



QAJAR DYNASTY XIII. CHILDREN'S UPBRINGING IN THE QAJAR PERIOD

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xiii. Children's Upbringing in the Qajar Period

The birth of a child in a Shi'ite family during the Qajar period was usually associated with the performance of various rituals. Immediately after the child was born, the Shi'i *adān* (call to prayer) as well as *eqāma* (the call indicating the beginning of public prayer) was recited in his/her ears by the father. On the seventh day, a ceremony known as *'aqiqa* took place when a sheep was slaughtered and the child's hair was cut. The advent of a child's birth was not only welcomed but was also considered essential both for strengthening the marriage bond and for the perpetuation of the line of descent. In Persia a house in which no child was born was referred to as *kāna-kur* (lit. of blind house,) or *ojāq-kur* (lit. of blind hearth), implying that there is no light in the house, as there is no child. Childlessness frequently resulted in divorce or at least the addition of another wife who would be able to bear children, as sterility was always considered to be the fault of the woman.

After birth the baby was wrapped in swaddling clothes (*qondāq*). These consisted of a square of cloth and two or more bandages. The child was laid



on the cloth diagonally and the corners were folded over the feet and body and under the head, the bandages were then tied so as to hold the cloth in position. This device formed the clothing of the child until it was about a year old. As a result, the movement of the limbs was greatly restricted. It was believed to contribute to good posture and also permitted infrequent changing. The baby wrapped in this way was placed in a cradle (*gahvāra, nanu*; the former was made from wood or metal, and the latter from cloth and leather), which either had rockers or was suspended in a manner by which the baby could be rocked. If not in the cradle, the baby was carried around on the shoulder or back of the caretaker. Once the children came out of swaddling clothes, they would be dressed just like other men and women of their class. This can be seen in the paintings of the period on the rare occasions when children are portrayed, and subsequently with the advent of photography also in photographs (Robinson et al., pp. 71, 115, 197; *Ḍokā'*, pp. 30, 93, 123, 135).

Breastfeeding was the norm, although in royal and upper class families a wet nurse (*dāya*) was employed for this purpose. A *dāya* was a woman who had just given birth to a child and had either lost the baby in childbirth or was prepared to feed both her own child and that of her employer. In either case, she usually moved into the household with her own child, if any (Mostawfi, I, p. 183). In other families the mother breast-fed her own child unless she did not have enough milk, in which case, if the family had sufficient means, a *dāya* was employed or a cow was kept for its milk (Mahdavi, 1999, p. 65). In the case of poorer families, a neighbor, a friend, or a relative who had also just given birth would fulfill the role. *Dāyas* were much respected and frequently went on living in the household of the one they had breast-fed until they died. The children of the *dāya* were also well-treated and known as milk sister or brother (*k^vāhar-e širi, barādar-e širi*). Demand for breastfeeding from the mother or *dāya* continued at least until the age of two and sometimes beyond. Breastfeeding acted as a form of birth control, and as a result lower class women had fewer children than upper class women.

In Qajar society the primary social unit was the extended family, which varied in size according to social class and economic status. In a wealthy family, it could encompass 30-40 individuals both related by descent and marriage. In a less wealthy household, it could consist of the parents and their unmarried daughters and their sons with their wives. The child was born into this extended family and received its nurturing, training, social manners, and discipline from members of this unit. It spent considerable time with its



mother and received much affection and indulgence from her, the father, older siblings, and other members of the extended family. Although the mother was primarily responsible for the welfare of the child in these extended families, the paternal mother also played an important role in its upbringing (Mahdavi, 1999, p. 179). There were no orphanages until the reign of Reżā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1915-41). Orphans were looked after by the extended families or charitable individuals (Šahri, I, pp. 586-88).

As part of the rituals of inculcating the child into the world of Shi'ite Islam, **circumcision** (*katna*) had to be carried out before the age of thirteen, but it was mostly done at approximately the age of four. This was a rite of passage that was considered a festive occasion and celebrated as such. Before deciding upon a day, a religious leader (*mollā*) or an astrologer (*monajjem*) would be consulted for an auspicious day. From a few days before the appointed day the boys were measured for a *qabā* (a long garment open in front) as they could not wear trousers for some times after the circumcision. The night before or on the morning they were taken to the public bath, and the next day the operation was carried out by a barber (*dallāk*; Polak, p. 140; Nafisi, pp. 600-602). The quality of the *qabā* and the degree of festivities (*katna-surān*) naturally depended on the economic standing of the family. In affluent families the festivities continued for a number of days. Musicians and dancers were employed; the musicians accompanied the family group to the public bath, played during the ceremony, and continued playing during the festivities. For a number of days family and friends came to visit the circumcised boy bearing gifts ranging from lengths of material to money and sweets. In the case of royal children, these gifts could be sumptuous. The visitors were fed and entertained. 'Abd-Allāh Mostawfi relates that the *qabā* of himself and his brothers were made from brocade and specially ordered from Isfahan. While he and his brothers were laid up after their circumcision, the musicians and dancers not only performed for the visitors who came to congratulate him, but would also come to his room and perform there (Mostawfi, 1, pp. 206-8).

