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QAJAR DYNASTY XII. THE QAJAR-PERIOD HOUSEHOLD

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xii. The Qajar-Period Household

Qajar society was pluralistic, in the sense that different groups of various social status existed in it. It was patrilineal and patriarchal, and residence after marriage was normally patrilocal, although there were exceptions to this rule. It was a society of strong kinship relations, in which an extended family system operated, and kin groups encompassed individuals from different categories, bypassing social status and economic standing (Mahdavi, 1999a, p. 1-5). The Qajar household consisted of the extended family, which in practice meant that an elementary family, adult male offspring with their spouses and children, and unmarried daughters—all lived in one compound. In cases of the affluent, the household would have included numerous servants and retainers, as well as distant relatives and out-of-town visitors. In wealthy families, in the event of there being more than one wife, each wife would have her own establishment (Mahdavi, 1999a, p. 180). The exact number of the servants who stayed in the house was never identical at any one time. Some of them would spend some nights with their own families and some nights at the house in which they worked, others would go back to the country to visit their families, or relatives of the servants would come to town to visit them. Consequently, the structure of the household was fluid and constantly

changing.

The structure and function of the house and household were defined and prescribed, in order of priority, by religious practice, by the Persian family system, and by the occupation of the head of the household. Whether large or small, the household was organized according to the patrilineal system of descent in which authority was vested in the oldest male. The roles of the members of the household were well defined, and the sexes were generally segregated. The head of the household was the oldest male member, and the sole, unquestioned, and recognized authority was his. All important decisions were made by him and obeyed by others including his adult brothers and sons (Mahdavi, 1999a, pp. 70-71). He also cared for the needs of all his dependents. The sexes were segregated not only socially, but also as far as their daily work was concerned. The head of the household and other males were the breadwinners, and the women homemakers. Amongst the women, the mother of the head of the household exercised authority over the other women of the household. The children spent time with their mother and other women of the house. They were looked after by specific servants, breast-fed by a wet-nurse (*dāya*), nursed by a nanny (*nana*), and educated by a tutor (*lāla*; Mostowfi, I p. 183; Mahdavi, 1999a, pp. 179, 181-82). Children inhabited the world of adults and did not have separate lives or space, and, in company, they were expected to behave with the same decorum as adults. This involved learning and observing the intricate rules of social etiquette, speech, and address that were in practice in Qajar society. There were various protocols for receiving and entertaining visitors according to their rank, as well as appropriate forms of address (Farmanfarmayan, pp. 62-65).

The women were homemakers and mothers, but they also played an important role in the maintenance of traditions and customs related to rituals of *Rite de Passage*, both secular and religious, in addition to those related to national festivals and religious mourning. An important aspect of this emanated from Shiʿism and the supplication of the Imams for various purposes primarily related to the welfare of the family. The Imams were supplicated through the making of a vow (*naḏr*), which frequently involved the preparation of special foods to be distributed amongst the poor. Three major items of the *naḏri* foods, which were prepared annually in the months of Moḥarram and Ṣafar, in a vow to Imam Ḥosayn and for the well being of the offspring, were *ḥalwā*, *āš*, and *šola-zard* (for a list, description, and method of preparation of all *naḏri* foods see Āšpazbāši, pp. 76-78).

Domestic architecture in Qajar Persia was influenced by the position of women in society, which was in turn ordained by Shiʿite Islam, the official religion of the country. Since women had to be veiled, secluded, and separated from men, the houses of those who could afford it were divided into two sections: one called *andaruni* ('inside' or 'innards,') for women and religiously permitted men (*maḥram*), and the other *biruni*('outside' or 'public,') for men (Bakhtiar and Hillenbrand, pp. 384-91; Mahdavi, 1999b, pp. 562-63; Nafisi, pp. 609-16). This form of separation also existed in the living quarters, of the poor, which might consist of one room in which the separation would take the form of a curtain or some other separating device. Basically, the plan of both types of house was similar, except that in the case of the poor, many families would occupy the space which would be inhabited by a single rich family (Mahdavi, 1999a, pp. 180, 184; Mostowfi, I, pp. 170-77).

