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The Evolution of Educational Discourse in Iran (1906–1941): From the Project of National Salvation to Authoritarian Modernization

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine the evolution of educational discourse in Iran from the Constitutional Revolution to the end of Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign (1906–1941). The central question is why and how education, during this period, was transformed from a “project of national salvation” with a social and citizen-centered character into an instrument of “authoritarian modernization” and centralized state-building. Using a historical-analytical method and focusing on the discourse of the press, educational documents, and the memoirs of political elites, the article explores this dual process. Drawing on primary sources, including the press of the Constitutional era, memoirs of statesmen, and educational documents, as well as a theoretical framework based on reform from above and directive reformism, the study shows that during the Constitutional period, education was regarded as a prerequisite for legalism and nation-building, a social ideal, and a popular demand. However, during the Reza Shah period, with the establishment of the first Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1941), this discourse underwent a fundamental transformation. Reza Shah's powerful and centralized state implemented the Constitutional ideal of universal education through the Compulsory Education Law, standardized curricula, and institutions such as the University of Tehran and teacher-training colleges. Yet this realization came at a heavy cost. During the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the same ideal, under the logic of a centralized and ideological state, led to compulsory education, a uniform curriculum, and ancient-oriented nationalism. The findings indicate that although educational modernization during this period achieved significant structural and quantitative accomplishments, its top-down and non-participatory nature caused it to fail in fostering critical consciousness, educational justice, and sustainable social acceptance. The article concludes that the dual legacy of this transition—success in constructing modern institutional forms versus failure in democratic educational content—cast a long shadow over Iran's educational system for decades.

Keywords: *educational discourse, Constitutional Revolution, Reza Shah, project of national salvation, modernization from above, nationalization of education.*

Introduction

Education in the contemporary history of Iran has consistently been one of the principal arenas of contestation between tradition and modernity, society and the state, and national ideals and political realities. The Constitutional



Revolution (1906–1911) constituted a turning point in this regard, because during this period, for the first time, education was understood not as a secondary administrative or military instrument, but as the “condition of possibility” for the realization of the rule of law and the salvation of the country from despotism and backwardness (1). Drawing on the experience of the failure of previous reform efforts, from Abbas Mirza to Amir Kabir, the constitutionalists realized that without the formation of an “aware and literate nation,” any top-down political transformation would be doomed to decline (2). Accordingly, education was elevated to the status of a “project of national salvation” and an “inalienable right of citizenship,” while educational associations, the press, and civil actors regarded school-building as a national duty (3, 4).

With the establishment of the first Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1941), this discourse underwent a fundamental transformation. Reza Shah’s powerful and centralized state implemented the Constitutional ideal of universal education through the Compulsory Education Law, standardized curricula, and institutions such as the University of Tehran and teacher-training colleges (5, 6). Yet this realization came at a heavy cost. According to Azghandi, the relative autonomy of schools and popular associations disappeared, educational content became intensely ideological and was placed in the service of ancient-oriented nationalism and the glorification of the Shah, and all forms of cultural, linguistic, and religious plurality were removed from the curriculum (7). In other words, education was transformed from a “social demand” into an “instrument of authoritarian state-building” (8).

The central question of this article is as follows: How did the discourse of education in Iran evolve from the Constitutional period to the end of Reza Shah’s reign, and why and through what mechanism was the ideal of “education for all” transformed in the second period into “state-controlled and ideological education”? The article’s hypothesis is that this transformation was not a complete rupture, but rather the “continuation of an ideal through a change in agency and nature”: the constitutionalists regarded education as the condition for “becoming a nation” from below, whereas the Pahlavi state turned it into an instrument of “nation-building from above” and a means of legitimizing its own power (8). Using a historical-analytical method and focusing on the discourse of the press, educational documents, and the memoirs of political elites, the article examines this dual process.

