



GILĀN XIX. LANDHOLDING AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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Prior to the Land Reform of 1962 that began the process of land redistribution, the dominant production system in Gilān, as in the majority of Persian provinces, was of a feudal nature. The often absentee landowner (*arbāb*), large or small, owned most of the arable land that was in turn cultivated by the peasantry (Gil. *ra'yat*, Pers. *ra'iyat*) bound by contract and enforced through a system of bailiffs (*mobāšers*).

However, the situation of the peasants in Gilān was less difficult than that of others in the rest of the interior of Persia. The contracts were less onerous, and they could profit from advantages seldom conceded in other areas of the country: "The worker," wrote Rabino (p. 25) at the beginning of the 20th century, "pays no rent for his cottage. His cows and sheep graze freely on any land that is not under cultivation. He cuts wood in the non-cultivated area of his owner's land, and sells it for his own profit. He burns charcoal without anyone preventing him. He grows vegetables around his house and sells them or uses them as he sees fit, and disposes at will the fruit that grows in abundance and the poultry that he raises." This relatively privileged position of the peasant in Gilān (especially in the plain) is the outcome of a twofold



process. First, the amount of work invested in rice-growing (the staple activity of the region) is much greater than that required, for example, in cultivating wheat or barley, so it is not surprising that the exploitation system was more favorable to the peasants in this rice-growing fringe of Persia. Second, the Gilāni landowners could not justify substantial levies on the production because of what might be called their functional weakness (Kazemi and Abrahamian, pp. 289-90): their role in the organization of production was minimal, as they were not required to finance major irrigation projects in this area of abundant rivers, as was the case in central Persia for the construction of *qanāts* (see [KĀRIZ](#)), nor did they provide protection against attack by, for example, nomadic populations.

Gilān thus showed a paradoxical profile. In the province, large properties owned outside of the local community prevailed. Along with Azarbaijan, Kordestān, and Lorestān, Gilān was among the areas characterized by large estates (see a 1947-48 document quoted by Lambton, p. 270) of over 200 hectares, mostly concentrated in the district of Rašt (Sahami, p. 43). In 1960, of the 281,875 hectares cultivated in Gilān, 56,316 were farmed by owners (approximately 20 percent of the total), 176,532 were tenant farmed, and 49,027 were jointly farmed by owners and tenants (Ehlers, p. 290). Absentee ownership was particularly evident in the delta area, although less in Ṭāleš (Bazin, I, p. 121). According to the 1960 agricultural survey, only 19 out of 356 large and average-size landholders resided in villages (Sahami, p. 47). Yet, despite the predominance of large private holdings (the quantity of land owned by the Crown, known as *kāleša* [see [KĀṢṢA](#)], and likewise of property owned by religious foundations, known as *mawqufa*, was negligible), the condition of the peasants was, for the reasons stated above, less drastic than elsewhere: the distribution of the harvest was not determined by the share contribution (labor, livestock, seeds, manure, land, water) of the owner and tenant, as it was in the rest of Persia. A tenant farming system (*ejāradāri*) based on fixed rents, which permitted the peasant to keep approximately two-thirds of the harvest, was the dominant system (74 percent of the rice acreage in 1960) throughout the region with some variation for sub-regional plantings.

Tenant leases, contracted for one, two, or three years, provided that the peasants supply the seeds, the plow, and livestock, and that they give the owner's representative, at the end of the rice harvest, a fixed number of *quṭi* (a measuring unit equal to a weight of between 24 and 37.5 kg, depending on local custom; see Bazin and Bromberger, p. 54 and maps 27 and 29). The



