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LITERACY CORPS

LITERACY CORPS (*Sepāh-e dāneš*), educational program implemented in Iran in the framework of the White Revolution (1963-79) during the reign of Muhammad-Reza Pahlavi (1941-79). Suggested by the Kennedy administration as an alternative to *red* revolutions and as a condition to U.S. aid, the White Revolution aimed at propelling Iran onto the level of the most modernized countries. However, according to the *Manpower Survey* carried out in 1958 in Iranian factories 41 percent of workers were illiterate and, thus, could not foster productivity. Moreover, since 67.2 percent of men and 87.8 of women above fifteen were illiterate (*UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1966*, pp. 18, 41), the government realized some action had to be taken in the field of education. By 1979 the rate had decreased respectively to 44.2 percent and 53 percent.

According to two government decrees issued on 26 October and 3 December 1962, and approved by the parliament on 26 January 1963, young men holding the diploma of secondary education—mainly urban middle-class youth—were given the option of serving in the Literacy Corps as their two-year army service. Dispatched to rural areas, 166,949 corpsmen (FIGURE 1) and 33,642 corpswomen (from 1969 on; FIGURE 2) taught over 2.2 million children between the ages of six and twelve years who had not yet attended school up to the second grade, plus a million adults (interview with Ḡolām-reżā Ṣadrāʾi, Tehran, 27 May 1997; D. Menashri, *Education and the Making of Modern Iran*, London, 1992, p. 180).

The Literacy Corps absorbed high school graduates who could not be drafted in the army and had no labor skills; used military facilities and the army's

experience in literacy training; saved funds compared with the previous teachers training program. It was peculiarly suited to the Persian temperament, because nothing could “get Iranians to help their fellow man or participate in any sort of *Peace Corps* activity except force or the threat of force” (8 December 1962, n. A-356, *The Literacy Corps*, NARA).

With the Literacy Corps “the state combined the stick of conscription with the carrot of monetary advantage and opportunity for service” (J. W. Ryan, *Educational resources and scholastic outcome: a study of rural primary schooling in Iran*, Ph.D. diss., Stanford,1973, p. 131). Corpsmen were paid $16 during the training period (Airgram, 13 January 1963, n. A-46, *Initial Implementation of Literacy Corps Proposal in Azarbaijan*, NARA, 888.43 /1-1363) and then 300-400 toman ($50), according to their military rank. Women received 450 toman. The cost of educating a student in a school run by them was considered minimal; at 100 toman (equivalent to $13.33) it was one-third of the per-pupil cost of a conventional school. Furthermore, the villagers paid for the construction of facilities (R. Sanghvi, C. German, D. Missen, “The Literacy Corps,” in *The Revolution of the Shah and the People*, vol. 7, London, 1967, p. 23).

With the Literacy Corps, education to some extent escaped the control of the ʿ*olamā*ʾ, who used to shape the younger generation along traditional lines. This program thus aimed at helping the regime in establishing a *modern* nation-state on a basis different from religion. Persian as a common language was the major tool used to inculcate the spirit of national unity: “I viewed central control of public education as one means of ensuring national unity. Teaching the Persian language throughout our country fostered a common bond among all,” wrote the shah whilst in exile (M. R. Pahlavi, *Answer to History*, New York, 1980, p. 128).Teaching the history of the Persian empire was a means to make people feel part of Iran. In the textbook for the third year of high school, for instance, the interference of the Zoroastrian clergy in politics caused the defeat of the Sasanian empire by the Muslim armies. Therefore, religious interference in political affairs was extremely dangerous.

The corpsmen’s involvement in politics. In 1966 some corpsmen were involved in political activity within the Islamic Nations Party. Arrested in the autumn of 1965, fifty-five members of this organization were sentenced in March 1966. Three of them were literacy corpsmen, and their leader had just ended a tour with the corps a few months before his arrest. In addition, “there are also indications that the Government, concerned over reports that corpsmen

wittingly and unwittingly have spread anti-regime propaganda in the villages (often as a result of communist radio broadcasts), is moving to counter this situation. In an operation as large as the Literacy Corps and in a country like Iran, some activity of this sort is to be expected" (10 May 1966, n. A-749, *The Literacy Corps – Growing Maturity*, NARA SOC 6-5 Iran).

Two decades of White Revolution improved standards of living. At the same time, however, "deprivations deepened, differences widened, and disparities became even more transparent." The combination of these factors can answer "the apparent paradox of sustained accumulation and growing absolute prosperity with outbursts of mass agitation and discontent" (H. Hakimian, *Industrialization and the standard of living of the working class in Iran, 1960-1979*, Development andChange 19, 1988, p. 30).

Consequences on the corpsmen's side. Some of the consequences were unleashed by the gap in living conditions between rural and urban areas and the large amount of money the regime was spending, for instance, on celebrations. Despite attempts to keep up the corpsmen's morale, the Literacy Corps led to some extent to the further radicalization of already discontented men. Corpsmen were reported as taking part in "dissident political activity," although, "in view of the size of the Corps, the incidence did not seem overly significant" (10 May 1966, n. A-749, *The Literacy Corps—Growing Maturity*, NARA).