Findings

The Constitutional Era: Education as a “Project of National Salvation”

Education as the Condition of Possibility for Constitutionalism

In the discourse of the constitutionalists, education was introduced for the first time not as a secondary instrument, but as the condition of possibility for the realization of constitutionalism itself and for national salvation. They believed that the rule of law and political participation were impossible without an “aware, literate, and patriotic nation.” Therefore, education was elevated to the status of a “project of national salvation” and an “inalienable right of citizenship,” and concepts such as “patriotic zeal and honor” were promoted alongside it (9). This view was rooted in the experience of the failure of earlier reforms: from Abbas Mirza to Amir Kabir, whenever reforms had proceeded from above and without the accompaniment of society, they had encountered obstacles (2).

Within this framework, the constitutionalist press played an unparalleled role in constructing the “problem of education.” The newspaper *Sur-e Esrafil* presented public ignorance not as an individual trait, but as a political problem rooted in the structure of despotism. In its first issue, the newspaper stated: “A nation that has not read and does not know will regard law as nothing more than paper, and freedom as a meaningless word” (1). Elsewhere,

Dehkhoda wrote: “Despotism draws strength from ignorance, and ignorance from the absence of schools; therefore, whoever is an enemy of schools is an enemy of freedom” (1). From this perspective, the modern school became a stronghold against despotism and a workshop for the formation of the “law-abiding citizen” (2).

The Socialization of Education and the Role of Civil Actors

One of the distinctive features of the Constitutional era was the removal of education from the monopoly of the state and its transformation into a popular demand. Educational associations, intellectuals, merchants, and urban guilds became pioneers in establishing modern schools. The experience of the “Educational Association,” established in 1898, may be regarded as the first attempt to create a quasi-institutional, organized, non-governmental body for the promotion of educational reform (3, 10). Indeed, these associations appear to have operated beyond the level of charitable institutions; they were intellectual and executive assemblies that blended education with politics and emergent nationalism.

Mirza Hasan Roshdieh, by establishing “Roshdieh” schools in Tabriz and Tehran, replaced traditional methods with modern teaching methods, such as phonetic alphabet instruction. Despite the severe opposition of some ulama, who accused him of innovation in religion, these schools were welcomed (11). Yahya Dowlatabadi was also among those who emphasized the necessity of teacher training, an idea that later led to the establishment of the first teacher-training institution (3). Dowlatabadi was also one of the first members and activists of the Educational Association, which was first formed in Tehran in 1897. He began his activity in this association with enthusiasm and stated in this regard: “I am pleased with beginning this work and with membership in this association, which is in truth the fulfillment of an aspiration I had held in my heart” (3).

The Question of Girls' Education

One of the most radical manifestations of the Constitutional educational discourse was the question of girls' education. Sur-e Esrafil stated: “How can a mother who is herself ignorant raise a learned child? How can a nation half of which remains in darkness attain enlightenment?” (12). The first girls' schools, such as the “Dushizegan School” and the “Namus School,” were established through the efforts of pioneering women and cultural associations, but they encountered widespread social resistance (12).

Limitations and Failures in Implementation

In the field of implementation, the Constitutional period faced enormous structural limitations. The weak central state, immersed in financial and political crises, lacked the resources required to institutionalize universal education. Mostofi writes: “The condition of education was deplorable. Teachers' salaries were delayed for months, and most schools operated through the efforts of benevolent individuals and associations” (13). In addition, modern schools remained largely concentrated in major cities, while villages remained deprived of this transformation. Resistance by traditional forces, including some members of the clergy and maktab teachers, repeatedly led to the closure of schools. Historical sources explicitly refer to complaints, obstruction, and even the incitement of people against modern schools by maktab teachers (10). Therefore, the main achievement of this period was primarily discursive: the consolidation of the idea that education was a public right.

*The Reza Shah Era: Education as “Authoritarian and Top-Down Modernization”*The Political-Ideological Context: The Centralized State

With the establishment of the first Pahlavi monarchy in 1925, education was transformed from a social-popular demand into a strategic instrument in the service of centralized state-building. Within the framework of “authoritarian modernity,” Reza Shah’s state defined education not merely as a cultural institution, but as a means of strengthening the concept of a “single nation” and diminishing local identities (6). The objective was to train disciplined citizens who were loyal to the central state and aligned with the official ideology of modernization (6). Unlike the Qajar period, in which the duality between traditional and modern education continued, the Pahlavi state sought to consolidate its educational monopoly by restricting traditional educational institutions and expanding state schools (14).

