



EDUCATION XX. ADULT EDUCATION

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The first adult-literacy classes in Persia were organized by constitutionalists at primary schools in Tehran and provincial towns in 1327/1909, but those efforts did not outlast the chaos of the period following the Constitutional Revolution (q.v. v; Hekmat, p. 376). The first national campaign for adult literacy was initiated in 1936 by 'Alī-Akbar Dāvar (q.v.), at that time minister of finance and one of the main architects of modernization under Reżā Shah (1924-41). Dāvar suggested the campaign to 'Alī-Aşğar Hekmat, minister of education, and promised to seek the shah's endorsement and to allocate the necessary funds. On 6 June the cabinet approved an adult-literacy program, with a budget of 1.5 million rials; operations began in the academic year 1936-37 (Hekmat, pp. 377-83).

The Ministry of Education (Wezārat-e ma'āref) established adult-literacy classes in state schools considered suitable. They were to last two years and to consist of ninety-six two-hour classes each year, free of charge. Reading and writing Persian, arithmetic, and elementary history, geography, and civics were to be taught. The ministry printing office issued two textbooks for these classes and distributed them free of charge among the participants. Students



who completed the course were to receive a certificate equivalent to that of the third year of conventional primary schools. Councils for adult education (*anjomanhā-ye akāber*), composed of local notables, government officials, and others were established to mobilize the public to attend the classes (Ḥekmat, pp. 378-81; Dānešgāh, p. 10).

In addition, efforts were made to increase the general knowledge of adult students. In 1938 it was decreed that all second- and third-year university students had to participate in adult-literacy classes, with the objective of generating discussion with the adult students (Šaftī, p. 2). In order to encourage and even to force illiterates to take part in adult classes, two measures were adopted. First, illiterate employees of the government and public institutions were obliged to take them, and the heads of guilds (*ašnāf*, q.v.) were required to ensure the participation of illiterate employees of guild members. Second, the council of ministers decreed that those holding adult-education certificates would receive preferential treatment in salaries, fringe benefits, and promotion (Dānešgāh, p. 10).

According to available statistics, between 1936 and 1940 more than 467,000 adults learned to read and write in these literacy classes (Šaftī, p. 27). Most were urban craftsmen and other members of traditional occupations, state-factory workers, low-ranking government employees, policemen, and construction workers. Owing to many obstacles, the number of adult classes in rural areas and among women, who constituted the majority of the illiterate population, was far smaller than in the towns and among men. Although the annual enrollment in adult-literacy classes (said to have been about 96,000) seems large compared to the number of children in primary schools, the statistics furnished by the Ministry of Education are not always very reliable, usually reflecting the number who registered for the classes, rather than completed them. The adult-literacy certificates did lead to improvement in salaries of government employees, and guild heads made difficulties for those who did not attend literacy classes. In some provincial towns the police forced the closing of shops so that employees could attend evening classes. Nevertheless, over the school year attendance usually fell considerably. In 1939, the peak year of the adult-literacy campaign under Reżā Shah, only 17,000 certificates were issued (Dānešgāh, p. 11).

After the Allied occupation of Persia in September 1941 compulsory education and the expansion of public education were halted (Qāsemī and Nūrī, p. 6). In 1943 adult education was revived under the rubric *āmūzeš-e sālmandān*. The



first change in the fundamental philosophy was to replace compulsion with encouragement. According to a ministerial circular to the provinces, “The experience of the past six years has shown that illiterate individuals can be attracted more easily to evening adult classes through encouragement and urging than through compulsion and against their will.” The ‘*olama*’ (religious authorities), preachers, intellectuals, and modernists alike were asked to use the means at their disposal, including the pulpit, koranic verses, and Hadith, to encourage people to take adult-literacy classes. Government employees were also urged to encourage illiterate colleagues to participate. The provincial offices of the ministry were to report the number of those who effectively and regularly attended classes, not those who enrolled (Dānešgāh, p. 13).

The Near East Foundation, an American philanthropic organization that had concentrated its activities in the region of Varāmīn since 1946, began to organize rural adult-education classes designed to fit the real needs of the population. The curriculum was thus not limited to reading and writing but also included modern hygiene, housekeeping, agricultural methods, handicrafts, and other skills. In twenty years the Foundation sponsored 150 adult classes in rural areas and trained many men and women to teach them. Owing to its localization in the Varāmīn

region and the big budget required for expansion to other parts of Persia, the Foundation was unable to carry its program farther, but it served as a model for national programs (Fuller; Dānešgāh, p. 13).

