



EDUCATION XXIV. EDUCATION IN POSTREVOLUTIONARY PERSIA, 1979-95

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The history of education in the Islamic Republic falls into two phases: from the revolution to the cease-fire between Persia and Iraq in 1367 Š./1988 (the revolutionary period), when Islamic ideology predominated, and the subsequent period of reconstruction and privatization.

The revolutionary period.

The leaders of the revolution called it a “cultural and ideological revolution,” “a revolution in values,” aimed at replacing secular and Western aspects of Persian life with a new and independent religious and political order. Education was viewed as a major tool in reaching this ideal. In the first phase the administrators of the educational system were thus charged with creating a “new Muslim person,” imbued with Islamic and revolutionary values.

Educational ideology. The close link between education and ideology is clearly stated in the principles of educational reform set forth in *Ṭarḥ-e kollīyāt-e neẓām-e āmūzeš o parvareš-e Jomhūrī-e eslāmī-e Īrān* (hereafter the



educational plan): The educational system should be based on Islamic teachings, as well as on rejection of any form of atheism and polytheism, and it should be geared to the restoration of Islamic culture and civilization in the face of the inroads of colonial and Western culture (Wezārat-e āmūzeš, 1367 Š./1988). In fact, the four ideological pillars of the Islamic Republic, inseparability of religion and politics, Islamic revival, cultural revolution, and creation of the new Islamic person, had a direct impact on Persian education in the early revolutionary period.

The close link between education and ideology is further apparent from the goals set for educating the young, most of them openly political: acceptance of God's absolute authority manifest through "government of the jurisconsult" (*welāyat-e faqīh*); support for the political, economic, and cultural unity of all Islamic nations and for oppressed peoples; rejection of every form of oppression, suffering, and domination; and strengthening of the country through military training in the values of independence and territorial integrity, as well as through physical training (Wezārat-e āmūzeš, 1362 Š./1983).

The first fundamental educational reform introduced by the revolutionary government was transformation of the curriculum, through revision of textbooks, especially those in social studies, humanities, and religion, a task that was completed within two years. The aim was to "demonarchize" the curriculum and to replace "colonial and tyrannical" topics with Islamic and revolutionary subjects (Sāzmān-e taḥqīqāt, 1359 Š./1980, p. 8). Schools were to inculcate values and beliefs appropriate to the Islamic regime. In the new textbooks Persian society is said to be divided between self-sacrificing and moral Muslims and inhuman, oppressive Westerners, the former led by martyrs and revolutionary leaders, the latter influential among corrupt "westoxicated" intellectuals (Mehran, 1989). Whether or not it is possible for schools to socialize children as fervent supporters of the government, especially if conflicting messages are received through the family and life experience, remains to be determined.

Quantitative growth. Government efforts to provide basic education for the greatest number of school-age children were rooted in two principles: training a new generation of pious, ideologically committed Muslims (*Mosalmān-e mota'ahhed-e maktabī*) and commitment to the cause of the disinherited and the downtrodden (*mostaẓ'afān*). As a result educational opportunities were expanded, especially in rural areas, and total enrollment increased from 7.5



million in 1976 to more than 17.5 million in 1993. The percentage of the appropriate age group enrolled in primary education rose from 95 percent in 1976 to 106 percent in 1991 (inflated figure also includes pupils from upper age group), in secondary schools from 31 to 41 percent, and in higher education from 3.8 percent to 4.8 percent in the same period (see vi, above).

Gender policy. There are fewer women than men at all levels of education in Persia, except in special literacy courses, where women outnumber men. Among the literate population men average more education than women. Although expanding female education was not stated as an explicit objective in the Islamic Republic, the disparity between the two genders in educational achievement, low female literacy in rural areas, and persistent local customs that prevent girls from entering or finishing school prompted the authorities to focus on this problem. In fact, women's education is the target of key policies in the educational plan. In postrevolutionary Persia school curricula were geared to furthering the Islamic identity of women and their expected roles in the family and society. Consequently gender segregation after the age of seven years was strictly enforced. At the same time, however, more equal access to education for women in all walks of life and improvement of literacy among rural, nomadic, and married women were promoted. Furthermore, women were encouraged, at least in principle, to participate in educational planning, policy making, and administration at all levels (Wezārat-e āmūzeš, 1367 Š./1988).

As a result, the enrollment of girls in elementary schools rose from 38 percent of total enrollment in 1976 to almost 50 percent in 1992 and in secondary schools from 35 to 42 percent; in universities, however, it remained stagnant at about 28 percent. The increase of female enrollment in elementary and secondary schools led to an increase in the literacy rate of females six years old and older, from 36 percent in 1976 to 52 percent in 1986; in urban areas it rose from 56 to 65 percent, in rural areas from 17 to 36 percent. Nevertheless, despite apparent progress, the absolute number of illiterate women increased from 8.4 million to 8.9 million in the same period, and the number of women who had attended university decreased from 4.2 to 3.1 percent (Kazemipour, pp. 27-28, 31; see xxvi, below).

Another type of gender difference occurred in the choice of specialization at the secondary level. More girls than boys chose the humanities, whereas boys outnumbered girls in mathematics and physics. Girls surpassed boys, however, in enrollment in the other experimental sciences, prerequisite for



medical school.

Although since 1993 women have been allowed to choose any university major, the prevailing emphasis throughout the socialization process on their “appropriate” roles in the family and society has led most of them to “female occupations.” The fact that some women have nevertheless chosen such male-dominated specializations as engineering and medicine represents a partial failure of official socialization patterns and the will and persistence of the women themselves.

The period 1988-95.