Administrative Centralization and the Compulsory Education Law

During this period, the Ministry of Education became one of the main axes of the state bureaucracy. The drafting of administrative regulations, the creation of a nationwide network of education offices, and the standardization of curricula were all undertaken in order to establish direct state supervision over education (6). The culmination of this process was the approval of the “Compulsory Education Law” in December 1934. This law declared free primary education compulsory for children aged 6 to 13 and introduced the state as the supervisor and executor endowed with the right of compulsion. Two provisions of this law were particularly indicative of the logic of the disciplinary state: first, the obligation imposed on parents to enroll their children under penalty of a monetary fine; and second, the obligation imposed on civil registration offices and municipalities to cooperate with education offices in identifying children subject to compulsory schooling (15).

Although this law paved the way for the quantitative expansion of schools, and according to the statistics provided by Samei Yazdi, the number of primary school students increased from approximately 55,000 in 1925 to approximately 287,000 in 1941, it faced enormous structural obstacles: shortage of budget and infrastructure, lack of experienced teachers, and widespread social resistance (15). Samei Yazdi also provides comparative statistics on the number of schools and students at the beginning and end of the period, clearly reflecting these limitations by emphasizing the urban-rural gap. He notes that “many rural schools were in fact rented rooms or private houses” (15).

At the same time, resistance was increasing. These forms of resistance may be analyzed at two levels: economic resistance, rooted in poor families’ dependence on child labor, and cultural-religious resistance, based on accusations that state schools promoted irreligion and immodesty. Basiratmanesh offers evidence to show the attitude of the clergy. While expressing sympathy with the perspective of religious resistance, he writes:

Reza Shah’s policies were deceptive from the outset, and Ayatollah Haeri, who had become aware of Reza Khan’s growing power, made the preservation of the seminary by any means possible his main priority. The ulama of the Qom Seminary, in confronting Reza Shah’s policies, never submitted; rather, while preserving the principle of intelligent dissimulation, they resisted the general course of the assault on Islamic values {...}. In fact, the most important response to Reza Shah’s anti-Islamic policies was the development of the educational-religious institutions of the Qom Seminary (16).

Authoritarian Modernity

In his well-known work, Touraj Atabaki emphasizes that during the Reza Shah period, the dominant discourse emerged from the political-military tradition from which Reza Shah himself had arisen, a tradition marked by autocracy. In general, this discourse was characterized by directive and authoritarian modernity and centralized homogenization (8). Overall, during the Reza Shah period, the content of education became an arena for the implementation of the project of modernization from above. The High Council of Education, as the sole authority for approving curricula, produced and distributed uniform official textbooks (6). This content had three main axes:

1. The Persian language as the backbone of national identity: Textbooks on literary instruction, by selecting classical epic and patriotic texts, presented standard Persian as the sole official language. Although this matter had historical roots, it assumed a new form during this period. A third-grade primary school textbook stated: "Iran is the dearest place on earth. One must love Iran and preserve the language, literature, and culture of Iranians in a pure and correct form" (15).
2. School historiography: Iran's past was divided into three periods: the golden age, consisting of the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods; the age of decline, extending from the advent of Islam to the Qajar period; and the age of revival, represented by the Pahlavi period, with Reza Shah portrayed as the restorer of ancient greatness. This narrative tied the legitimacy of the Pahlavi dynasty to the revival of an idealized past. The aim was to create a sense of pride in an irrecoverable ancient past and then transfer this feeling to the current government as the heir and restorer of that glory (7).
3. Administrative secularism and the subordination of religion: On this basis, traditional religious lessons gave way to a limited and state-approved form of "religious instruction" that emphasized civic ethics, such as order, patriotism, and honesty, rather than jurisprudence and doctrine. Religious symbols and rituals were pushed to the margins of the school, and the school environment became a state-secular space (6). What is evident from a rereading of the sources is that this policy provoked the anger of traditional religious institutions and became one of the main centers of resistance against modern schools.