In 1941-46 the concept of “fundamental education” for villages, focused on literacy training and simultaneously on improvement in health, agriculture, home welfare, and group cooperation, was gaining currency around the world (Hendershot, pp. 96-97). It was promoted by the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which launched pilot programs in Mexico, Egypt, India, and the Philippines. The Persian government decided to emulate this program in rural areas, in order both to increase literacy among the population and to propagate new methods in agriculture and animal husbandry. In 1943-51 the fundamental-education program, rather similar to that of the Near East Foundation, was launched in 731 villages, with the participation of 114 advisers, 309 instructors to train teachers, and 2,880 male and female teachers, who reached more than 30,000 villagers. In 1951 the program was shifted to the rural-development agency (Bongāh-e ‘omrān) of the Ministry of the Interior (Wezārat-e kešvar; Dānešgāh, p. 13).



More systematic efforts to promote adult literacy and fundamental education in Persia began in 1953 when an agreement was signed between the U.S. Operations Mission and the Persian Ministry of Education (Wezārat-e farhang) for cooperation in developing a program to improve village life, “using education as the means with emphasis on adult literacy training.” In accordance with this agreement the ministry established the Department of Adult Education (Edāra-ye āmūzeš-e sālmandān) to administer the program (Hendershot, p. 97). In November 107 teachers who had received eleven weeks of special instruction began providing on-the-job training to village teachers in forty-four subprovinces (*šahrestāns*). Special teaching materials were also prepared (Hendershot, pp. 99-100). According to figures from the Ministry of Education (Wezārat-e farhang), in January 1957 there were 1,010 adult classes in the capital and 7,886 in the provinces, with enrollments of 30,000 and 50,000 respectively (Šaftī, p. 6). These numbers were small, considering the rapidly growing adult population.

In 1957 the new Department of Fundamental Education (Edāra-ye āmūzeš-e asāsī) was established, and in March 1958 joined with the Department of Adult Education in planning a coordinated five-year program, with assistance from the ministries of labor, agriculture, and defense. A textbook, *Hama bāham bāswād šavīm*, was written for use in adult classes. The government provided 24.5 million rials for the first year of the program (Hendershot, p. 102). By 1961, when the two departments were merged, there were “200 pilot centers which served in addition 475 surrounding villages located in 123 *shahrestans*, which included virtually the entire coun-

try. The staff consisted of a small headquarters group, 14 *ostān* supervisors, 275 men and women village teachers.” In the same year about 22,100 villagers were attending literacy classes in 827 schools under this program (Hendershot, p. 103).

In 1962 the Sepāh-e dāneš (Literacy Corps) was launched. By the beginning of May 1963 the first corpsmen, numbering 2,460, were being sent to provincial centers to teach in villages without schools. The corpsmen, in addition to teaching pupils between ages six and twelve years, were required to teach adults in the evenings or other suitable times (Šaftī, p. 9). In the academic year 1966-67 about 65,880 illiterate adult villagers attended Literacy Corps classes (Sāzmān-e barnāma, 1992, p. 31). A literacy corps for women was decreed by the council of ministers in 1967; the first corpswomen were sent to rural areas in 1969.



Meanwhile, in 1964 the National Committee for the International Campaign Against Illiteracy (Komīta-ye mellī-e paykār jahānī bā bīsawādī) was founded as a consequence of efforts by the United Nations. The initial experimental program consisted of two successive classes lasting six months each, though they could be extended or condensed in response to weather conditions or other vocational constraints (Komīta, 1346 Š./1967, p. 19). The program was launched in the region of Qazvīn and spread to rural areas around the country in 1967. The aim was to increase the number of literate adults by 4.5 million under the fourth development plan (1968-72), but, according to official figures, in 1970 no more than 1 million adults had taken the classes; only about 450,000 had completed the advanced class (Qāsemī and Nūrī, p. 78).

