balanced discourse to work the system 'to their minimum disadvantage', to use Eric Hobsbawm's phraseology.

In Chapter Two I present an historical background of the 19th century, insofar as it relates to the period investigated in this work. Here, mention is made of the reform movement which mainly started in the military sphere as a reaction of successive defeats at the hands of Russia, but then extended, in the following decades, to include the political, economic and social spheres as well. The economic and social aspects of the reforms are particularly emphasized here. It is argued in this chapter that the popular support for the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 was due to epidemic diseases, famines, unpopular economic policies of the Court as well as stifling foreign economic domination. A coalition of merchants, tradesmen, craftsmen, religious groups and intellectuals were responsible for the uncompromising movement against arbitrary Qajar rule. This was most clearly reflected in the Tobacco Protest of 1891. The significance of this protest for labouring people stemmed from the fact that the craft workers experienced or witnessed for the first time the possibility of affecting the Government's policies through resistance.

Chapter Three deals with an overview of the period which extends from the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 to the end of Reza Shah's reign in 1941. Here attention is especially paid to the emergence of a new political community in Iran, particularly among labouring people, in its shifting forms. In the First National Assembly opened for the first time in country's history in 1906, six classes (*tabaqat*), including guild members, were represented in the Parliament. Their parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities are discussed in this chapter. The class-based election system was abolished before the elections for the Second Parliament in 1909. This however did not mean the end of the participation of the labouring people in the making of the political community in Iran. To this end, mention is also made of petitioning a peculiar channel of state-society interaction in Iran from the Constitutional Revolution onwards, although petitioning as such had been a centuries-old established tradition in the country. Also, the failure of the constitutional experiment in 1911 and the emergence of authoritarian modernization within about a decade are analysed from a grassroots perspective. In the main, it is argued in this chapter that, disillusioned by the constitutional experiment's failure to provide employment, establish security and form a national economy with minimum foreign influence, Iranian subaltern groups, along with other

classes, had become receptive to a strong, though not necessarily despotic, state. The steady rise to power of Reza Khan from 1921 until his coronation as the Shah in 1925 partly met some of these expectations. However his uncompromising centralization policies claimed the previously more or less autonomous realms from which Iranian subalterns made their living with little state intervention. Combined with the mechanized factory-based economic policies from the mid-1925s on, Iranian subalterns increasingly felt uneasy with the new regime and enjoyed almost no betterment in their living and working conditions.

Chapter Four examines Iranian industrialization between 1906 and 1941. In this chapter I first analyse popular perceptions of economic development and reactions to foreign ready-made imports. These reactions do not only show how popular classes perceived economic development in Iran but also curiously illustrate the working of the state society interaction. Following this, Iranian industries until the industrial leap-forward of 1903s are discussed by emphasizing small-scale and artisanal industries. The tension between promoting the craft industries and introducing factory-based industrialization is referred to in the chapter. It then discusses the factory-based industrialization which started in the late 1920's and gained unprecedented speed during the 1930's. Along the way, however, attention is paid to how workers, as well as other classes, were involved in this process and how they perceived industrialization policies. Throughout the chapter, emphasis is put on the textile industry, while other industries are also mentioned when relevant. Chapter-5 deals with labour issues. It first discusses the discursive formation of the Iranian working class and how Iranian workers perceived themselves primarily as workers and how they gradually developed a language of their own. Following this, the nature of the Iranian labour was discussed. Here such issues as the total number of workers in Iran, male and female workers as well as the distribution of workers to those who were employed factories and those who worked at craft industries. This is followed by an examination of legislative attempt to regulate labour issues in Iran. In the rest of the chapter working hours, sanitary conditions and workers' attempts at improving their conditions were discussed. These attempts did not only include collective actions but also petitioning which workers used as a way of conveying their grievances and demands. Attention is paid, in this context, to workers' impact on and reactions to the labour policies adopted by the state. Throughout the chapter not only central politics, but also provincial politics are considered. Chapter 6 contains some concluding assessments and suggestions for further research.