The houses of the rich were entered through a doorway leading to a narrow corridor inside which a gatekeeper (*qāpči*) was stationed for the express purpose of opening the door. Some houses had two different knockers, one for female visitors and one for male visitors. The narrow corridor led into a hexagonal or octagonal room known as *hašti*, from which two doors on opposite sides of the room led to the *biruni* and the *andaruni*. The door opening to the *andaruni* was frequently covered with a curtain to distinguish it from the *biruni* door. The plan of each section of the compound was similar, except that there were more buildings in the *andaruni* compound. Each of the doors opened into a yard or a garden. The *andarun* consisted of raised buildings on each side of the courtyard in which there were suites of rooms. In the middle of the courtyard there was a pool, which was used for ablutions required for prayers. There was a veranda (*ayvān*) in front of each building, from where steps led into the courtyard. The buildings had no access to each other except through the courtyard. One of these three buildings would be the main one in the *andarun* and would have a large hall in the center. Here the women would entertain other women, religiously permitted men, and also this was the place where the entire family would gather. All communal activity took place in that building. In each of the buildings there were prayer rooms, storage rooms, and sometimes rooms for the servants. At least one of the buildings would have a large basement room with a small pool with a fountain in it, known as *ḥowż-ḵāna*. It was particularly used in the summer as a place to retreat from the heat.

The *biruni* was always much more elaborate than the *andaruni*. This was due

to the fact that it was in the *biruni* that the master of the house received important visitors. The degree of the opulence of the *biruni* was relative to the status of the master of the house. The lavishness also applied to the gardens of the *biruni*. Upon entering the garden of the *biruni*, the visitor was immediately faced by the main building, which contained the *tālār* ('salon') where the master of the house received and entertained visitors. A photograph (*Ganjina-e ʿakshā-ye Iran*, p. 360) shows the *tālār* of the *biruni* of Moḥammad-Ebrāhim Khan Ḡaffāri, Moʿāwen-al-Dawla. There is also a description of the *tālār* of Ḥājj Moḥammad-Ḥasan Amin al-Żarb (Mahdavi, 1999b, p. 560). Each of these is commensurate with the status of the head of the household—Moʿāwen-al-Dawla being an office holder, a diplomat, and part of the élite and Amin al-Żarb being a merchant. Attached to the *biruni* there was usually a stable (*ṭawila*) with a groom (*mehtar*) in it to tend to the pack animals the owner kept for transportation (Mostowfi, I, p. 172). Outside each section, in the courtyard, the lavatory was situated which had a pitcher (*āftāba*) filled with water for cleansing purposes. In the houses of the rich there was also a bathhouse (see BATHHOUSES) in the compound, as certain activities and occurrences, such as sexual intercourse and women's monthly periods, rendered people ritually unclean (*najes*), after which bathing was obligatory before prayers could be performed. Those who did not have a bathhouse went to the numerous public baths that existed in all neighborhoods. The main kitchen was in the *andaruni* compound, although there was often a kitchen in the *biruni* as well. On formal occasions of entertainment in the *biruni*, outside cooks would be brought in (Morier, p. 143-44). There was also a pantry (*ābdārḵāna*) with a servant known as *ābdār*, who was in charge of the samovar (*samāvar*) in the *biruni* for providing visitors with tea and refreshments. In each section there was also a servant in charge of the hookah (*qalyān*; see ḠALYĀN) which both sexes smoked.