Children inhabited the world of adults. They did not have separate worlds or even rooms. In fact, life in Qajar Iran was communal, and rooms were multi-functional. The same room was used for socializing, eating, and sleeping. After a child was weaned, he or she would eat the same food and at the same time as the adults. Women were segregated, so men and women had separate spaces. In the adult world, the children spent their time in the women's space



and went regularly to the public or private bathhouse with the women of the household. The boys stopped accompanying the women when they reached the age of eight or nine or when other women in the bathhouse objected to their presence.

Children's pastimes were dependent upon their own inventiveness and the material available. Toys were few and far between, and those in existence could be found in royal families or affluent classes who traveled to Europe or obtained them from merchants who imported European objects. Toys were made at home by the children themselves, as a result of which there were no toyshops. The only place where objects resembling toys could be found was in stands in front of the shrine of Shah 'Abd-al-'Azim in Ray, and those consisted of wooden monkey puppets, paper windmills, and rattles (Mostawfi, I, pp. 206-7; Nafisi, pp. 597-600).

Children spent much time playing outside, weather permitting. In the case of affluent children it would be in their private garden and, in the case of the less affluent, in the street or the field. One of their amusements was picking nuts and fruit. There are few descriptions of the games children played (see [BĀZI](#)). However, according to available accounts, it appears that children's play was defined according to sex. Boys engaged more in games involving movement, whereas the girls' games tended to be more stationary. Also the boys' games were more often group games, whereas those of the girls were solitary. In royal and affluent families, riding, shooting, and hunting were regular forms of recreation for boys (Sālur, I, pp. 25-38). Girls tended to imitate adult women in their games and would be provided with miniature women's tools such as cooking utensils. They played with dolls made from cloth or wood and under the guidance of adults would sew clothes for the doll or cook little meals in miniature pots and pans (Nafisi, pp. 599-600; Mahdavi, 2007, p. 498).

An important pastime for both boys and girls would be listening to stories, which would be performed orally and from memory by any member of the family or servants. The stories would always begin with the expression *yek-i bud yek-i nabud, ġayr az kodā hički nabud* (once upon a time; lit.: there was one, there was not one, there was no one except God). Most of the stories were either from classical Persian literature or folkloric, which had been passed on from one generation to another. Children's amusements were limited. Going on excursions to gardens outside the city was a form of amusement in which the whole family participated. The day would be spent entirely there picnicking, riding donkeys, and playing (Mahdavi, 2007, p. 498). A major



pastime for everyone was attending religious observances such as commemoration of the martyrs of *Karbalā* (*rawza-k'āni*) and passion plays (*ta'zia*). Mostawfi says that he and the other children would be looking forward to the month of Moḥarram because of the fun they had participating in these events, particularly the distribution of food among the poor (Mostawfi, I, pp. 274-90; Šahri, V, pp. 521 ff.). There were also public entertainers in Qajar Iran who wandered the streets and amused both children and adults for a small sum. Among these was *luṭi 'antari* (monkey juggler), who, by playing the *kamānča* (a stringed instrument), would make a trained monkey and sometimes a bear dance. There were also strolling acrobats. The master of the troop would be an adult, but the acrobatic feats would be performed by a young boy (Mahdavi, 2007, pp. 491-92).

The traditional form of elementary education in Qajar Iran was provided in the *maktab* (or *maktab-kāna*; lit. the place of writing; see EDUCATION iii), which was available to all children who could afford it. These *maktabs* were traditionally taught by clerics (*mollā*). From approximately the age of five to nine, boys and girls attended the same *maktab* (Nafisi, pp. 645-49). Women teachers were frequently to be found, and they were known as *mollā-bāji* (lit. female cleric). The quality of teaching and the teacher differed from neighborhood to neighborhood depending on the economic status of the residents and on the teacher himself (Moḵber-al-Salṭana Hedāyat, p. 4; Mostawfi, I, pp. 218-22). There were two types of *maktabs*: private and public. The curriculum of the *maktab* was limited; teaching began with the alphabet and then went onto the recitation of the Qur'an. The method of teaching was oral recitation, and learning was done by oral repetition. The pupils would learn many verses of the Qur'an without understanding their meaning, as they did not know Arabic. As far as writing was concerned, the teacher would write a few words on a piece of paper, and the pupil would then copy them. After the period of the Qur'an recitation was finished, the pupils would continue with the *Golestān* and *Bustān* of Sa'di and the poems of Ḥāfeẓ, and learn by heart many of the stories and poems of these poets. Discipline was very strict, and unruly boys were frequently given the stick or in extreme cases the bastinado (Polak, pp. 187-89; Afšār, p. 317; Šahri, IV, pp. 447-56). The atmosphere of these *maktabs* was not very inspiring, and, as a result, the children frequently behaved in an unruly manner, which would lead to their punishment (Jamālzāda, pp. 65-67). Consequently the *mollā* was disliked; it is related in two memoirs that the children put gunpowder under the cushion on which the *mollā* sat and ignited it (Tāj-al-Salṭana, p. 21, Momtaḥen-al-Dawla,



pp. 62-63).

