



Religion and Society in Iran under the Qajars

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Abstract:

From ancient times Iran has been abode of great cultural and civilizational legacy, after Samanids, Saljuqs, Safavids, it was Qajar Empire which ruled Iran at the dawn of modern times. Qajar dynasty which ruled Iran for more than a century from last decade of 18th century up to the first quarter of 20th century (1925) was very much different from its preceding empires. The principal religious identity of the majority of Iranians, from Safavid times particularly since the Qajar period has consisted of a devotion (of varying intensity in different elements of population) to Twelver (Ithna Ashari) Shi'ism. Qajar period saw a growing independence of mind among the religious classes and religious thoughts. The present paper studies Qajar society vis-à-vis the growing challenges/influences of western modernization on the Iranian society under the Qajar, it further depicts the influence of religion on the pluralistic and hierarchical society of Iran during Qajars.

Key Words: Iran, Qajars, Safavids, Shiaism, Ithna Asharia

Introduction:

At the dawn of the modern world particularly after renaissance and industrial revolution in the west, Muslim societies and culture round the globe got directly or indirectly influenced by the Western modernization. Iran being an epicenter of great culture from earlier times after the powerful Safavids was in a kind tryst between its religious traditions, pluralistic subjects and growing impact of western modernity. The Qajars were basically a Turkmen tribe that held ancestral lands in present-day Azerbaijan, which then was part of Iran. Eighteenth century proved to be very uneasy for the Safavid Empire ultimately during the last decades of 18th century, new powers emerged in Iran and ultimately In 1796 Agha Muhammad khan was formally crowned as shah of Iran and founder of Qajar dynasty. Qajar rulers (Shahs) referred to themselves as the shadow of God on earth, and by gathering the Shiite religious leaders around them, they further legitimized their rule over their subjects. They were absolute rulers and appointed different princes as heads of the states and provinces and established a large bureaucracy. Qajars who replaced Safavids although were also followers of Shia Islam and society during Qajars was also greatly influenced by the Shia traditions, but Qajar society apart from its religious nature was more prone to the developments going in the modern world. The efforts of Nasir-ud-Din Qajar towards modernization of Iran had a landmark influence on Qajar society down the line, but Iranian society had always tried to maintain its religious and cultural traditions.

In spite of diverse internal and external challenges, Qajars tried to maintain balance between growing challenges of western modernization and traditional religious traditions, therefore Qajar era emerged as a bridge between the forces of tradition and modernization in Iran.

Religious Policy the Qajars:

After the great empires like Samanids, Saljuqs who were followers of Sunni Islam, the religious atmosphere of the Iran got transition in its religious traditions with the rise of safavids who used the religious card throughout their tenure and emerged as the champions of Shiaism in Iran. Qajars being their successors also followed almost the same religious policy as matter of fact upto their times Shiaism had become dominant faith in Iran. As the Qajars came to power when whole Muslim world in general and Iran in particular was facing the striking challenge of western imperialism, western modernity which had also its impact on the socio-religious policies of the empire.

Qajar era's difference from other Muslim empires during early modern times was its Shia religious nature. Shia traditions were always used by Qajar rulers for legitimization of their power. As Shiaism become synonymous term for Iran and it turned to be the stepping stone of Iranian religious and cultural traditions since 16th century, therefore it is very pertinent to know about its origin and development in Iran, Ervind aptly remarks about the origin, development and impact of Shia Islam on Iranian society in his book, *A Modern History of Iran*:

The official religion of Iran was Shia Islam, to which the majority of Iranians adhered. Second It may be stressed that Iranians lived a "Shia way of life. Islam came to Iran at the time of the Muslim conquest of Iran in the first half of the seventh century by the Arabs, although the population at large did not become Muslims until later. However, it was under the Safavids (1501-1722) that *Shiism* was consolidated and declared the official religion of the country. By the mid-nineteenth century, *Shi'ism* was the most important ingredient of the social and cultural life of Iran. It determined every aspect of life, ranging from family relations, to the position of women, to ethics and morals, influencing the arts, in particular architecture, and even providing national pastimes¹.

The Qajars shrouded themselves in a religious aura. They declared themselves Protectors of Shi'ism, Keepers of the Koran, Commanders of the Faithful, and Girders of Imam Ali's Sword. They made well-publicized pilgrimages to Shia shrines – to the Imam Reza Mosque in Mashed where lies the shrine of Eighth Imam of *Ithna-Ashairya*, to the Fatemeh Mosque in Qom where Imam Reza's sister was interred; and even to the Ottoman Empire to visit Karbala where Imam Hussein had been martyred, Najaf where Imam Ali was buried, and Samarra where the Twelfth Imam had lived. They gold-plated the large dome at the Samarra Mosque. They also built up Mashed, which literally means the "place of martyrs, "to rival Mecca and Medina. They patronized theological centres in Najaf, Mashed, and Isfahan, and in Qom they founded the Fayzieh Seminary. They buried their own relatives at the Shah Abdul'Azim Mosque on the outskirts of Tehran which was deputed to contain not only their own ancestor but also the Seventh Imam's son. They continued to appoint