quantity of *quṭi* required per *jarib* (a unit of surface equal to 10,400 m² in the plain) varied according to the productivity: from six (equal to 222 kg in Asālem, Ṭāleš) to thirty (960 kg in the most fertile zones of the plain). In the central region, it was fixed at about twenty *quṭi* (from 32 to 37.5 kg according to place) of hulled rice. When contracts were let for the development of new farmland, farmers were generally exempt from paying annual rentals for at least three years (Rabino and Lafont, p. 135). Less widespread was the use of sharecropping (*monāṣefa*; *tivakāri*, lit. “you, farm,” in Ṭāleši), whereby the owner and the peasant shared equally in the harvest (practiced in 14 percent of the rice plantations in 1960); the process of division consisted in creating heaps (*kuhs*) each including the same number of sheaves (*dasta* or *darz*) after the harvest and dividing the harvest equally under the watchful eye of the *mobāšer*. Depending on local arrangements, operating costs (e.g., plow, livestock, seeds) were—in most cases—shared between the tenant and the owner, or else, were the exclusive responsibility of one or the other (in Ṭāleš particularly, for which see Bazin, I, p. 123).

The contracts for tenant farming and sharecropping also stated the proportion of different varieties of rice that had to be supplied by the peasant; a quarter of the owner’s share generally consisted of first-quality rice (of the *ṣadri* type). In addition, peasants were to supply their masters with farmyard and garden produce: chickens (sometimes cooked, such as *morḡ lāku* “young chick”; *lāku* literally means “young girl chick” in the Gilāki dialect of Lāhijān and is cooked in *fesanjān*; q.v.), eggs, green grape juice (*āb-ḡura*, q.v.), broad beans, sour pomegranates, watermelons, melons, and nuts. They also had to bring them *jukul* (green rice grains, announcing the next harvest, used to make sweets; see Gilān. Cooking) dry leaves (*saračina*) of rice stems to feed horses, and straw brooms. Finally, the peasant was required to perform community service (*bigāri*) such as clearing the irrigation canals and repairing roads and houses. If a peasant did not fulfill his obligations, he could be punished by the *mobāšer*, who could lock him up in a cattle shed or a smoke-filled rice drying shed (*dud-kāna*) or whip him with a pomegranate tree branch. The owner’s representative—who sometimes was also the *kadkodā* (chief of the village)—was exempt from paying rent for the land he farmed or else received a percentage (generally 10 percent) of the rents paid by the peasants. But, in order to increase the value of his tithe, he adjusted quantities and weights to his advantage, thus “exceeding the legal weight stated in the lease” (Nikitine, fol. 125). This practice was known to the owners and even had a name which sanctioned the practice, the *towfir-e sang* “difference in weight.”



It was also the *mobāšer* who, in the old days, collected the tax due to the governor, a source of incremental demands, which further burdened the peasants' budgets (Nikitine, fol. 124-25). Regional poetry (see, among others, Fakrā'i, ed., *Gozida-ye adabiyāt-e gilaki*) strikingly echoes the tension between the *arbāb* and his representative on the one hand, and the *ra'yat*, his subject, on the other. Moḥammad-'Ali Afrāšta (q.v.) thus recounts a dialogue between a peasant and his son (Fakrā'i, pp. 150): *Arbāb-e kāne mi amrā āi šeyṭāni nokon / Kun kone kānom agar das bebari hož-e darun / Ti pišāni 'araqā āstin āmrā pākā kun/ šiškārā jur agar arbāb torā jandar dagāne / kāme bo rastā bo ti dastā ti sine sar bene* "If you come with me to the lord's house, do not play tricks / If you touch the pond in the courtyard, the lord's wife's heart will miss a beat / wipe the sweat off your face with your shirt sleeve / If the lord sees you from the top of the balcony / bow at first then stand up and put your hands on your chest."