Whereas ideological commitment was the key concept in the immediate postrevolutionary period, training of skilled manpower, improvement in the quality of education, and privatization have been government priorities since the end of the war with Iraq. In fact, there has been a clear shift from exclusive emphasis on commitment to emphasis on expertise and technical knowledge, because the educational system was neither training the skilled labor force required by the economy nor adequately preparing students for entrance to university. These considerations, coupled with large numbers of students required to repeat grades in secondary school, prompted the educational authorities to undertake serious reforms.

The reformed educational system. The authorities blamed the shortcomings of the existing system on excessive centralization and too little attention to regional or local needs; inflexibility with regard to the differing needs and interests of students, especially the sharp separation of academic and technical-vocational programs; concentration on preparation for higher education, at the expense of immediate entry into the work force; emphasis on memorization and rote learning, rather than analytical thinking; and high percentages of students repeating grades, causing waste of resources. The reforms were said to be aimed at “providing enough flexibility to lead students to pursue more useful jobs and enter higher education, while choosing their academic branches according to the needs of the country, their own interests and aptitudes, and local opportunities, and increasing the quantity and promoting the quality and status of technical and vocational education” (Wezārat-e āmūzeš, 1372 Š./1993a, p. 62).

The reforms in secondary education (*nezām-e jadīd*) were introduced in some schools during the academic year 1992-93; 10 percent of first-year students



were registered in schools operating under them. This percentage was to increase each year until the entire secondary-school population was included. Under the reforms secondary education lasts three years, and students are graduated upon accumulation of ninety-six credits. There are two types of courses: general and core courses or skill modules. Half the credits are earned in general courses, offered mainly in the first and second years; they include subjects that “promote the scientific, social, economic, cultural, and political insight of students.” Core courses prepare students for either continued education or immediate careers; in skill modules students are trained in skills that are particularly in demand in the country. Middle-school graduates can take these courses and receive a diploma with forty-eight credits. The major differences introduced by the reforms are reduction in secondary schooling from four to three years and introduction of the credit system to eliminate repeating grades.

Once having received the secondary-school diploma, students who wish to enter a university take an additional one-year course geared to the highly competitive university entrance examination. Those with technical-vocational diplomas can also choose further technical and managerial training offered through two-year “associate programs,” without taking the one-year university-preparation course. Although the Ministry of education (Wezārat-e āmuzeš o parvareš) is ultimately responsible for administering the university-preparation program, the curriculum is based on the requirements of the universities. It is developed through the joint efforts of the ministries of education, culture and higher education, and health and medical education. According to the most recent statistics available, during the academic year 1993-94 a total of 363,048 students (197,977 boys, 165,071 girls) were studying in reformed secondary schools, 47,961 of them in Tehran (Wezārat-e āmuzeš, 1373 Š./1994).

Continuing problems in secondary education. Despite analysis of problems and thoughtful recommendations for solution, the reformed system still suffers from lack of coordination; inadequate preparation of teachers, counselors, and principals; and parents’ unawareness of the benefits of the reforms. Preliminary evaluation, mostly in the provinces, suggests, however, that the new schools are popular among students, who believe that studying in them will enhance their chances of acceptance in the university-preparation program.

Privatization of education. A more controversial change in the educational



system has been the establishment of “nonprofit” private schools (*madāres-e ḡāyr-e entefā’ī*). The proliferation of these schools, which in fact charge high tuition, came as a surprise in a country claiming support for the disinherited and dispossessed. Despite an increase in public educational expenditure from 3.89 percent of gross national product to 5.75 percent in 1993, rapid increases in the school-age population and growing demand for education led to legislation permitting private individuals and nongovernmental organizations to invest in education at all levels, provided that they offer the same curricula as in public schools (Wezārat-e āmūzeš, 1372 Š./1993a).

This move has provoked heated debate among educators and policy makers alike. Nonprofit schools, characterized by high tuition fees, low student-teacher ratios, more advanced equipment, highly qualified and more experienced teachers, and better libraries and laboratories are being questioned as elitist, closed to the children of the poor. Nevertheless, the number of such schools is increasing rapidly. In the academic year 1993-94 there were 966 private primary, 829 middle, and 430 secondary schools in Persia. In the same year private primary schools enrolled 102,000 pupils (1 percent of total enrollment), middle schools 87,000 (slightly less than 2 percent), and secondary schools 44,000 students (2.3 percent; Wezārat-e āmūzeš, 1373 Š./1994).

Although attention to the quality of education is characteristic of the reconstruction period, the shortage of skilled workers and absence of technical expertise in the economy as a whole are continuing problems. Furthermore, there are still disparities in access to education in urban and rural areas and among various provinces and minority groups. Lack of educational facilities and shortage of teachers may be partly responsible for low literacy rates in rural areas. The highly centralized educational system in Persia is not geared, for example, to the special requirements of agricultural areas, where children work in the fields during the harvest season. Enrollment at all levels is thus much higher in urban than in rural areas.

There are also significant differences in literacy between those for whom Persian is the mother tongue and linguistic minorities. Persian is the sole language of instruction, which hinders efforts to raise literacy among the non-Persian-speaking population to the level of native Persian speakers. Government resistance to bilingual education, coupled with inadequate training of teachers of Persian as a foreign language, have contributed to high levels of illiteracy especially among Azeri Turkish- and Kurdish-speaking



populations. Although the total literacy rate rose from 61.8 percent in 1986 to 74.1 percent in 1991 (Wezārat-e āmūzeš, 1372 Š./1993b), the rates in East and West Azarbaijan in the latter year were 69.1 and 61.6 percent respectively and among Kurds as low as 58.9 percent. The difference between the literacy rate in the capital, 85.1 percent, and that in the poorest province, Sīstān and Baluchistan (q.v.), 50.3 percent, underscores the problem of ensuring equal access to education throughout Persia.

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