In addition to this program, the World Congress of Ministers of Education held in Tehran in 1965 called for promoting adult vocational education, an idea that had been discussed for some time in international circles. Eradication of illiteracy was viewed not as a goal in itself but as a means to further other goals, like eradication of the fundamental causes of national underdevelopment (Īzadī, p. 5). An experimental adult vocational-education program was introduced in Isfahan and Dezful in 1967; adults were to attend literacy classes geared to their work. In 1972 the program was extended to the whole of Persia. These classes, too, were subject to dramatic drops in attendance over the duration of the program, however. One problem was that the link between the student's work and the curriculum was not always clear and direct (Īzadī, p. 51).

In 1976 the National Crusade Against Illiteracy (Jehād-e mellī bā bīsawādī), apparently an amalgam of the successful features of previous programs, was launched. The aim was to eradicate illiteracy by 1988 (Komīta-ye mellī, 1976, p. 2). The planners of this program believed that previous efforts had been imposed on society from without, whereas the new program was to be based on societal needs for literacy and education. For this reason, part of the new curriculum was devoted to fundamental principles and creating awareness of the social value of literacy, in an effort to mobilize the population and to establish a decentralized system for literacy training. In the three years 1976-78 approximately 725,000, 968,000, and 531,900 adults were enrolled respectively (Homāyūnpūr, p. 17).

After the revolution of 1979 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Āyat-Allāh Rūh-Allāh Komeynī) called for an effective literacy campaign, free of bureaucratic complexity, that would soon enable every Persian to read and write. A new



organization, Sāzmān-e nahẓat-e sawād-āmūz, was established to deal with this issue (Jamšīdīhā ,p. 39). The subsequent literacy campaign can be divided into three phases: from January 1980 to the adoption of rules by the Revolutionary Council (Šūrā-ye enqelāb) in 1981, from 1981 to the adoption of a new law by the Majles in 1984, and since 1984.

During the first phase there was no concrete organization, no program, and no sufficient budget or effective human resources. As a result, of 784,027 men and women enrolled during this period only 53,172 were able to complete the courses and receive the certificate. Prerevolutionary textbooks, slightly amended, were used. In the second phase a new organization was formed (Komīta, n.d., p. 7). Under the new regulations general literacy in Persia was to rise to 90 percent by 1983. In this phase progress was made, including progress in organization, teaching methods, and availability of human resources. Textbooks were adapted to the spirit of the Islamic revolution. Nevertheless, in 1982-83, of some 2,004,000 adults enrolled in the first class, only 310,800 were able to complete the course and receive certificates (Jamšīdīhā, p. 65). In the third phase the campaign against illiteracy was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Under the new law men and women above the age of ten years were required to learn reading and writing, basic arithmetic, and the elements of Islamic culture. No deadline for eradicating illiteracy is specified in the law (Jamšīdīhā, p. 67).

Under present regulations there are three stages in the instruction of adults, lasting a total of two and a half to three years: the five-month preparatory stage, equivalent to the first two years of elementary school; the middle stage, subdivided into three and six months, for improving reading (particularly the Qur'ān), writing, and arithmetic skills and increasing knowledge, particularly of ideology; and the final stage, consisting of three or four hours daily for nine months. The textbook for the last stage is the same one used in the standard fifth grade. Anti-illiteracy campaigns have also been launched in factories, the armed forces, mosques, regular schools, and prisons (Jamšīdīhā, p. 76).

From available statistics (Table 1) it seems that the proportion of literate adults has greatly increased and is now more than half the population. As illiterate women far outnumber the literate (Table 2) and as more men participate in adult classes, the literacy gap between men and women continues to grow, however.

According to estimates of population growth between 1936 and 1946 and



censuses in the period 1956-91, the population of Persia increased from about 12 million to 55.6 million, a rate of 2.8 percent per annum (Table 1). About two-thirds of the population was above the age of ten years; owing to a slight increase in life expectancy, this segment grew at an annual rate of 2.9 percent. In the same period the total literate population above the age of ten years rose from 5 percent to more than 70 percent. The role of adult education in this improvement was not insignificant.

The anti-illiteracy campaign since the revolution has reached hundreds of thousands of adults. In a crash program in 1990 more than 2.3 million adults were educated in literacy classes. Nevertheless, illiteracy is far from having been eradicated.

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