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ARBĀB

ARBĀB, the plural of the Arabic noun *rabb* “owner, master, the Lord,” used in Persian to signify any sort of owner or master. In modern Persian (in addition to a purely honorific application to eminent Zoroastrians), it indicates a proprietor of rural land, and the adjective *arbābī* is applied to a rural estate, e.g., a village in the sense of “belonging to a large landed proprietor” (A. K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, London, 1953, p. 423). Within the traditional agrarian structure, the opposite of the *arbāb* was the *raʿīyat* (q.v., pl. *raʿāyā*), signifying both peasant and subject of a king or ruler. In modern terminology, the form of land tenure prevailing until recently is known as the *arbābī-raʿīyatī* system, the origins and development of which have been thoroughly investigated by Lambton (op. cit.).

The Iranian agrarian system can be traced to ancient times. Under the Achaemenids, large feudal estates worked by serfs and/or slaves were the main source of agricultural output. The Parthians favored large land holdings over small, and the latter tended increasingly to disappear; the peasants lost much of their freedom, while the great landowners strengthened their hold as the dominant aristocracy. This polarization increased during the Sasanian period, when most of the country’s land belonged to the state and was administered by the royal governors; the clergy also constituted a significant group of landowners. Many of the large proprietors lived on the land and personally directed the peasants, who were in effect their serfs. Despite these trends, there was an important class of small landowners, known as the *dehqān*s, between the higher aristocracy of great landowners and the

peasantry. Forming part of the lower aristocracy, the *dehqān*s were vested with hereditary rights to exercise local administrative functions and were regarded as village headmen. According to legend, the *dehqān* class was established by Vēḡard, a brother of the Pishdadian king Hōšang (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 440; Christensen, *Iran Sass*., pp. 112-13). Although the *dehqān*sseldom owned much land, they wielded great influence through their responsibility for the collection of local taxes, a function that they retained a long time after the Arab conquest. (With the spread of the *eqṭāʿ* system in the 5th/11th century, both the *dehqān*s and the large landowners lost much of their status and influence.)

After the Arab conquest, the Iranian agrarian system underwent various changes but retained its essential character. The new rulers imposed the *ḵarāǰ* (tribute) and instituted the *waqf* (inalienable endowment) early on. The practice of *eqṭāʿ* did not begin until the 3rd/9th century; this was originally a transfer of the state's fiscal claims on an area to an assignee (*moqṭaʿ*); in the course of time, however, assignees were often able to transform their rights into virtual ownership (*eqṭāʿ al-tamlīk*). Islam, with its egalitarian spirit, redistributive inheritance law, and support for central authority, did not work in favor of continued territorial aristocracies. Nonetheless, large landowners were strengthened and encouraged to strive for control of the state apparatus by other factors, including a heavy tax burden, which forced small cultivators to seek the protection of the richer and more powerful proprietors; specific geographical conditions in Iran, particularly the aridity, necessitated costly irrigation works and made it hard for small owner-cultivators to survive; and similar obstacles to the acquisition and use of new agricultural techniques.

The agrarian system in Iran gradually assumed three new characteristics that were to persist for centuries from the Saljuq period on: absenteeism of large proprietors, who preferred to live in the cities (in contrast with the lords and squires of Western Europe, who generally lived in the countryside in order to manage their estates); frequent change of proprietorship due to political upheavals; and overexploitation of the soil and the resulting impoverishment of the peasants, prompted in many cases by the landlord's own insecure tenure without full right of ownership.

Despite some improvements under the constitutional regime after 1324/1906, the age-old *arbābī-raʿīyatī* system survived into the 20th century with its main features intact, namely landlord absenteeism, management of production units by the steward (*mobāšer*) or tenant-in-chief (*mostaǰer*) of the large

landowner, the weakness of local officials in the face of large landowners who treated their villages like personal domains, archaic techniques, crop sharing between landowner and peasant on the traditional pattern of their respective contributions of the five factors of production (soil, water, animal traction, seed, and labor), and the poverty and dependence of the peasants. The abolition of compulsory services (*bīgārī*) is the most significant change introduced after 1906 (on the "personal servitudes" that had been customary since Qajar, Safavid, and perhaps earlier times, see Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*, chap. 18). Within the traditional system, the large absentee landowners exerted considerable influence on urban and central government affairs, while the peasants were not a significant political force at any level.

Available statistics for rural landownership before the reform of 1340 Š./1961 show the following distribution: large proprietors (*arbāb*), 56 percent; small proprietors (*ḵorda-mālekīm*), 10-12 percent; royal estates, 10-13 percent; public institutions, 3-4 percent; religious endowments (*awqāf*), 1-2 percent; lands occupied by tribes, 13 percent (see K. S. McLachlan, "Land Reform in Iran," *Camb. Hist. Iran* I, p. 687). The number of large landed proprietors in the early 1950s has been estimated at about 100,000 (this figure is probably exaggerated, since the total number of villages was then about 45,000; it may include owners of rental shares).

The *arbābī-raʿīyatī* system has often been compared to Western European feudalism (E. Abrahamian, "European Feudalisms and Middle Eastern Despotisms," *Science and Society* 39, 1975, pp. 129-56, with bibliography). Common to both were the landlords' patriarchal authority (as formulated by Max Weber), mutual obligations between landlord and peasant (although in Iran these were fixed by long-established custom rather than by contractual arrangements), and the grant of exploitation rights in exchange for payments in money, goods, and labor services. At the same time, there were significant differences in social, economic, and political organization, at the core of which is the nature of the central authority and its control over land holdings. In Iran, the land grant system and bureaucratic state absolutism interacted dialectically throughout history (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 101). Most often, bureaucratically organized governments were able to dominate a fragmented subject population and assign land revenues for their own political purposes; only when the central authority was weakened and dependent on the large landowners, who then controlled local tax revenues, did land holdings become comparable with the fiefs in Western Europe, where the feudal magnates

consistently enjoyed greater independence from a less effective central authority.

See also Amlāk; Dehqān; and Land Reform.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also E. J. Hoogland, *Land and Revolution in Iran*, 1960-1980, Austin, Texas, 1982.