All houses had a water reservoir room (*āb-anbār*), in which the city-supplied water which came through narrow street canals (*juy*) was stored. The *ābanbār* water was used for all purposes: drinking, washing clothes and dishes, cooking and cleaning, and any other necessity. Toward the end of the Qajar period, drinking water was also provided by the water-carriers (*saqqā'*), who carried the water in leather containers from door to door (Šahri, pp. 98-103). However, the drinking water used by the households of the rich came from a well that was located inside the house. Also, some houses had their own subterranean canals (*qanāt*; Mahdavi, 1999a, p. 58). The water reservoir room, being a cool place, was also used for storing perishable foods.

Persian private houses possessed many rooms, but most of the rooms were multi-functional and interchangeable. Traditionally, in Persian houses of all classes there was a main room in which people sat on the floor or on cushions and entertained visitors. At meal times, a cloth was spread out on the floor on which platters of food were served. The furnishings of most Persian houses of all classes were extremely limited. There were no tables, chairs, sofas, chests of drawers, beds, curtains, or elaborate decorative mirrors (Drouville, pp. 84-85; Mostowfi, I, pp. 177-78). Carpets were the only pieces of decoration. All round the rooms there were mattresses and cushions used for sitting. The walls were decorated with blind arched recesses and mantelpieces, sometimes in carved, sometimes in painted plaster. Since there were no tables, these recesses and mantels, in particular in the *andaruni*, were used for placing functional objects in use. In the rooms there was nothing but a few chests, in which women kept their valuable jewelry, a samovar, cups, sugar bowls, and a mirror, which would be part of the wife's dowry (Mostowfi, I, pp. 177-79). The bedding consisted of a few bolsters, a quilted counterpane (*leḥāf*), and a mattress, all of which were folded, wrapped in a square piece of cloth (*čādoršab*) by a servant, and put away in the morning and spread out at night. Every wing of the *andaruni* had a room called *ṣandoq-ḵāna*. In this room, the women kept their clothing and other personal possessions in chests, and it was in this room that the bedding was put away during the day.

Cutlery was not in general use, as fingers were used for eating, although spoons of wood or china were used for serving food. There was an ewer of water and a basin in the room for washing the fingers before and after meals. The cooking utensils consisted of pots and pans of copper which were plated annually and which varied in size (Jahāndāri, p. 94; Mostowfi, I, pp. 179-81).

Cooking was done with either charcoal or firewood. The fire was made in open hearths (*ojāq*) that were raised about a meter from the ground, some 30 cm deep and about 20 cm wide and long (Eastwick, I, p. 249). The main kitchen was located in the *andaruni* and was supervised by the women of the household. Near the kitchens there was a dry well that was used for disposing of used cooking water, particularly water used for boiling rice.

Kerosene lamps and, on special occasions, candles were used for lighting the house. In winter, two different forms of heating were used: one for the *andaruni* and another for the *biruni*. The *andaruni* was heated by a *korsi*, which was a wooden low table placed upon a brazier which contained burning charcoal and was covered with an enormous quilt. Mattresses and

cushions were placed on each side of the table, and people sat around it with their legs inside the table covered with the quilt. Sometimes they also slept round it (Farman Farmayan, pp. 19-20). The *biruni* was heated by open braziers.

An important component of life style, which had a direct bearing on the consumption patterns of the family, was the eating customs of the family. This life style was very simple in the case of working-class families, but was more complex for the rich when it needed a certain amount of planning, provisions, and organization. The provisions were arranged annually, monthly, and daily according to their perishability and availability. Women of neither upper nor lower class went outside the house for food shopping. In upper-class houses there was a superintendent (*nāẓer*) who was in charge of buying the household provisions; in working-class families the husband would bring the shopping home. In general, the contribution of the women toward the functioning of the household was confined to activities within the home, although they did make some purchases from street vendors.

There were a number of localities in which provisions could be obtained. The major source of all wholesale goods, some retail goods, and services was the bazaar. Specific and separate bazaars were allocated to different goods and occupations (Šahri, I, pp. 316-22). In addition, there were smaller markets (*bāzārča*) in every quarter and *goḏar*s (subdivision of a street) in every neighborhood, which accommodated shops where daily food requirements could be met (Šahri, I, pp. 323-30). The rich preferred to have various goods delivered to home. This system was especially convenient for women who, due to seclusion and veiling, did not have many opportunities to go out (Wishard, pp. 87-88).