Institutional Innovations at the Cost of Social Participation

In order to provide loyal human resources, the state created a centralized teacher-training system centered on teacher-training colleges. These institutions were not merely centers for teaching pedagogical methods; in effect, they functioned as "workshops for producing state subjects" (8). In the field of technical and vocational education, vocational schools were also established; however, due to shortages of budget and equipment, they were largely reduced to centers for training lower-ranking employees (17). Girls' education also proceeded with caution and limitation. Azghandi notes that girls' schools were mostly concentrated in major cities, and their curricula emphasized traditional domestic roles. The objective was to train "modern wives and mothers" for the new middle class, not to prepare women for independent employment (7).

Achievements and Limitations: The Paradox of Authoritarian Modernization

Educational modernization during the Reza Shah period had remarkable structural successes: the creation of a centralized legal and administrative framework for national education, the quantitative expansion of schools, the establishment of the University of Tehran, and the training of the first generation of teachers in teacher-training

colleges. However, these achievements came with heavy costs: the widening gap between the official nation-state and a plural society, the prioritization of ideology over quality and critique, and the nationalization of education at the expense of its socialization (8). In other words, during this period Iran acquired a “modern educational system,” but this system was less the product of a social contract than the result of an authoritarian political project imposed from above.

Discussion and Analysis: The Path from the Project of National Salvation to Modernization from Above

Points of Continuity and Rupture between the Two Discourses

At first glance, there appears to be a clear continuity between the discourse of education in the Constitutional era and that of the Reza Shah period: both emphasized the importance of universal education and its role in nation-building. However, this apparent commonality conceals fundamental differences in the “why,” the “how,” and the “agent” of education.

In the Constitutional discourse, education was the condition of possibility for the realization of constitutionalism and national salvation. The constitutionalists believed that without an “aware, literate, and patriotic nation,” the rule of law and political participation were impossible. Therefore, they regarded education as an inalienable right of citizenship and as a social-popular project. The main agents of this project were civil associations, the press, teachers, and intellectuals, while the state had a supportive but not monopolistic role (4). In contrast, during the Reza Shah period, education became an instrument of centralized state-building and cultural homogenization. The first Pahlavi state, relying on absolute power and modern bureaucracy, placed education in the service of the project of “authoritarian modernity.” The principal agent was the state, while society occupied a passive and receiving position (5). In other words, while the constitutionalists sought education from the bottom up and through popular participation, the Pahlavi state implemented it from the top down through coercion and homogenization. Atabaki argues that Reza Shah’s principal objective was to “catch up with the West” (8).

The Realization of the Ideal in a Transformed Form

The ideal of “universalizing education,” which had circulated widely in the Constitutional era, was realized during the Reza Shah period in the form of the Compulsory Education Law and an extensive network of state schools. Yet this realization was accompanied by a fundamental transformation in the nature and spirit of education. First, the “right of citizenship” became a “state duty.” During the Constitutional period, education was a right that people demanded for their own salvation. During the Pahlavi period, education became an obligation imposed by the state on the people (15). Second, “diversity and plurality” were transformed into “homogenization and ideology.” Although the modern schools of the Constitutional period were limited, their content was diverse and based on local initiatives. During the Pahlavi period, a uniform curriculum and standardized textbooks were implemented, with an emphasis on ancient-oriented nationalism (7). The third form of transformation may be described as a shift from “critical consciousness-raising” to “discipline and obedience.” In the thought of the constitutionalists, the school was supposed to train critical and law-abiding citizens. During the Pahlavi period, the school became a space for discipline, obedience to the Shah, and the inculcation of loyalty to the central state (18).