members of the ulama to be qazis, sheikh-al-Islams, and imam jum'ehs (heads of the main Friday mosques). The Qajars also perpetuated the Safavid practice of inventing genealogies linking themselves both to ancient Iranian dynasties and to the Shi'i Imams. The Qajars patronized the annual Muharram ceremonies commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. They financed dastehs (flagellations), rowzehkhanis (recitations), taziyehs (passion plays), husseiniehs (religious centers), and takiyehs (theaters). After his 1873 tour of Europe, Nasser al-Din Shah built the vast Takiyeh Dowlat (Government Theater) in Tehran to house the annual passion plays. The passion plays, whose origins go back to the Safavid era, dramatized in blow-by-blow accounts the final days of Imam Hussein and his seventy-two companions.

Ulama Empire relations during Qajar Era:

From the times of Safavids Ulama were having very influencing position in the empire, and all the rulers were maintaining good relations with the Ulama to get their support, although generally the same policy continued towards the Ulama but during the times of Muhammad Shah (1834—1848) and Nasir al-Din Shah (1848—1896) which saw a persistence and deepening of the opposition between ulama and state. The first forfeited all hope of peaceable relations with the ulama through his patronage of the Sufis, a group bitterly hated by the majority of the ulama; while the reign of the second witnessed the beginnings of that process of governmental reform, foreign encroachment and westernization which was to threaten the whole traditional context of ulama thought and activity with destruction. It is true that there always existed a certain group of ulama associated with the state, headed by the Imam Jumah of Tehran, but of greater importance were those who shunned it as illegitimate and its property as unclean. Almost at the same time that the contest between the Usulis and the Akhbaris was settled in favour of the former, a new branch of Shiaism, the Shaikhi School, arose, contributing a further element of variety to Iranian Shiaism and another instance of its internal differentiation. The distinctive teachings that set the Shaikhis apart from the main body of the Shia community were also concerned in essence with the implications of the occultation of the Imam, but were directed more to the spiritual and cosmological than the legal dimensions of the problem. *Akhbaris* and *Usulis* were agreed that the Imam continues to exercise a guiding and directive function even while in occultation, but evinced little interest in the precise mode whereby his function is exercised, concentrating instead on the juridical problems resulting from his physical absence². The Shaikhis, by contrast, devoted intense speculation to the continuing reality of the Imam's spiritual presence, seeking thereby, it has been suggested, a restoration of the esoteric dimension of Shiaism that had suffered by the Safavid establishment of the faith and the consequent loss of the traditional minority status.

Qajar Society: between Tradition and process of Modernization:

Muslim world after the fall of Abbasid Caliphate produced three great and powerful empires in the three different regions of Muslim world. Due to their military might they were popularly known as gun powder empires, those powerful empires include Turkish Ottoman Empire, Mughal empire in India and the Safavid empire in the Iran. Iran being cradle of Islamic Civilization had always been in political transition, Safavids after their rule of almost two centuries were replaced by another powerful

dynasty, called Qajars. The Qajars formally started their rule from 1796. Although the usual nature of Qajar Empire was same as that of their predecessor Safavids, but as now the times and challenges were different so was the nature of both administration and society different from the Safavids. Actually after 16th century renaissance in Europe, the scientific and cultural impact of the west was most powerful influencing force for both the subjects and the rulers of Muslim world whether we talk of Ottoman Empire of Turkey or the Qajar Empire of the Iran. About the growing influence of West on the Iranian society during Qajars, M.E. Nezam Mafi, writes in *The Oxford handbook of Iran history*,

The Qajar period which lasted from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, presented many distinctive features never before seen in Iranian history. The most important of these is the gradual Western influence that came to dominate the political, economic and social life of the country. This caused the Iranians to the dangers facing the independence of their country. The result was an attempt by the government and intellectuals to seek remedies to put a stop to the threat of European dominance³.

Qajar society was basically a pluralistic and hierarchical society in which believers of diverse faiths and different groups with different social status existed. It was also a society in which the kinship system was strong, the extended family system operated, and kin groups encompassed individuals from different categories, bypassing social status and economic standing. Each social group in the Qajar society was accompanied to fulfil a specific function and was accompanied by specific norms of behaviour, ranging from clothes to social etiquette.

Religion being the most important factor in the social nature of man, the religious culture and tradition was having an outstanding influence on the Qajar society. From the era of Safavids, Shia interpretation of Islam had been the official religion of the Iran, the same legacy continued during the Qajar Empire. About the rise and impact of Shiaism on the Qajar society, James Morier, who was basically a European traveller and historian who visited Iran during Qajar era aptly remarks in his travelogue, *A Journey through Persia, Armenia*, about the blend of Iranian's with Shiaism, while presenting his first hand experiences, he states:

The official religion of Iran was Shia Islam, to which the majority of Iranians adhered. Second It may be stressed that Iranians lived a "Shia way of life. Islam came to Iran at the time of the Muslim conquest of Iran in the first half of the seventh century by the Arabs, although the population at large did not become Muslims until later. However, it was under the Safavids (1501-1722) that *Shiism* was consolidated and declared the official religion of the country. By the mid-nineteenth century, *Shi'ism* was the most important ingredient of the social and cultural life of Iran. It determined every aspect of life, ranging from family relations, to the position of women, to ethics and morals, influencing the arts, in particular architecture, and even providing national pastimes. Islam, in general, and *Shi'ism*, in particular, ordained the veiling and segregation of women. The structure and function of the house and household were prescribed, in order of priority by religious practice, by the Persian family system and by the occupation of the head of household⁴".