The daily items of consumption consisted of tea, bread, meat, eggs, fruits, and herbs. Tea was an item of consumption that had to be available all day long, as it was drunk throughout the day in addition to being offered to any guests who might arrive. For this purpose, a samovar was kept heated all day by burning charcoal. Bread was an important daily requirement, as it was not only consumed with all meals, but it was also used in place of cutlery to eat with (Mahdavi, 1999a, p. 195).

The products obtained and stored on a long-term basis were rice, cooking oil, dried *kašk* (a dairy product), tea, sugar, coal, charcoal, and firewood. Houses had various storage rooms (*anbār*) for these items, and the edible ones were

kept in large earthenware jars or sacks (Nafisi, p. 635). Cheese was bought in substantial quantities, cut into smaller portions, placed in cloth bags, and preserved in salted water in large earthenware vessels. Yogurt was also bought in large quantities and stored in leather bags (*ḵik*). Some common types of medicinal herbs were also always kept handy in the house to be used as prescribed by the traditional Islamic medicine practiced in Persia (Sajjādi, pp. 68-75).

Summer was the time when the household was occupied with sorting and storing provisions for the winter. Many rich families possessed a small village near their cities to be used for the household. Much of the family's fruit, vegetable, and dairy products came to the house directly from this village. Herbs were dried; jams, pickles, and tomato paste made; and vinegar and sour-grape juice (*āb ḡura*) extracted (Nafisi, pp. 634-35). In spite of the presence of servants, the ladies of the house personally participated in these activities and supervised them. An essential annual task during the summer was washing all the carpets and kilims (*gelim*). There were other tasks such as beating up or changing the cotton inside mattresses, having new ones made, or changing the water of the pool, all of which were performed in the summer by itinerant laborers.

Another important item of consumption was clothing. The clothing of Qajar men was elaborate and similar for both outdoors and indoors. Qajar women had two types of costume: one for venturing outdoors (the street costume), and another one as indoor costume. The street costume ensured a woman's seclusion even when outside the *andarun*. It consisted of a *čādor*, *čaqčur* (knickerbockers reaching and tapering at the ankles), and the veil (*rubanda*). The apparel of wealthy men and women was made to order by tailors or dressmakers who came to the house. A seamstress would frequently be resident in wealthy families and make the servants' clothes and other necessary simple sewing. However, for the less fastidious, there were specific bazaars for various items of clothing. Related to the maintenance and appearance of clothes was ironing. The irons were made of cast iron and heated with burning coal.

Most of the above tasks were performed by resident servants; females in the *andaruni* and males in the *biruni* (Farman Farmayan, p. 16; for the exact number and specialty of their servants see Nafisi, p. 509). The male servants were under the supervision of the superintendent (*nāẓer*) and the female ones under the supervision of the ladies of the house (Jahāndāri, pp. 170-72). In

addition, most rich households would have one or two slaves (see BARDA and BARDADĀRI): a female (*kaniz*) and/or a male (*ḡolām*) to take care of certain duties (Farmanfarmayan, p. 33; Mahdavi, 1999b, p. 563; Nafisi, pp. 538-39). These were the most trusted members of the household, and they were treated well (Jahāndāri, pp. 172-77; Wills, p. 326-27). Generally, with the abundance of servants in a wealthy household, the role of the ladies of the house was of a supervisory and specialized nature.

Although the household was a dynamic institution occupied with different activities at different times of the year, its structure and functions were well defined according to an established and accepted system based upon religion and custom. The needs of the household were also fulfilled in accordance with established customs and norms, the exigencies of the day, and with the assistance of tradesmen, servants, and laborers.

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