Up to approximately the age of nine the children, regardless of class, shared certain conditions in common, such as going to the *maktab* and playing the same games. After that age their lives diversified according to gender and class. Boys of the less affluent class would usually leave the *maktab* at around the age of nine or ten and start working or training for a profession, although they might have been doing that part-time already. The more affluent ones continued their education either in the private *maktab* or with private teachers. At the same time children from royal and upper class families were also provided with a live-in tutor—in the case of boys known as *lala* and in the case of girls as *dada* (who was frequently black). The position of *lala* to the royal children, particularly to the heir to the throne, was a coveted one, since not only could the holder mold the mind of the future monarch, but he could also count on a later influential position for himself. For instance, [Ḥājj Mirzā Āqāsi](#), who was [Moḥammad Shah](#)'s tutor, went on to become his prime minister. The only type of higher education accessible to the average family was the *madrasa* system ([EDUCATION iv](#)). Normally, students entered the *madrasa* after finishing the *maktab* in early adolescence. The curriculum included primarily Islamic jurisprudence (*feqh*), logic, the Qur'an and its interpretation, [Hadith](#), Arabic grammar, and other related subjects.

Regardless of gender or background, children in Qajar Iran shared one circumstance in common. In all cases the period of childhood was short, that is, the period when neither any responsibilities nor any adult behavior were expected of an individual. One of the factors that curtailed childhood in all cases was early marriage. Girls were commonly betrothed at the age of seven and married a few years later ([Tāj-al-Salṭana](#), pp. 23-28, 31, 41, 73-74). Even before an early marriage, children were often assigned new roles and faced expectations distinctly different from those in the West. In general, due to limited social mobility, choice of occupation was not a problem; for instance, a boy would follow his father's plow from the age of seven or eight without thinking of any alternatives, and apprenticeships started early as well. In working class families, girls of four or five were frequently given the care of young siblings. Boys, if they went to the *maktab*, would serve as part-time apprentices in their future occupation, or, in rural areas, they would help in the field or look after animals ([Āqā Najafī](#), pp. 3, 7-12, 28). Girls would also act as shepherdesses ([Rice](#), p. 108). Another custom which affected working class children was that of contracting them out (*ajir šodan*) to work for a period of



time in return for a lump sum of money, or to work either as servants or in handicraft workshops such as carpet weaving (Rice, pp. 122-28, Courtauld, p. 51; *Dokā*, photograph, no. 137).

Royal and upper class children did not work in this way, but there were different expectations of them. From an early age they were expected to behave as an adult. This involved learning and fulfilling the intricate rules of social etiquette, speech, and address in vogue in Qajar society. There were various protocols for receiving and entertaining visitors according to their rank, and suitable forms of address. In addition to having to be familiar with all protocols, royal children had further responsibilities laid upon them. For instance 'Abbās Mirzā, the crown prince, at the age of eight accompanied his great-uncle Āgā Moḥammad Khan on a campaign against the local rulers of Shusha (Fasā'i, p. 242, tr., p. 73). Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, as heir to the throne, at the age of seven was sent at the head of a delegation to Erevan to meet the Russian emperor, Tsar Nicholas I (Amanat, p. 34).

There was another custom prevalent in the Qajar court that affected boys of the nobility. At an early age they were sent to the court either as servant boy (*kāna-šāgerd*) or page (*gōlām-bača*). Until approximately twelve they would serve both in the harem and outside the harem, and after that in the court. This would frequently ensure them a position in the court as adults. As a young boy, they could be asked to perform any number of tasks. A *kāna-šāgerd* would be given more menial tasks, while a *gōlām-bača* would be assigned to more dignified ones, such as being the playmate of a prince.

Consequently it can be seen that, by their teens, most children had left the family and put childhood behind them. The great majority of children would be living in a state of semi-independence, either married or as pages in the court, or as servants in a household or apprentices or seminarians. However, this does not mean that they did not have a childhood. The family was an institution of great importance in Qajar Iran, and the child was an integral part of the family. The extended family established relationships that not only were recognized during a person's lifetime, but also were acknowledged by future generations. In spite of the short duration of childhood, in the period that the children spent in the family fold they were not only cherished and dearly loved, but also provided with amenities and amusements within their means and their reach.



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