Despite the western influences during Qajar era, Iranian society remained enrooted in its shia religious traditions, About the same religious aspect of Qajar society, Hassan Bashir Aptly remarks in his theses, entitled as “The Iranian Press and Modernization under the Qajars” submitted to Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester:

Generally speaking, Iranian society was traditional and deeply conservative devoted to its Shia faith and the preservation of Islamic values. Religion played an important role in the life of the people. The religious leaders were not only the main source of religious education but also the main reliable source of information concerning everyday activities. The ethnic mosaic of the country was composed of a variety of different religious groupings. Whilst the majority of the population belonged to the Twelve- Shi‘ah branch of Islam (as is the case today) there existed a number of non-Muslim religious groupings such as Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians. Socially, Iran was a diversified mix of social units consisting of tribes, villagers and urban dwellers all with differing cultural backgrounds, languages and dialects such as Persian, Turkish, Kurdish and Arabic. The Persian language was spoken by less than half of the population. Because of its diversity in ways of life, religions, cultures, habits and languages, Iran during the 19th century could be described as a ‘communal diversity’⁵,

The major population during the Qajar period lived in small face-to-face communities with their own structures, hierarchies, languages and dialects, and, often, until the late nineteenth century, they were self-sufficient in their economies. Physical geography lay at the root of this social mosaic. One of very distinctive feature of Qajar society was its diversity; in both religious and social aspects. Ervand Abrahamian writes in his article *Oriental Despotism: The Case of Qajar Iran*,

The social structure of Iran was therefore like a complicated mosaic where each inlay was small but of different shape, texture, and colour. If one word were chosen to describe the population, it would be 'diversity'. There was diversity in religious sentiments between the Muslims and non-Muslims, the Shi'is and the Sunnis, and between the various sects of *Shi'ism*. There was diversity in languages, especially among the Persians and the Turkic-speaking *Azaris*, *Turkmans*, *Qajars*, and *Qashqayis*. There was diversity in tribal affiliations with the nomadic peoples divided into separate and scattered units. And there was diversity in the way of life, especially among the urban dwellers congregated in their town quarters, the peasants isolated in their small and often inaccessible villages, and the nomads migrating each year from summer to winter grounds in their tribal cam⁶.

Although peace and harmony was prevalent among different classes of society but usually there were always some incidents of confrontations between different groups E. Abrahamian states about same communal confrontations between different communities, he aptly remarks, “Communal conflicts produced parallel and hierarchical each group had its own separate structure, analogous and competitors. At the apex were the communal magnates - landlords, and the *mujtahids* in the cities. At the bottom were -the tribesmen, the

peasantry, and the urban population, layers of intermediaries whose main function was to protect group from a hostile world. The essence of the whole system by a popular Persian proverb, 'A man without a protector in the wilderness'⁷. The modernization process which started very smoothly during Qajar era but it got state sponsored impetus after end of Qajar era, about rise and objectives of modernization, aptly states;

Modernizers in Iran sought to achieve two basic goals. They sought to transform Iran's economy to a semi-industrialized and commercialized system; they also aimed at expanding the power of the central government over all segments of the society, with the purpose of centralization and unification. In the process, the government sought to eliminate the traditional social forces and ideologies such as the ulama and religion, and to substitute new ideologies and attitudes seen as more compatible with its modernist aims⁸.

This process of modernization accelerated during the era of Naser o-Din Shah, who is called for his efforts as the founder of modern Iran. During Naser o-Din Shah's reign Western science, technology, and educational methods were introduced into Iran and the country's modernization was begun. Naser o-Din Shah tried to exploit the mutual distrust between Great Britain and Russia to preserve Iran's independence, but foreign interference and territorial encroachment increased under his rule⁹.

Conclusion:

Qajar dynasty was probably the most dramatic era of the history of Iran. Decline of Iran's influence over the world after the fall of Safavid dynasty led the country to a long political depression. Qajar era which ruled Iran during the early modern times tried to maintain the balance between the religious traditions of Shia faith vis-à-vis the modernization in the administration. The overall religious policy remained dominated by the Shiaism and the Ulama (clergy) emerged as the main leaders of the masses who also played pivotal role in the constitutional movement of 1905. Iranian society under Qajar dynasty (1795-1925 C.E) was pluralistic and hierarchical in nature but at the same time was influenced by both Shia religious traditions and growing western modernization.

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