Successful Structure-Building and the Failure of Critical Thought

Educational modernization during the Reza Shah period may be regarded as a clear example of the paradox of “authoritarian modernity” (8). On the one hand, this project was successful in structure-building: it created a powerful ministry, approved modern laws, expanded schools quantitatively, trained teachers, and established the University of Tehran. On the other hand, according to critics, it failed to attract public participation and cultivate a critical spirit. Katouzian argues that this “pseudo-modernism” was a mental construct that generated “discontents.” He regards Reza Shah’s reform measures as necessary, yet criticizes his tyranny (6).

This failure to attract public participation had three roots: first, the non-participatory and top-down nature of the process (17); second, the intense ideological orientation of the content; and third, the neglect of Iran’s social diversity. The policy of removing religious symbols from schools provoked widespread resistance among traditional religious strata. Basiratmanesh writes:

Haj Hossein Qomi was another marja who struggled against Reza Shah’s anti-religious actions. He communicated his demands to the ruling authorities in a five-point statement. Ayatollah Borujerdi also convened a meeting in Borujerd in support of Ayatollah Qomi’s positions. At the end of the meeting, they concluded that they should announce their protest to the prime minister of the time through a telegram as follows: The demands proposed by Ayatollah Qomi are also our demands. If his proposals are not accepted, I will personally move toward Tehran, and the authorities will be responsible for the consequences. In assessing cultural-religious efforts, the collected writings and scholarly endeavors of Sheikh Abbas Qomi during this period are of great importance, as they stood in a direction completely contrary to the cultural policies of the Pahlavi regime (16).

The Dual Legacy for Iran’s Educational System

The transition from “education as a project of national salvation” to “education as authoritarian modernization” left behind a dual legacy. On the one hand, the centralized and state-controlled framework of education was permanently consolidated. All subsequent governments were compelled either to operate within this framework or to struggle over its control. On the other hand, a deep gap between state and society in the field of education became institutionalized. The state school was never able to fully gain the trust and genuine participation of the people and was consistently perceived as a symbol of “imposition from above.” On the positive side, the structure of a centralized national educational system was consolidated. The number of primary school students increased from approximately 55,000 in 1925 to approximately 287,000 in 1941 (5). A network of state schools was created as a symbol of governmental presence across different parts of the country, and the concept of “universal education” became a dominant discourse. On the negative side, however, a rereading of the sources shows that this process deepened social gaps. First, the gap between city and village widened, because educational development was concentrated mainly in urban centers. Second, the authoritarian and non-participatory approach of the state caused the state school to be perceived as an “imposed” institution rather than a “popular” one. This intensified a sense of alienation toward the institution of formal education among broad segments of society (17).

Conclusion

The present article showed that the evolution of educational discourse in Iran from the Constitutional period to the end of Reza Shah’s reign involved a shift from a “project of national salvation” with a social and citizen-centered

nature to “authoritarian modernization” with a state-centered and ideological nature. In the Constitutional discourse, education was the condition of possibility for constitutionalism and an inalienable right of citizenship, and its main agents were civil associations and the press. During the Reza Shah period, the same ideal of universal education was realized through the logic of the centralized state and through the instruments of compulsory law, a uniform curriculum, and ancient-oriented nationalism; however, it lost its libertarian and participatory spirit.

Theoretically, this article showed that “authoritarian modernity” provides an appropriate framework for analyzing educational modernization during the Reza Shah era, because it combines success in structure-building with failure in participation and pluralism (8). Methodologically, the emphasis on the discourse analysis of the press and educational documents also made it possible to reconstruct the hidden layers of this transformation.

The main limitation of this study is its focus on official and elite discourse and its relative lack of attention to the lived experiences of teachers and students in schools. Future studies can provide a more precise image of this transition by drawing on oral history and teachers’ memoirs.

Ultimately, this article showed that the transition from the Constitutional era to the Pahlavi period in the field of education was not merely a linear form of progress, but a contradictory process in which emancipatory ideals underwent a change of nature in the course of their practical realization. This finding reveals the importance of attending to the relationship between “discourse” and “structure” in historical analyses of modernization in Iran.

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Authors’ Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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