



COTTON I. INTRODUCTION

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i. Introduction

Cotton (*panba* < Mid. Pers. *pambag*; *katān*; in Isfahan *kolūza*; genus *Gossypium*), particularly the short-staple species *Gossypium herbaceum*, is cultivated in almost all parts of Persia, and is of great economic importance both for home consumption and for export. It has, in fact, been a decisive factor in the economic modernization and industrialization of the country (see ii, below). A very detailed description of traditional methods of manufacturing cotton yarn from the plant fibers was given by H. E. Wulff (*Crafts*, pp. 179-82). His examples are ample proof of the refined techniques and wide range of professional skills connected with the cultivation and processing of the raw material.

That cotton was already known in Persia in the Sasanian period can be documented from carpets and other textiles (see [carpets vi](#)), but little substantial information is available on its cultivation before the Arab conquest in 30/650. One of the earliest surviving reports is included in *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam* (ca. 372/982), where different parts of the country in which the plant was cultivated are mentioned (ed. Minorsky, pp. 102, 105, 132, 143). Manufacturing centers, which were probably located close to where the plant was cultivated, included Herat, Nīšāpūr, Ray, Ṭabarestān, Āmol, Jebāl, Isfahan, Šūštar, Kūzestān, Ṭawwaz, and Azerbaijan (for references, see Spuler, *Iran*, p. 395; Serjeant, *passim*; Lombard, pp. 63-67). In the 13th century Marco Polo also



listed different regions where cotton was grown. The fiber was always of basic importance for production of household articles in nomadic, rural, and urban environments. Quantitative information is almost nonexistent, however, for early written reports are rare, and observations by later travelers are also rather brief. Nevertheless, the documented production of the famous *karbās* cottons from Isfahan, *darā'ī* blankets from Gīlān, and other local cotton specialties is ample proof of the widespread use of cotton in Persia. In both commercial and some tribal carpet weaving cotton has been preferred for warps and sometimes even wefts because of its firmness, relatively low cost, and natural light color (see [carpets](#) ii, xii, xiv)

Cottonseed oil has also been used in Persia as an emollient, as a fuel for lamps, and as animal feed (Schlimmer, p. 162). The roots of the plant have been used as a medicine. Beginning with the late Qajar period, more precise information on the uses of cotton is available. In 1319/1901 and 1327/1909 respectively the first two modern textile factories in Persia were established in Tehran and Tabrīz, although it is not known if they were cotton-processing units. At the turn of the century cotton growing and cotton trade were already major business. According to H. W. MacLean, cotton was a leading export from Qajar Persia, valued at 400,000-450,000 pounds sterling, second only to dried fruits. On the other hand, cotton yarn and textiles were by far the most important import items, valued at 1.8-2.3 million pounds sterling. According to Julian Bharier (pp. 132ff.), annual production of cotton reached approximately 20,000 tons between 1304 Š./1925 and 1314 Š./1935. Under Reżā Shah the expansion of cotton cultivation, especially in the eastern parts of Māzandarān and in the Gorgān/Gonbad-e Qābūs area, became one of the main bases of industrialization. Increases of national cotton production (average production per year in 1314-18 Š./1935-39: 38,000 tons; Bharier) resulting from decisive expansion of the cotton-growing area in different parts of Persia (1315-16 Š./1936-37: 147,838 ha, compared to 96,397 ha in 1313-14 Š./1934-35; 1972) led to the establishment of a number of cotton-ginning and cotton-spinning mills. Two big new cotton mills were constructed near the predominant cotton producing area, at Behšahr (32,000 spindles, 1,000 mechanical looms) and at Šāhī (25,000 spindles, 350 mechanical looms). Other, smaller units were also built, especially in the Tehran area and in Isfahan. Owing to these investments, Persia was able to produce approximately 50 percent of its annual consumption of 120-130 million m of cotton fabrics from national cotton harvest; on the other hand, it produced a surplus of raw cotton for export.



War and political changes caused stagnation in Persia between 1319 Š./1940 and 1339 Š./1950. In connection with the first national-development plan (1328-35 Š./1949-56) cotton production again became one of the major focuses of the economic planners; the area of cultivation was increased by 40,000 ha in Māzandarān and the same amount in Gorgān, a comparable amount in Kūzestān, and approximately 10,000 ha in Fārs, as well as by smaller amounts in other parts of the country. As a result production also increased, with further effects on industrial development and export trade. By 1331-32 Š./1952-53 there were thirty-five government-owned and twenty private cotton gins, by 1339 Š./1960 a total of eighty-two. Also the construction of a large cotton mill (32,000 spindles, 1,200 automatic looms, more than 4,000 employees) in Tehran in the early 1950s, at that time one of the largest industrial enterprises in Persia, reflected the postwar production boom, as did modernization of the Šāhī plant and construction of a second cotton factory there (30,720 spindles, 1,020 looms). Around 1344 Š./1965 there were three big centers of cotton processing in Persia: Isfahan (17,010 employees), Tehran (11,123 employees), and Māzandarān (especially Behšahr and Šāhī: total of 6,800 employees).

Today cotton production and cotton manufacturing are still of major rural and industrial importance. Cotton is grown on approximately 200,000 ha in Persia (1357 Š./1978: 280,000 ha; 1361 Š./1982: 205,000 ha), and the annual yield varies between 427,000 tons (1357 Š./1978) and 302,000 tons (1361 Š./1982). Rainfall, temperature, and plant disease are the major variables affecting the crop. Although cotton was a major export article before the revolution of 1357 Š./1979, today it is grown mainly for domestic use. Beside industrial processing, it remains important in rural and nomad households, especially for carpet manufacture and for the production of blankets, bags, saddles, and other household goods.

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