Tenant farming dominated rice culture, but the production of cash crops (silk, tea, hemp, jute, citrus fruits, etc.) was governed by other types of contracts. Sharecropping was most widespread in sericulture, the cocoons also being divided between owners and breeders (see Abbott, fol. 27; Bromberger, 1989b, p. 79). By the end of the 19th century however, when, following the outbreak of the silkworm disease pebrine, local producers were forced to import seeds, a tripartite system (known as *mosalasa*, Pers. *moṭallata*) temporarily replaced the produce-sharing lease system. The harvest was then split three ways between the seed supplier, the owner, and the peasant (Lafont and Rabino, p. 21). More recently, the cultivation of hemp, jute, and especially of tea—which requires an initial major investment (tea becomes profitable only at the end of the sixth year)—was developed in large fields using paid labor (Issawi, p. 210; Bazin, I, p. 159; Suzuki, p. 125). The large orange plantations in eastern Gilān were exploited in the same way (Vieille, p. 49). So, even before agrarian reform, feudal and capitalist systems of production coexisted, depending on the nature of the cultures.

Agricultural activities having recourse to paid labor, especially in tea and citrus *bāgs* (gardens), were exempted from reform (article 3.1 of the law of 1962) and further developed. These industrial properties form large enclaves in the patchwork landscape of rice fields, most of which had been acquired by peasants by the end of the third phase of the Land Reform, completed in 1971. Today, parcels not farmed by the owners are not held by tenant farmers but sharecropped. This system is undoubtedly less favorable to the peasants,



except that now the owners provide seed, fertilizers, and herbicides. In addition, the demand for land is high—the plain, which is now entirely cleared, has doubled in population over the past 40 years (1956-96)—and the farming population, although declining sharply, still accounts for 40 percent of the active population. In the absence of owners, the sericulture or silkworm breeding, whose production has dramatically diminished, remains in the sharecropping system, with the owners supplying seed and other factors of production.

As was already the case before the agrarian reform, the farming community is comprised of social levels or strata organized according to the size of the rice holdings. A distinction can be made between three categories of holdings: (1) Micro-holdings are farms less than one hectare, where production volume is just enough to feed the family who works the land; in the plain, one hectare of rice plantation yields two tons of rice on average, which is to say a little more than the consumption of a country family. (Rice was until very recently the basic food for all three meals, and an adult ate about a kilo per day.) In 1956 these micro-farms accounted for 29 percent of the total number of holdings, and in 1974 36 percent (Research Group, p. 139; Markaz, pp. 124-25). (2) Average-sized farms are of one to three hectares (54 percent of the total in 1956, and approximately 50 percent in 1974). Farms of this size are able to accumulate a production surplus and market part of the harvest. Holdings are generally family farms, although it is not uncommon to hire for the season a helper (*mozdur*), a landless peasant (*košknešin*), or temporary migrants from the mountain region. (3) Three and four hectare farms represent a small minority (7 percent of the total in 1956 and in 1974) and resemble small companies employing permanent, paid labor. Such farms are often owned by the descendants of the *kadkodā* and *mobāšer*, whose landholdings were greater than the average peasant's holdings before the land reform.

On the scale of the *maḥalla* (hamlet), the principal unit of space and social affiliation, a family's status depends on the size of their holdings and on other factors that magnify or reduce differences. Among the average owners, those who own plow animals (oxen, horses), or later cultivators and mechanical threshers, constitute a relatively affluent category, since other peasants are required to rent livestock or farm tools from them. Between 1960 and 1970, when mechanization was at an embryonic stage, over a third of the owners had no plow animals (Research Group, p. 143; Suzuki, pp. 281-82). In addition, the majority of the peasants have multiple occupations (*čand šoḡl*), to



supplement their incomes with more or less lucrative side jobs. The poorest get seasonal work in the construction business, in factories, in small trade operations, or as farm laborers. The wealthiest have acquired plantations (especially poplar groves, or *senovars*), rice mills (*kārḱāna-ye berenjḱubi*), farm equipment and supply stores, or they market the agricultural production. Affluent peasants generally will leave the village and settle in a nearby town or in a regional metropolis; their lands being given over in tenancy, thus pursuing in the tradition of Iranian agriculture, albeit under less onerous terms, the practice of *rentenkapitalismus*, to use HansBobek's expression. Such affluent owners, once they have become tradesmen, often practice usury, lending money to peasants against the guarantee of a low price for their harvest. Debt remains one of the endemic evils of small farming communities (as an example, the proportion of owners who negotiated loans in 1960 was estimated at 58 percent; Research Group, p. 144).