The historian Moḥamad Tavakoli told the story of his brother who was drafted into the Literacy Corps in the early 1970s: "His understanding of the problems of village life politicized his consciousness and spurred the formation of a new revolutionary identity in him and many others. His subsequent involvement with leftist groups was the direct and unintended consequence of the state's programs of development" (Z. T. Sullivan, "Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-Century Iran," in L. Abu-Lughod, ed., *Remaking Women. Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton, 1998, p. 227). In contrast, some corpsmen declared that their experience in the countryside had strengthened their support for the regime (interview with Johanes Farhadian, London, 13 May 1999).

In addition, many of the corpsmen's parents were influenced by their "children's new-found radicalism" (B. V. Street, *Literacy in theory and practice*,Cambridge, 1984, p. 206), and the political impact of the Literacy Crusade was thus larger than generally thought. According to a survey, 82.3

percent of literacy corpsmen declared that this experience had made them more aware of the actual situation in rural Iran and they had realized that no prompt solution was available. Eight percent declared they had become “more aware of the inefficiency and inertia of the government bureaucracy” (H. Faris, *Conscription of urban youths for rural education and development in developing countries: Iran as a case study*, Ph.D. diss., The American University, Washington, D.C., 1975, pp. 313, 316-17).

According to ʿAli Reżāvi, in the 1960s the widespread opinion among leftist corpsmen was that the White Revolution had been implemented because the shah had been instructed to do so by imperialist countries wishing to have cheap labor and to rule over people. With the White Revolution, imperialist countries supposedly wanted the villagers to migrate to towns, increase the unemployment rate, and thus decrease wages to the benefit of the imperialists themselves. At the end of the day, the only real change brought by the White Revolution was that “the landlord’s power had been weakened and he and his sons could not enjoy the *jus primae noctis* any longer.” This advantage for the villagers was pointed out to my interviewee by Darviš Maḥmud, a dervish who spent his time traveling, reciting poetry, and collecting money: “*Sarkār* [’corpsman’], up to four years ago any bride in the village would have had to spend her first night with the landlord or his sons. Therefore, 50 percent of the children of our village are illegitimate. Everything changed when the White Revolution was launched and the villagers dared to set the landlord’s car on fire. Can’t you see the difference between now and the past?” (interview, London, 10 April 1999). It is, however, difficult to distinguish between the political implications motivated by the experience in the Literacy Corps and those generated by the turbulent atmosphere of those years. My interviewee Ismāil Bayāni stated that in 1973, after having watched the television broadcast of the trial of Ḵosrow Golsorḵi (q.v.), his perception of the regime was so negative that he decided to join the street protest and throw stones at the windows of the university. Some of his anger was surely motivated by Golsorḵi’s death sentence, but it was also the result of his personal experience. In fact, at the beginning of the 1970s Bayāni was directly involved in the Fedāʾin-e Ḵalq (see COMMUNISM iii.), which he joined after a period spent attending Dr. ʿAli Šariʿati’s lectures in Tehran at the Ḥoseyniye-ye Eršād and leading a group of pro-Islamist students. Before entering the university, Bayāni had served as literacy corpsman in a village in Māzandarān, and this experience helped the shaping of his political thought. As a corpsman he had tried his best in order to implement the White Revolution, had written to

many ministries complaining about the lack of resources, but was disappointed by the fact that as a reply he only received threats for being too active. Though it is not possible to give an exact dimension to one experience compared to another, Bayāni declared that serving in the Literacy Corps surely had an impact on his political activism (interview, Venice, 21 September 1998).

Cultural differences, the communication gap between corpsmen and villagers, and conflicts with the local mullahs. Whenever possible, corpsmen were send to their own district. However, since experience showed that corpsmen sent near their home neglected their jobs, and since some villagers complained their children were not learning Persian because the corpsman could speak their own language, corpsmen were sent to villages in scattered parts of the country. However, people were not happy with this either; they complained and assumed that by sending into their region only Persian speakers the government was trying to "Persianize them and stamp out their own languages completely" (10 May 1966, n. A-749, *The Literacy Corps—Growing Maturity*, NARA). Indeed, language was a major problem, because children learned how to read Persian words, but not their meaning; and they were thus unable to speak.

A further difficulty occurred when corpsmen professed a different religion from the peasantry. On the one side, the Ministry of Education failed to use adequately its members of non-Moslem faiths, who were not allowed to hold responsible administrative posts. On the other side, Shia corpsmen could have a hard time in Sunni villages such as in some Kurdish areas. In this connection, a case was brought up by an article published in London, in which a corpsman remembered his experience in 1968-69 (1347) in a Kurdish village ("Ḵāṭere-ye mikošami," in Ettelaʿat International, 28 July 1998).

The implementation of the Literacy Corps thus led to cultural clashes between corpsmen and villagers. The villagers' consideration for the elderly and disregard towards outsiders did not contribute to the corpsmen's integration. Furthermore, rural family life constituted "the most stubborn core of resistance to change" (B. V. Street, Cultural Meanings of Illiteracy, Geneva, 1990, pp. 8-11). In this context, the mullah's opposition was often successful, since he was likely to enjoy a high status, while the members of the Literacy Corps were young and inexperienced. Adjusting to such difficulties was not easy. In order to obtain the villagers' confidence, corpsmen opted for various strategies. These ranged from reciting the Qurʾān every day and asking children to line

up and pray every morning before starting their classes, to permitting female pupils to sit in the rear of the classroom, separately from the boys (Faris, p. 300).

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