Another differentiating factor among farming families arises in their demographic structures. Under the old landowning system, the custom was for the holding to remain within the same peasant family without being divided, one son taking over his father's tenancy contract while his brothers and sisters were forced to emigrate, to occupy subordinate positions in the village society, or, with the approval of the landowner, to clear an uncultivated area. As Eckart Ehlers clearly pointed out (p. 299), this custom favored a degree of stability in the size of farms and of the agricultural population. The peasants' access to ownership has been accompanied by a return to Islamic Law regarding the sharing of property, the land now being split among the children, resulting in the fragmentation or even the atomization of holdings (see [Gilān xiii. Kinship and Marriage](#)). Whatever the arrangements made by the families to reduce fragmentation, the dilution effect is most evident in large families and has contributed to widening gaps within the farming community.

The stratification of pastoral society, made up of Gāleši and Ṭāleši stockbreeders who migrate seasonally from the wooded foothills to mountaintop pastures, has tangible similarities with that of the agricultural world. Large stockbreeders hire shepherds (*čupāns*) who are usually paid year-round (sometimes seasonally) and whose remuneration is supplemented by payment in-kind (Bazin and Pour-Fickoui, pp. 71-72). As community structures are fragile in this area, small stockbreeders do not entrust their animals to a common shepherd, as they do in the interior of Persia and in rare



instances in the mountains of Gilān (in Raḥmatābād and Rostamābād districts), but contract for work in a system similar in some respects to the tenant farming and sharecropping systems. *Terāz* arrangements are made throughout the year or during the summer season (the latter prevailing in eastern Safidrud) to match a stockbreeder with a shepherd, who himself may own a herd. The owner and shepherd agree on payment in wool, cheese, and lambs. The association between stockbreeders can also take the form of a *šerākat* (“partnership”) in which both owners bring in the same number of animals and divide the lambs equally. The one who husbands the herd receives, as compensation, a larger share of the cheese, milk, and wool (Bazin and Pour-Fickoui, pp. 72-76); such contractual relations based on a “per half” division are called *monāšafa* in the southern Gilān district of ‘Ammārlu, a term which means sharecropping in agriculture. Finally, the last instance is that of the small stockbreeder who cares for his herd directly and individually.

Encapsulating socio-economic differentiations arising from the size of farms and herds, an “ethnic” division of work heightens social contrasts and hierarchy (see [Gilān xiv. Ethnic groups](#)). Recent progress has deeply disrupted the social landscape of the rural communities. In 1956, 77 percent of the population resided in rural areas; the proportion was 71 percent in 1976, 62 percent in 1986, 53 percent in 1996, and 46 percent in 2006. The rate of rural emigration is lower, however, than it is in other areas of Persia. Significantly, nearly 8 percent of the active population residing in urban areas are employed in agriculture, and the “neo-urbanized” maintain strong bonds with their native *maḥalla*. The prevailing model for social mobility, however, is the same for all of Persia: one leaves the country for the nearby town, then moves to the regional metropolis and finally to the state capital (even if migrations to Tehran dropped since the beginning of the 21st century), and from agriculture to trade or to the service industry. In the villages, poor mountain migrants now replace the small farmers of the plain who have found jobs in towns where there may be few large employers, but where employment in the trades, in craft industries, in factories, in construction, transportation, and repairs has increased significantly over the past 40 years (while the population of Gilān doubled between 1956 and 1996, the active population in these sectors has multiplied fivefold). The signs of social distinction have also changed: the *bāzāris* who became rich through speculation, led simple lives, sponsored religious associations, and supported the poor, are now gradually replaced by tradesmen, entrepreneurs, doctors, and dynamic executive types, who reside in villas in Golsar (the upscale district in Rašt) and are fond of Western



consumerism.

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